

GAYANE GRIGORYAN

**RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COUPLES IN HEMINGWAY'S
SHORT STORIES**

*(“Cat in the Rain”, “The Snows of Kilimanjaro”,
“Hills Like White Elephants”)*

These short stories discuss the problems between couples. They came from Hemingway's own life experiences. From his early childhood he had a strong desire to make his parents proud of him, but this was in constant conflict with his need to tell a story

In these stories, there is a gradual shift in the dynamics of the relationships as Hemingway's fictional women struggle to climb from under men's domination.

Hemingway never recovers from the emotional damage inflicted by his mother, evident in his personal life and in the dysfunctional relationships in his short stories. He remains vigilant and is concerned that he will end up like his father and be controlled by a domineering bitch. However, Hemingway exerts so much control in his relationships and becomes a version of his mother. In his life, he transitions from an angry resentful child-man to a young husband, a reluctant parent, a ladies' man, and an adventurer. Likewise, his perception and portrayal of women in his short stories keep pace with his personal experiences.

Hemingway began his writing career when he was well versed in the ways of Mother Nature, but rather naive in the ways of women. This led to stories rich in narrative descriptions concerning nature, but lacking in development of his female characters. Over the course of his career, Hemingway's interaction with women strengthens his understanding of them and this can be detected as changes, not just in his female characters, but also in the relationship dynamics between men and women. His female characters change from meek creatures dominated by men to strong characters, able to hold their own, no longer living under the thumb of a man.

His fear of emasculation made it impossible for Hemingway to establish a healthy man/woman relationship and by extension, to portray healthy relationships in his stories.

Written in 1923, prior to the birth of Hemingway's first child, "*Cat In The Rain*" can be viewed as a relationship in which the woman's biological clock is ticking.

The plot of the story is meant to begin before the narration itself starts. There isn't any preface to the story, the reader knows nothing about the couple's past. The author shows his characters in a certain period of their lives.

"Cat in the Rain" is about an American couple on vacation in Italy. While at the hotel the woman saw a cat and the story progresses from there. During the story it is made obvious that the couple's relationship wasn't good. The author uses the cat stuck in the rain with nobody to care for it to show that the wife wasn't loved by her husband. So, the story begins with the description of the hotel where the two Americans stopped:

*"Palms grew and the bright colors of the hotels facing the gardens and the sea..."*¹. We can say that this place is very beautiful. But only one thing breaks the idyll - the rain, that's why the couple stays in and just a cat in the rain attracts the young woman's attention. She wants to get the cat inside.

At first sight everything seems to be ideal: a cozy room on the second floor, lovely view from the window. And only the description of the rain evokes the mood of sadness in the reader. To bring home this air of melancholy which is felt when it is raining, the author uses such stylistic device as parallel construction: "The rain dripped from the palm trees. The water stood in pools on the gravel paths. The sea broke in a long line in the rain and slipped back down the beach to come up and break again in a long line in the rain". Nouns *rain, pools, sea* belong to one sphere – *the water*. People cannot hide from the rain. Water is everywhere: it is on the ground, it is pouring from the heavens as though nature is weeping for something.

Complication starts when the American young lady sees a cat in the rain. *"The cat sat under the table and tried to make herself so compact that she wouldn't be dripped on"*. Suddenly the girl feels a strong desire to get this cat. It is a miserable spectacle: a wet, homeless cat crouching under the table in the empty square. The girl decides to go down and get this cat. Here we get acquainted with her husband. He lies on the bed reading and he has no desire to go out in such weather to get the cat his wife wants so much.

Although he offers to do so out of politeness he does not insist. *"Don't get wet"* he said, but it wasn't a sin of care – he said it just to say something. Later we can see that the hotel-keeper pays more attention to her than her own

¹ Hemingway E., "Cat in the Rain", 1923, p. 159.

husband. That's why she liked the owner of the hotel so much. Emphasizing the girl's attitude to the hotel-keeper the author resorts to repetition: "*She liked the deadly serious way he received any complaint. She liked his dignity. She liked the way he wanted to serve her. She liked the way he felt about being a hotel-keeper. She liked his old, heavy face and big hands*". Unconsciously comparing him with her indifferent husband she likes him because he displays so much care.

The author says: "*The padrone made her feel very small and at the same time really important. She had a momentary feeling of being of supreme importance*". That is the reason she likes him. He makes her feel important. He listened to every word and request of hers, and she knows that her little whims will be fulfilled, and that cannot be said about her husband.

