



## Gender Miscommunication in Ernest Hemingway's Selected Short Stories

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### Abstract

Ernest Hemingway the great American novelist and short story writer has exerted an influence on the direction of American fiction. In order to do a comprehensive analysis of gender and discourse in Hemingway's shorts stories, Deborah Tannen's idea of gendered discourse was used to illustrate the way the author plays with linguistic elements to depict male and female differences in their communications. Working within the framework of Tannen's theory of gendered discourse, the study examined male and female characters and their conversations in the light of gender roles. The present study is an attempt to explore the nature of relationship between men and women in the selected short stories of Ernest Hemingway. It was argued in this study that gender miscommunication is a major aspect of Hemingway's short stories as they apparently demonstrate dominance of men and powerlessness of women in the dominant masculine discourse. It can be concluded that through his stories Hemingway was examining the ineffectiveness of gender binaries in his societies through his characters' experiences. His writings lead to an understanding of gender as runny and increasingly unstable as societies progress.

**Keywords:** gender, miscommunication, Ernest Hemingway, short stories

### INTRODUCTION

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) the great American novelist and short story writer has exerted an influence on the direction of American fiction, which is perhaps greater than that of all other writers. Winner of both Noble and Pulitzer Prize for his works, Hemingway tells many interesting stories. Hemingway's fiction is painted by two significant aspects of his own personal experience in encountering social reality in American postwar life. On the one hand, he shows to be predominantly occupied with war and its negative hold on human psyche after the breakdown of all human moral concerns in the First World War. On the other hand, human relationships, particularly the gender relations between men and women, seems to be the backbone of many of his stories through which he develops a specific narrative discourse that embraces both masculine and feminine stylistic features and demonstrate prevailing gender relations of his time.

According to Zabala, Hemingway is exactly like his writing, simple yet full of complexities upon a second look. Zabala enjoys the mental challenges of Hemingway's works, that is, wondering what the character means when he or she refers to "it." He engages a proactive audience in that everyone has their own interpretation about his works. The reader has to apply his or her own life experiences in an attempt to deconstruct Hemingway's writings. When the United States was ideologically isolationist, Hemingway involved himself in several war conflicts abroad including World War I and the Spanish Civil War.

Among a diverse variety of topics, Hemingway's short stories portray difficulties that men and women encounter due to social gender binaries. However, Hemingway professionally avoids giving direct and specific voice to his gender orientation, his stories tell a lot about gender relations and how masculinity and femininity are defined and perceived. Many of his stories deal with multiple gender issues and explore boundaries that male and female characters are cast in.

However, a common theme of many of his stories are the dominative and assertive role of men in contrast to passive and subordinate role of women which follows a similar pattern from one story to another. A close analysis of Hemingway's short stories reveals that he portrays a stereotypical image of women as insignificant and subordinate, while giving important roles to his male characters. Moreover, cross-gender relationships in his short stories are mostly problematic due to misinterpretation of messages exchanged between men and women. However, in this relationship, Hemingway's stories are usually side with masculine dominance and introduce an inferior image of women. As Jackson Benson argues in *The Writer's Art of Self-Defense*, "Hemingway's emphasis on the masculine point of view is easily the most characteristic aspect of his writing, and although it is only one among many elements in his work used to channel emotion into non-sentimental directions, it serves to unify them all" (29).

The present study is an attempt to explore the nature of relationship between men and women in the selected short stories of Ernest Hemingway: "The End of Something", "Hills Like White Elephants", "Up in Michigan", "The Snows of Kilimanjaro", "Mr. and Mrs. Elliot", "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber". It is argued in this study that gender miscommunication is a major aspect of Hemingway's short stories as they apparently demonstrate dominance of men and powerlessness of women in the dominant masculine discourse. Thus, men and women tend to send and receive different messages and misinterpret what they perceive. In order to perform a comprehensive analysis of gender and discourse in Hemingway's shorts stories, Deborah Tannen's idea of gendered discourse is used to illustrate the way the author plays with linguistic elements to show male and female differences in their communications.

