
Ernest Hemingway, the False Macho

Men and Masculinities

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Certainly, when people think of Ernest Hemingway what comes to mind for most is the idea that he was a “man’s man,” a true macho who loved in equal parts drinking, hunting, war, and womanizing. He is associated with Pamplona and the running of the bulls, *corrida*, deep-sea fishing for marlin in the Caribbean, and the shooting of lions and water buffalo in East Africa. He was a man of action, the Lord Byron of his age, seriously wounded in Italy in the First World War, the survivor of two airplane crashes and, of course, as a writer someone who won both the Pulitzer and the Nobel Prize for literature.

Yet, while all of the above is true, this traditional image of my grandfather was problematic for me as I was growing up. Being a part of the family I couldn’t, like most of my grandfather’s many admirers, look at the man and just see the legendary writer and world traveler. This was because my father, Ernest’s youngest son Gregory, seemed to be as different as you could be from the author of *The Old Man and the Sea*. From his early teenage years, Gregory cross-dressed and eventually underwent a series of operations at the age of sixty-four to change his sex. Needless to say, there were many times when I’d ask myself, just what connection could there possibly be between this cross-dressing, transsexual Doctor of Medicine (MD), and America’s macho icon? While there didn’t seem to be any on the surface, even as a boy I knew that there was a strong link between the two men. Yet, knowing that there was this connection didn’t necessarily mean that I was eager to explore their possible similarities. As a young man, I thought that if Ernest was anything at all like my father, then what did this say about me? Was I like them? Perhaps, destined to

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become a cross-dresser and transsexual like my dad? It was difficult for me to reconcile Gregory's strange behavior with my grandfather's image; and until my father's death in 2001, I tried not to think about this potentially generational Hemingway obsession with ambiguity, keeping the two men as far apart as I could in my mind. I loved my father, but Gregory, I told myself, was Gregory and Ernest was Ernest and there could be no confusing the two.

What changed my mind was an article written in *Il Corriere della Sera* (Farkas 2001). I was traveling to my father's funeral and still half between accepting that he was gone and not wanting it to be true when I read a journalist's description of how he had died of a heart attack in the Miami Dade County Women's Correctional Facility and how the circumstances of his passing were a disgrace to his last name and especially to his illustrious father. There could be absolutely no connection between this transsexual and the great writer, said the journalist, and my immediate reaction was that she didn't know what the hell she was talking about.

Not only was I sure of this connection, but Ernest himself could see it. In a passage from his posthumous novel *Islands in the Stream* the main character, Thomas Hudson, who is clearly autobiographical, talks about his youngest son (my father):

The smallest boy was fair and was built like a pocket battleship. He was a copy of Thomas Hudson, physically, reduced in scale and widened and shortened. His skin freckled when it tanned and he had a humorous face and was born being very old. He was a devil too, and deviled both his older brothers, and he had a dark side to him that nobody except Thomas Hudson could ever understand. Neither of them thought about this except that they recognized it in each other and knew that it was bad and the man respected it and understood the boy's having it. (Hemingway 1970)

My father quoted this paragraph in his memoir because he was startled and amazed at how well his father knew him. When Ernest refers to the youngest son's "dark side," he is at the same time recognizing that both of them had to deal with the curse and/or blessing of the doubled-edged brilliance of bipolar disorder and the fact that both he and Gregory had always been attracted to androgyny, or a kind of union between the sexes. As a doctor, my father experimented this goal on his own body, while Ernest as a writer wrote about it in his works as far back as the 1920s. Stories such as "A Simple Inquiry," "A Sea Change," or "Big Two-Hearted River" come to mind, where gay and lesbian themes are explored, as well as the idea of pushing yourself into dangerous territory (sexual or otherwise), beyond the point of no return (*The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* 1987). No one was forcing him to write these stories, tales which obviously contrasted with the popular image that people had of him. He wrote them simply because as a man he needed to and as an artist they inspired him.

These stories are important in the chronology of my grandfather's career. When *The Garden of Eden* was published posthumously in 1986 (Hemingway 1986), one of the major criticisms of the novel was that it could not be compared to my

grandfather's best work nor did it touch upon in any way the themes that he was famous for—that is, death, war, tragic loss, and love. While it is true that as a posthumous work it could never be the book that he might have wanted, had he had the strength to finish it, *The Garden of Eden*'s themes of sexual ambiguity, gender bending, and male/female unity are, as we have seen, ideas that he was exploring from the beginning of his career. If anything, *The Garden of Eden* could be viewed as a return to his artistic origins.

The publication of this novel set in motion a wave of critical texts that revolutionized academia's understanding of my grandfather's work. Scholars such as Carl Eby, Nancy Comley, Robert Scholes, and Debra Moddlemog (Eby 1999; Comley and Scholes 1994; Moddlemog 1999) examined Ernest's other side, and even if the results of their studies have been for the most part completely ignored by the general public, for me they were an enormous aid in writing my memoir, *Strange Tribe* (Hemingway 2007a). They helped me see the similarities between these two men and to dispel once and for all the idea that my father was not a "real" Hemingway.

What furthered my understanding of these men and added yet another layer to my memoir were the unpublished letters that I discovered between my father and grandfather. They were written for the most part in the 1950s and using them I was able to recreate their oftentimes turbulent dialectic. It was the period when Ernest was being canonized as the symbol of American male virility and also when he was writing *The Garden of Eden*. The letters were at times very difficult for me to read because they brought me face to face with the reality of two men who were so similar and who needed and loved each other so much that there were times when communication itself became impossible. I was reminded, if I ever needed to be, that as a boy my father had been Ernest's favorite. He had inherited all of the positive qualities of his father and more than his fair share of the negative.