The young lady goes upstairs to her room. The only reaction of her husband is the question if she got the cat. He does not notice her disappointment. Suddenly the girl feels unhappy. Through her sad monologue the writer shows all her dissatisfaction with the life, beginning with the absence of the cat and ending with her short clipped hair.

The American wife needs someone to nurture and the cat is a thinly veiled substitute for the baby she desires (Hemingway's letter dated 24 December 1925 makes it clear that F. Scott Fitzgerald and his Zelda believed the "Cat in the Rain" was autobiographical in nature).

In "Cat in the Rain," the American wife getting the cat she has longed to care for, is a euphemism for Hadley being able to keep the baby. While Hadley may be able to continue her pregnancy, in this story Hemingway marginalizes unnamed female character, referred to as the American wife, giving credence to the concept that the woman simply disappears upon marriage and is absorbed into the husband. Some critics believe that by not providing a name for the character, Hemingway's story seems to relegate women to second-class-citizen status

In "Cat in the Rain", Hemingway again uses brilliant description to introduce the story. Hemingway's description captures the natural beauty beyond the hotel room while simultaneously expressing the gloom found within the room.

In "Cat in the Rain", Hemingway's description of the American wife is almost nonexistent. The only description of the American wife occurs when the narrator mentions that her hair "is clipped close like a boy's". She is treated like a child rather than an adult, not only by her husband, but also the hotel staff as they constantly remind her that she must not get wet. Eventually, she begins to

tell her husband George, who unlike her does have a name, exactly what she wants to do:

“I want to pull my hair back tight and smooth and make a big knot at the back that I can feel”, she said. “I want to have a kitty to sit on my lap and purr when I stroke her”.

“Yeah?” George said from the bed.

“And I want to eat at a table with my own silver and I want candles. And I want it to be spring and I want to brush my hair out in front of a mirror and I want a kitty and I want some new clothes”.

“Oh, shut up and get something to read”, George said. He was reading again.

His wife was looking out of the window. It was quite dark now and still raining in the palm trees.

“Anyway, I want a cat”, she said, “I want a cat. I want a cat now. If I can’t have long hair or any fun, I can have a cat”.

George was not listening. He was reading his book¹.

This passage represents a huge step forward in the development of Hemingway’s female voice and the evolution of his female characters. The American wife has found her voice and she is not afraid to use it. The husband, George, exerts tremendous control over his wife. He controls her appearance, what she is allowed to do, and where she lives. When he is tired of hearing her speak, he tells her to shut up. The relationship Hemingway portrays between George and his wife is predicated on Hemingway’s own fear that men must constantly guard against emasculation by their wives.

However kindness is opposed to egoism. In this story, the cat is the symbol of woman. The woman feels lonely, dependent, and unhappy. She is just like a cat in the rain wet, alone. She is neglected like a poor kitty. She needs to be loved. She needs interest, security and comfort. Her husband doesn’t attach importance to her ideas, feelings. While she wants to have a kitty, because she wants give her love to this poor kitty.

The American wife expresses a desire for many things in this story. She tells her husband that if she cannot have any fun, then she might as well have things that she wants. In other words, this desire for material goods comes from an inability to acquire intangible goods such as fun and affection. This lack of intimacy is not entirely her husband’s fault, of course. It is her fault as well.

¹ “Cat in the Rain”, E. Hemingway. (1923). P. 161.

In “Cat in the Rain” there a hidden idea between the lines, the author doesn’t say it directly. The contrast between the husband’s complacency and her desire for respect, admiration and emotional fulfillment is brilliant. She had the role of an object that was to be used by her husband. He did not even need to show any respect to her. She tries to improve their cold relationship but without a result. The lonely cat is her mirror image. Hemingway’s talent lies in the deep psychological insight into human nature.

Another short story is “*The Snows of Kilimanjaro*”.

Hemingway is as an author who presents readers with an “iceberg” scenario, in which most of the substance lies deep beneath the surface and cannot be seen or known. As a result, one is constantly forced to play detective and unravel the brief glimpses of the inside stories presented. In addition to this, Hemingway also offers several metaphors and figurative images and ideas that serve as guides for the reader when attempting to dismember a story. Throughout his short story *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* metaphors play an important role, particularly as they relate to the disintegration of Harry as an author and creative man. Strangely, however, this process of decay, despite its parallels to the gangrenous infection plaguing his right leg, did not begin suddenly, but evolved over time.