The main possible question that would be attempted to be taken into consideration and seeking for possible answers through the research is:

- How is gender miscommunication constructed in Hemingway's selected short stories?

## GENDER

In her seminal work, *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler defines gender as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (25). By this, Butler defines the nature of gender as what an individual does and argues that all bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence, which means that gender is a specific way of doing rather than a particular way of being.

In fact, Butler states that gender is produced by what one does in social interactions and communications with the same or the opposite sex. More importantly, gender identities are constructed and constituted by language, which means that there is no gender identity that precedes language. By this, Butler means that it is through the use of language and communication with others that gender and gendered discourse is created (Butler 23-27).

## MISCOMMUNICATION

Deborah Tannen argues in *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* that gender miscommunication is an integral part of cross-gender interactions as women and men use different discourses in their daily conversations which may not precisely perceived as intended because of different assumptions men and women make as regards the purposes of communication. Accordingly, miscommunication is the situation in which men and women fail to get the message of each other and misinterpret the message, which leads finally to an interruption of discourse and misunderstanding each other. For Tannen, miscommunication is the result of different discourses between men and women and their purpose of using language. Also, the scope to which either side of the conversation expect attention in communication is important (654-655).

According to Tannen, the study of language and gender might seem as a narrowly focused field, but actually it is interdisciplinary. Suci asserts that relationships are made or broken through talk. Communication between the sexes has been an area of interest for both scholars and lay people and people have looked everywhere to find the sources of communication differences. It has been suggested that we come from different planets, that we have different ways of talking, thinking, different brain organizations, etc. Some scholars claim the battle between the sexes can never be won, others claim there is no battle, only a struggle to understand each other and communicate.

Suci believes that gender is one of the axes around which our world revolves and through which we encode our experiences. Gender is a dynamic and inherently communicative process and language is fundamental to understanding our gendered selves. Not only do we communicate gender in these ways, but we also do it with our words. Because we construct and enact gender largely through discourse, language plays a crucial part in doing gender and displaying ourselves as gendered beings.

According to Baranauskiene and Vilija, Tannen argues that gender differences are parallel to cross-cultural differences. She claims that when interpreting the cultural information encoded by language, women and men rely on different subcultural norms. Male

subculture uses language to build hierarchical relationships, while female subculture uses language to build equal relationships. In other words, Tannen maintained that differences in language between women and men result from a misunderstanding of the intent of the other sex, and not from the dominant position of men in society.

Linguists that have adopted the difference approach claim that women are simply different from men as a result of belonging to different subcultures, and their differing conversational styles reflect these subcultures. According to them men and women, speak differently because they were brought up in different sociolinguistic subcultures. The socialization process, including family, school, games, friends etc. contribute to our femaleness or maleness. "Culture is simply a network of habits and patterns gleaned from past experiences, and women and men have different past experiences. From the time they were born they were treated differently, talked to differently, and talk differently as a result." (Tannen 125).

Women focus on feelings, men on the referential function of the language. Women often suggest that people do things in indirect ways, while men use a direct imperative. Women refuse to oppose the will of others openly, while men prefer an open conflict. Women are defined by their feelings and relationships; for them communication is of major importance. Men are defined by their ability to solve problems, to achieve results, therefore to offer a man unsolicited advice is to presume he is incapable of solving the problem by himself. This might be the reason why men refuse to ask for directions, since asking for help would make them look incompetent. For men, asking for information/directions is a sign of inferiority, the one giving directions appearing as more knowledgeable or competent than they are.

Tannen mentions that men are perceived as more likely to use hostile language and profanity than women, women being perceived as 'more proper' and being expected to adopt a more polite style in conversation. One of the most common stereotypes is that women talk a lot without saying anything of importance that they deal in trivial and unimportant matters. In all female conversations, women talk about a certain topic extensively, sharing a wealth of information about themselves. Men jump from one topic to another, rarely providing information about themselves.