The story opens with a paragraph about Mt. Kilimanjaro, the highest mountain in Africa, which is also called the *House of God*. There is, we are told, the frozen carcass of a leopard near the summit. No one knows why it is there. Then we are introduced to Harry, a writer dying of gangrene, and his rich wife Helen, who are on safari in Africa. Harry’s situation makes him irritable, and he speaks about his own death in a matter-of-fact way that upsets his wife, predicting that a rescue plane will never come. He quarrels with her over everything, from whether he should drink a whiskey-and-soda to whether she should read to him. Helen is obviously concerned for his welfare, but self-pity and frustration make him unpleasant to her. He then begins to ruminate on his life experiences, which have been many and varied, and on the fact that he feels he has never reached his potential as a writer, because he has chosen to make his living by marrying a series of wealthy women. In italicized portions of the text that are scattered throughout the story, Hemingway narrates some of Harry’s experiences in a stream-of-consciousness style.

This story focuses on the self-critical ruminations and memories of a writer dying of a preventable case of gangrene on safari. Its main themes are death and regret, and Harry’s morbid thoughts epitomize a classic case of taking things for

granted. Harry takes his blessings, including his caring wife, his full life, and his writing talent, for granted, and on his deathbed muses on how he could have appreciated each more. His main regret, of course, is that he has not reached his full potential as a writer because he has chosen to make a living by marrying wealthy women rather than memorializing his many and varied life experiences in writing. The progression of his gangrene symbolizes his rotting sense of self-worth.

The narrator of Hemingway's short story describes the beautiful nature and the abundance of animals that are in this environment. He uses animals like the hyena and the *big and filthy birds* represent Harry's feeling of approaching death. Harry looks at these birds, which come to him because of his leg's scent, in case he ever wanted to use them in a story.

In addition, his characters are also described in order to show what happens when a person does not make enough effort to achieve his dream. Harry's selfishness is presented in this text as the opposing of his wife's feelings, because while Harry threatens Helen with words, she asks him not to think so negatively. She tries to comfort him, but the only thing he can do is insulting her and saying that he doesn't love her. Besides, Harry says that the wound on his leg is painless, despite the stench. It can be a sign that he does not feel the *pain* of the bad things he has done for himself and for other people around him. But being sorry for the bad odor that his leg causes can be a way to apologize himself or maybe an irony upon his desire to be shot by his wife.

Throughout the text, the narrator gives the reader some flashbacks, which are written in italics, about the past of Harry's life. These flashbacks present essential information to understand Harry's situation and the waste of his talent by not writing while he could. Helen fell in love with Harry because of what he wrote when he was in prison. But he got rich "because of his wife's money" and couldn't write because of so many things that occupied his mind instead of writing. So, they decided to go to Africa to have the possibility of writing again. But, he waits for the moment to have the talent to write and it does not come, because he does not start writing.

Harry's wife Helen is at his side trying desperately to ease his pain and suffering and hoping against hope for his recovery. Yet, despite the obvious feelings Helen has for Harry, there is a feeling of hopelessness as the dialogue between the husband and wife represents the juxtaposition of love and hate.

Harry's dialogue is filled with self-loathing and contempt toward his wife as Hemingway exposes the ugly underbelly of Harry's relationship with Helen:

"Don't".

“All right. I’ll stop that. I don’t want to hurt you”.

“It’s a little bit late now”.

“All right then. I’ll go on hurting you. It’s more amusing. The only thing I ever really liked to do with you I can’t do now. . . . I was all right when we started talking. I didn’t mean to start this, and now I’m crazy as a coot and being as cruel to you as I can be. Don’t pay any attention, darling, to what I say. I love you, really. You know I love you. I’ve never loved anyone else the way I love you.” He slipped into the familiar lie he made his bread and butter by.

The disagreement between a couple, and that a person who lies destroys a relationship, while the other person loves unconditionally. For instance, the man in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, embodies this deceitful nature when he tells his wife that he *never loved anyone else the way he loves her*, even though this is the *familiar lie that he makes his bread and butter by*. These kind words, with no true meaning, display the way in which lies ruin relationships. As these lies continue, the entire bond between the two people builds on false truths. Moreover, the man expresses the fear that women get the men down. Through this apprehension, the man cares not about the woman’s feelings, but only how he can out-think her. This carries on throughout many people’s thoughts, and destroys relationships through the shallowness and deceit that it creates.

Likewise, Lynda Coupe notes that “Hemingway fears he can be Harry”, and due to this he “exorcises such a demon in the writing of the story”¹. Hemingway understands man’s somewhat primitive nature and way of thinking, and realizes that if he falls into that mindset, he will lose the things that matter to him. He teaches the male readers that they must be open minded and acknowledge the possibilities and challenges that women bring to the society. Lastly, the changes within the man allow him to realize "he has loved too much, demanded too much, and he wore it all out. Love only goes so far, after it stretches past its limits, the effects are drastic. Hemingway notices this, and brings the understanding to Harry that people must be treated in a way that does not abuse them. As Harry takes advantage of his spouse’s feelings, he begins to comprehend the profound effects of her in his life.

Contrary to Harry’s portrayal, his wife is described as loving, nurturing, and capable. She stands tall under adversity, is able to use her rifle to put food on the table, make sure the makeshift airstrip is ready for the plane’s arrival, nurse Harry in an attempt to keep him alive until help arrives, and gently admonishes Harry for being so cruel to her:

¹ Images of the Hunter in American Life and Literature. Lynda Coupe. P. 133.

“You won’t talk to me like that again, will you? Promise me?”

“No”, he said. “I don’t remember what I said”.

“You don’t have to destroy me. Do you? I’m only a middle-aged woman who loves you and wants to do what you want to do. I’ve been destroyed two or three times already. You wouldn’t want to destroy me again, would you?”

Helen by virtue of her wealth, holds the dominant position in the relationship. Even though Helen does not gloat over the dynamics of the relationship, and from all appearances goes out of her way to make Harry an equal partner, Harry, like Hemingway, chafes under the imbalance caused by his partner’s financial situation and feels a need to strike back and do whatever he can to tear Helen down and bring the relationship into balance.

This story is remarkable in the way it packs so many of the details of Hemingway’s life, relationships with women, aesthetic outlook, ethical orientation into a text of less than thirty pages.

When Helen asks Harry if he loves her, his answer is that he does not think so, that he never has. This answer evokes memories of his story *Soldier’s Home*, in which there is a similar bit of dialogue between the mother and her son Harold, a soldier returned from the war. In both instances, the male character feels obliged to dash a woman’s expectation of an answer that is begged by her question. Above all, Hemingway sought honesty and truth in his writing and demanded nothing less of his fictional characters.

At this point of the analysis we can ask: Was Harry determined by the environment? To help us answer this question, Fairclough says that *the relationship between different elements of social practices is dialectical*¹. He points out these dialogical elements as: action and interaction, social relations, persons, the material world; and discourse. Complementing this idea, Meurer says that simultaneously the discourse is influenced by the social structures and conversely, influences them. With these ideas we can understand that Harry was responsible for his failure by not using the opportunities he had to make progress in his writing. Of course he had lots of things that occupied his mind, but he could have made a selection of what he considered the priority, if writing was a priority for him.

The last regret is made so bitter to Harry because, as he admits, it is his own fault he has not adequately exercised his great talent: *He had destroyed his talent by not using it, by betrayals of himself and what he believed in*. In a strange parallel, it is also Harry’s fault that he developed gangrene; by not using iodine

¹ Textual Analysis for Social Research: Norman Fairclough. (2003). P. 25.

on his scratch, he allowed it to become septic and is therefore to blame for his impending death.

Viewed in this light, Harry's predicament is self-inflicted, and is therefore a fitting punishment for his repeated acts of self-betrayal over the years. The lingering question of the story is how Harry's situation is resolved by the dream sequence that ends the narration. Does his journey to the top of Mt. Kilimanjaro symbolize Harry's acceptance of his punishment and acquiescent passage into the afterlife, or does it stand for Harry's redemption as a character and continuing desire to rise above his past mistakes, even at the moment of his death? What does Kilimanjaro stand for?

There is abundant symbolism in this story, as many scholars have noted. The actual significance and meaning of these symbols has been hotly debated, but generally, the frozen leopard on the summit of Kilimanjaro is associated with death, immortality, and possibly redemption. The hyena and vultures are associated with illness, fear, and death, and Kilimanjaro itself, though its role has sparked the most controversy among scholars and critics, seems associated with a sort of redemptive heavenly afterlife. In addition, throughout the story, low-lying, hot plains areas are associated with difficult or painful episodes in Harry's life, including the situation in which he begins the story, and snowy mountainous areas are associated with his happier, more uplifting experiences, including his final imagined ascent to the top of Kilimanjaro. In addition, gangrene, the rotting of the flesh, is symbolic of Harry's rotting soul.