Wakoski claims that when Hemingway arrived at young manhood, there was a struggle going on between the male and the female over personal and sexual freedom, economic independence and political powers. This struggle questioned the justification and naturalization of oppression against women and the idea of "learning to live with what you are born with" (11). Major factors behind such developments were the works like Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, John Stuart Mills' *The Subjection of Women*, and Margret Fuller's *Women in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century*. Later in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Olive Schreiner, Virginia Woolf and Simon de Beauvoir concentrated on the gender issues like education, marriage, economics, sexuality and morality. This ideological debate on the representation of women in literary texts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was so profound that Leslie Fiedler has commented in this context that "in this century the only class war is between the sexes" (62).

Zabala claims that in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century America, the male and the female were considered complementary opposites and were associated with certain gendered values. For example, the attributes of emotional and moral-toughness required to survive in the competitive public world were linked with the man's sphere and the qualities of purity, piety, domesticity and submissiveness were associated with the woman's sphere. With the passage of time this division was challenged by a feminist undercurrent that gained momentum throughout the century. These feminists highlighted, through their insightful re-reading of the literary works, gender biases and oppressive structures in pedagogic practices to think upon the women's questions and hurdles created by patriarchal society which prevented women from concretizing their goals: "only one way . . . to control her future . . . is to choose her man" (Shulman 72).

By the time, American women gained the right to vote in 1920s, a modern "New Woman" had appeared. Moreover, as stated by Zabala, the well-known appearance of the New Woman was the sexually permissive flapper, an urban creature who was young and tomboyish in appearance and behavior. Unlike earlier hour-glass-shaped, fully skirted woman, the flapper had short hair, bound her chest, wore short straight-cut dresses, played golf, smoked, drank and danced in the company of male counterparts. In 1924 an article entitled "Feminist - New Style" in Harper's Magazine declared the newly evolved modern woman to be a composite figure, a boyish girl who combined the flapper's physical freedom, sexually and stamina with feminist self -assertiveness and traditional domestic femininity, a woman who could happily combine pleasure, career and marriage. To the advanced people of that time, these New Women proved the perfect partner: fearless, bright, eager to participate in work, in play, in martial sex.

Hemingway's childhood, therefore, took place in a family environment, which was losing its gender distinctions. His parents divided their roles according to the ideals of "companionate marriage" or equal partnership that gained popularity during the Progressive Era. His mother pursued her own artistic and occupational interests in music and painting and his father assumed such domestic functions as cooking. Straightforwardly, Zabala thinks that just as women as the "second-class" gender have challenges, men have challenges in keeping up with the ultra-masculine persona as portrayed in music, television, and other forms of multimedia. Men's embrace of more "feminine" traits, will lead to improved relationship between men and women in society. Zabala explores how even Hemingway, known as "Papa" for his "machismo"-style writings, reflects his own anxieties about masculinity in his characters. Perhaps when men reveal their own grievances with gender binaries, violence against women and the inequality of women will decrease.

According to Spilka in *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny*, this process of liberation from the Victorian sexual teachings was further accelerated by the Freudian idea of 'Id', the guiding force behind all human behaviors. Though it is uncertain whether Hemingway went through the works of Freud, it is known that in 1920 and 1921 he read and recommended to his friends the voluminous *Studies in Psychology* by sexologist Havelock Ellis. Ellis, a Darwinist, recognized woman's sexuality and encouraged its liberation. He

also believed that there were natural differences between men and women that should guide their behavior (32).

In many of his works, Hemingway explores the disadvantages of society's gender binary system. In his stories, he examines how the gender hierarchy between men and women no longer applies after World War I. The gender spheres of men and women that the Victorian era so desperately tried to keep apart merge after World War I. Women begin to realize that they cannot retain their traditional lifestyles in a modernizing world. For example, long hair and frocks will impede women from working efficiently in the home and factories. Men find themselves accepting women's changes, as change coincides with a progressive, efficient society. Hemingway likes to examine how asexual hairstyles affect gender relationships between men and women.

One of the stories of Hemingway that illustrates the gender miscommunications is "Hills like White elephants"; this story is filled with gender linked misunderstandings that are perhaps resulted from lack of mutual empathetic behaviors. In examining gender miscommunication in "Hills like White elephants", Smiley declares that while the main narrative with its reliance on dialogue allows the characters to develop their different "gender-linked language patterns," the omission of the events preceding the beginning of the story allows them to create persuasively secondary narratives and thus create visions that fit either the male or female language.