In terms of style, Hemingway narrates the sequences between Harry and Helen in a straightforward third person format and breaks into italicized stream-of-consciousness for Harry's many memory sequences. These memories are often conveyed using run-on sentences and consist of bewildering pastiches of characters, places, and events which are consistent with Harry's delirium.

According to Hemingway scholars, these memories are mostly autobiographical. Using Harry as a vehicle, Hemingway writes of a log house he visited as a child in Michigan, of his experiences during World War I, of his life in Paris with his first wife and their fishing trip to the Black Forest, of his skiing trips in Austria, and of a location near the Yellowstone River in Wyoming.

The other short story is "*Hills Like White Elephants*".

"Hills Like White Elephants" displays how a relationship changes from time to time, and how miscommunication and lies impact them. The story is a conversation between an American man and a young woman waiting for a train in Spain. As they talk we come to know that the woman is pregnant and the man

convinces her for the abortion. But the word “abortion” is not really used during the conversation. We just guess it through the context.

Throughout the story, the American presents Hemingway’s rigid concept of masculinity. The American is portrayed as omniscient, knowledgeable, worldly, and always in control of himself and the situation at hand.

He is cool and feigns indifference, such as when he tells the girl he doesn’t care whether she has the abortion or not. He tries to convince the girl by oversimplifying the operation and relentlessly pushes her to have it. He lacks the sympathy and understanding she needs during the crisis, in contrast, the girl is less assertive and persuasive. She is nameless, helpless, confused, and indecisive.

Hemingway does not clarify the relationship between the couple; some critics refer to her as a wife while others believe she is a mistress. Hemingway obviously did not see this as an important distinction.

What is important is that “Hills like White Elephants” is comprised almost entirely of dialogue that showcases Hemingway’s continuing development of a feminine voice and a more self-reliant female character. Jig, the female character, faces a monumental life changing decision that is the basis for the conversation. Jig uses her voice to question her male counterpart and stress her point of view, actions missing from Hemingway’s earlier stories.

Hemingway understands the female psyche and this is evident in the psychological manipulations attempted by Jig in *Hills like White Elephants*.

Compared to the American, Hemingway’s overly masculine character, the girl is less assertive and persuasive. Throughout the story, the girl appears helpless, confused, and indecisive. She changes her mind about the attractiveness of the surrounding hills, for example; claims to selflessly care only for the American; and seems uncertain about whether she wants to have the operation. In fact, the girl can’t even order drinks from the bartender on her own without having to rely on the man’s ability to speak Spanish. Ironically, the girl seems to understand that her relationship with the American has effectively ended, despite her professed desire to make him happy. She knows that even if she has the operation, their relationship won’t return to how it used to be. In many ways, the girl’s realization of this fact gives her power over the American, who never really understands why they still can’t have “the whole world” like they once did.

Both the American man and the girl drink alcohol throughout their conversation to avoid each other and the problems with their relationship. They start drinking large beers the moment they arrive at the station as if hoping to fill their free time with anything but discussion. Then, as soon as they begin talking about the hills that look like white elephants, the girl asks to order more drinks to

put off the inevitable conversation about the baby. Although they drink primarily to avoid thinking about the pregnancy, readers sense that deeper problems exist in their relationship, of which the baby is merely one. In fact, the girl herself implies this when she remarks that she and the American man never do anything together except try new drinks, as if constantly looking for new ways to avoid each other. By the end of their conversation, both drink alone the girl at the table and the man at the bar suggesting that the two will end their relationship and go their separate ways.

Hemingway sets *Hills Like White Elephants* at a train station to highlight the fact that the relationship between the American man and the girl is at a crossroads. Planted in the middle of a desolate valley, the station isn't a final destination but merely a stopping point between Barcelona and Madrid. Travelers, including the main characters, must therefore decide where to go and, in this case, whether to go with each other and continue their relationship. Moreover, the contrast between the white hills and barren valley possibly highlights the dichotomy between life and death, fertility and sterility, and mirrors the choice the girl faces between having the baby or having the abortion. The girl seems torn between the two landscapes, not only commenting on the beauty of the hills but also physically walking to the end of the platform and gazing out at the brown emptiness around the station.