During his era, Hemingway has witnesses huge shifts in the roles that were previously devoted to male, during this time females seem to gain more dominance than before. Flexner mentions that Hemingway's male and female characters most often find themselves impeded by the gender binaries of society, which explains why they endeavor beyond the gender lines of "man" and "woman." Although Hemingway never found the words to articulate the matter, Hemingway experiments with the possibility of multiple genders in society.

Beside the era in which he developed, Hemingway's contact with the literary personalities, other women in and outside America also played an important role in shaping his gender perspective. When Hemingway started writing full fiction, he was in his twenties and was an eager observer of all these developments. This dislocation of sexual traditions and reconstruction of gender roles had a decisive effect on Hemingway's thinking and writing about women. Gertrude Stein describes him, at twenty-three as: "An extraordinarily good -looking . . . with passionately interested, rather than interesting eyes. He sat in front of Gertrude Stein and listened and looked "(212).

To Hemingway, Stein was a kind of literary mother who is compared to his real mother in age, self -confidence, artistic ambitions and homo -sexual preferences. She had a profound effect on his thinking. During his youth, Hemingway's most serious relationships involved older, more mature women. For example, his first passion - the nurse Agnes von Kurowsky, his first wife Hadley, Duff Twysden and his second wife Pauline - were all several years older to him.

In Paris of 1920s, postwar feminism was most prominent with over eighty feminist societies representing more than sixty thousand members. However, very few feminists

supported the idea that liberation means sexual freedom, most of the women, Hemingway met in Paris, embraced the modern sexual freedom. Period photographs of Montparnasse capture the sexual ambience of the place: studio models, dancers, artists, and women writers are shown swimming and partying in mixed groups, or cross dressed in male attire, or posing in the nude. In memoirs, these women write of uninhibited sex with multiple partners. Among this extensive community of sexually experimental and lesbian women writers and artists were many who occupied central position in the artistic and publishing circles Hemingway frequented in Paris like Sylvia Beach, Natalie Barney, Janet Flanner, Hilda Doolittle, Margaret Anderson and Gertrude Stein.

How we say something is at least as important, if not more important than what we say. Non-verbal behavior provides important clues as to our attitude towards what is communicated, towards the addressee, the situation etc. Eye contact expresses interest or attention. Research shows that women have more often contact during conversations, they use more facial expression and are more expressive than men, they speak with more expressive intonation patterns and come closest to standard speech norms, they smile more than men.

This does not mean that Hemingway has depicted only one type of woman: his search for complementary relations between the sexes expresses itself in a wide range of fictional females. According to Harding, in *The Sun Also Rises* Brett Ashley, though modern and appealing in many ways, does not achieve true reciprocity with a man and it results in divorce, and irreconcilable differences. In spite of this, most of his writings of 1920s were praised for elaborating modern gender issues like studies of the lives and relationships of New Men and New Women complicated by distinctly modern problems. In his short - stories "love relationship fails consistently and it is precisely Hemingway's depiction of the corruption, the loss, or the absence of love that magnifies its values" (Harding 114). Most of the short-stories in *In Our Time* and *Men without Women* are tales of modern life focusing on modern and ancient violence, especially showing males and females engaged in modern war of sexes.

Zabala believes that as against the charge on him that he automatically favors fictional males can easily be refuted because most of his stories are consistently sympathetic to women who are often revealed to be more mature than their mates. Though Hemingway's code heroes are a standard in themselves yet those qualities do not assure success in their relation with the women. Male characters are less active and indifferent towards responsibilities as compared to their female counterparts. Most of the love-tales end in discords due to the problems arising out of homoeroticism, divorce, abortion, venereal diseases and infidelity (Zabala 27).

Baker claims that within the literary world, Hemingway was only one of several leading male authors whose writings expressed an anxiety over the power of women in that world. In his correspondence, Hemingway frequently showed defensiveness or hostility towards women who compete with men. Competition from female writers and the female influence in publishing industry on critical standards and on popular tastes threatened to stigmatize the writing profession as effeminate and to devalue the style and marketability of man's writings.

In the 1930s, Hemingway wrote specifically on the topics like fishing, hunting, boxing and politics. When "Green Hills of Africa" was published, it was attacked by the critics. At this point he said as a writer he is corrupted by wealthy women in his life: both through the financial support he received from his wife Pauline, and through his adulterous affair, intermittently between 1931 and 1936, with Jane Mason, a wealthy married woman fourteen years his junior. These feelings were vented in a series of safari writings which put on trial both castrating bitches and their cowardly men. "Green Hills of Africa" introduced the theme of conflicts between powerful women and their impotent, bitter men, which Hemingway depicted more fully in his two short - stories, "The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber" and "The Snows of Kilimanjaro".

Waller states that in "The Snows of Kilimanjaro", hunting indicates a switch in gender roles. Helen must go hunting for Harry because he is incapable of it due to his of his gangrene. Once again, Hemingway shakes things up when the woman has to hunt to provide for the man. This is shown by the passage "She had gone to kill a piece of meat and, knowing how he liked to watch the game, she had gone away so she would not disturb this little pocket of the plain that he could see" (87-88). It is also suggested that Harry appreciates the scenery more than he does actually hunting because Helen takes precaution to hunt where his view will not be disturbed. Appreciating the beauty of nature rather than viewing the action of hunting is more commonly a feminine characteristic, nonetheless a feminine quality that Harry possesses.

There is only one woman in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber"; Margot Macomber. However, she plays a *huge* role in how the story unfolds. It can be inferred that she is beautiful, was once a model, is something of a socialite. She is also a bruiser who makes sport out of busting her husband's chops. At least that's the woman Hemingway presents, from the perspective of her husband and Wilson. However, no matter how these guys see her, Margot is, in the end, a bit of a mystery. Given all that Hemingway leaves out of the story, we are not sure if we are supposed to like her, or if we are supposed to write her off as scheming, selfish, cold-hearted wife. One thing is for sure. Her beauty and wits are a threat to her husband's masculinity, and that is so *not good*. She is powerful, sure, but only in a destructive and cruel way, and we are left wondering if Hemingway agrees with Wilson's assessment that she is not much more than a typically horrible American woman.

In "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" from the beginning, the gender roles are switched, as Helen is the one who cares for Harry, instead of the man providing for the woman, the man is helpless and the woman is able. The roles are further switched when it comes to temperament. Harry is dramatic and emotional about his gangrene. He displays feminine traits in his emotion. He assumes his gangrene will kill him before he arrives, and he acts like his life has been worthless up to that point.

## CONCLUSION

It is believed that through his stories Hemingway is examining the ineffectiveness of gender binaries in his societies through his characters' experiences. His writings lead to an understanding of gender as runny and increasingly unstable as societies progress. In



contemporary society, it is clear that the more regressive and backsliding societies exhibit clear boundaries between men and women, which leads to an oppression of women. Although Hemingway's popularity stems from his male characters, many of his female characters either support Hemingway's portrayal of the male characters or in their strength exceed the male characters. Not only Hemingway, but also many great writers all over the world provide evidence for gender as increasingly unstable matter. In order to achieve a non-discriminating society concerning gender and sexuality, studies must continue to educate the public on such matters.

Generally, it can be concluded that Hemingway is exactly like his writing, simple yet full of complexities. Hemingway was famous for presenting the truth in a very simple format. The mental challenges of Hemingway's works are wondering. He engages a proactive audience in that everyone has their own interpretation about his works. The reader has to apply his or her own life experiences in an attempt to deconstruct Hemingway's writings. The era in which he was born and raised and the people with whom he was connected have influenced his gender based thoughts; these thoughts are clearly realized in his works. Most of his stories illustrate male and female conflicts and misunderstandings. In these stories, women have potential but do not have true identities because they have been reliant on and have taken care of men their whole lives, and have not had the time or freedom to pursue their own interests and ambitions.

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