The first time that Ernest saw my father putting on a pair of nylons was in the *Finca Vigía*. Gregory was about twelve years old and it was soon after he had won a national skeet shooting contest against adults in Havana. Ernest walked into his son's room, saw what he was doing, and walked out without saying anything. A few days later, when the two of them were alone by the swimming pool, Ernest said to my father, "Gigi, you and I come from a very strange tribe," and that was all. But it was more than enough for my father. He understood instantly that his father shared a secret with him and one that no one besides themselves would ever understand.

Gregory continued to cross-dress throughout his teens, and soon after he was married in 1951 he was arrested when he tried to use the ladies bathroom in a movie theater in Los Angeles. His one phone call from jail was to his wife, pregnant at the time, and she called my grandmother, Pauline Pfeiffer, who was in San Francisco visiting her sister. Pauline took the next plane to Los Angeles, paid her son's bail, and managed to keep the press quiet. But what she wasn't prepared for was my grandfather's reaction when he heard about the incident. She spoke to him over the phone in Havana and he was livid, blaming her and the way she had raised Gregory for the sorry state that their son was in. It was all her fault, he said, totally hers, and

they went on this way for over an hour. When it was over, my grandmother was shaken and distraught. She had faced the proverbial wrath of her ex-husband and was in no condition to take it. Later on that night, she started to feel ill and was rushed to a nearby hospital where surgeons discovered that she was hemorrhaging massively. For over an hour, they sought in vain the source of the bleeding and at 2 a.m. on October 1, 1951, she died.

My father was terribly upset and in part blamed himself for his mother's death, thinking that if he had never been arrested, she never would have come to Los Angeles or ended up in the hospital. Ernest had no hard feelings and invited my father, his young wife, Jane, and their newborn baby girl to Havana for Christmas. By all accounts, they had a wonderful time. Ernest treated Jane like a princess, introducing her to who's who of Havana's social elite, taking her out to all his favorite bars, and trying in his own way to make up for what had happened in Los Angeles. But on the day that they were to fly back to Miami and then to California, he stopped his son as he was about to climb up the steps to the plane and told him, "Gigi, you killed your mother with that stunt in L.A." My father couldn't believe it. It was as if a ton of bricks had been dropped onto his shoulders, the guilt that he already felt for his mother's death was being redirected at him once again by his own father.

Gregory returned to Los Angeles and for a while it seemed as if the two of them had forgotten the incident or at least had agreed not to talk about it. But soon it showed up in their letters. In an angry reply to something his father had written to him about his mother's death, he said:

When Mother died and I first called, you accused me of killing her. When I brought Jane down to Cuba you behaved so inhumanely that after the trip I had to (Gregory's handwriting makes it impossible to identify the missing word). . . myself for three whole days to stop myself from crying. I know you thought you were doing this all for my own good, but I hate the way you did it . . . As far as I am concerned you can go to hell. If you want answers to any letter from me, make your own truthful and devoid of any epistles to the Californian shit . . . If we see each other again and you act nastily, I will fight and I will beat the shit out of you. (Hemingway 2007b)

A week and a half later, he wrote another letter where he began to list the things that he found abusive in Ernest's character:

I used to think that you were such a wonderful guy in the morning when your head was clear that whatever stupid, inane, illogical, ruthless and (to use your own word) Chicken-shit things you said later on in the day were excusable, and even must be sensible because they were coming out of the same person who could be so human and sensible in the morning. Well, old boy, I'm sick of adding it all up—trying to balance things in your favor. Let me name a few things I'm tired of. 1) your incessant castigation of Marty, who was the second-best wife you ever had (after Bumby's mother). If ever there was a girl who was alive and with a capacity for enjoying things, it was

Marty. She never bitched you without reason, never bitched you until you had made a thousand and one tantramental [*sic*] scenes, made her so sick of you and so destroyed her love for you that she was delighted to leave you finally; and now she lives a peaceful (but duller) life in Mexico where she no longer has to fare [*sic*] an illogical, torpid bull every evening.

That is the big decision everyone who is close to you has to make eventually—whether to stick and live for the few times when you are kind, perceptive and human (and by sticking and waiting for these times they undervalue themselves and forget that in their own way they are twice as good as you), or to leave and be rid of this gin-soaked, abusive monster. (Hemingway 2007b, 95)

The letter continued with Gregory telling his father how much he hurt his mother when he came back from Spain and ignored her and how all the people who he calls friends (including Mary, Ernest's fourth wife) are nothing but sycophants who hang around him only because he's famous and has money. And after that he wrote yet another letter and then another, both just as angry and bitter as the first one was.

Ernest's reply to these letters was prompt and to the point. Ernest had discovered that his son had taken a pair of nylons from Mary's bedroom on their visit and then had blamed it on the maid. Not that my grandfather really cared much about the nylons but Greg had badmouthed Mary in his letters and Ernest wanted a written apology to his wife and wanted one as soon as possible:

... You stole from Mary, you may remember, and now you write obscenely and insultingly about her.

Your threats to beat up your father are comic enough. Ordinarily I would ignore such nonsense. But obscene threatening letters sent through the United States mails are not comic at all.

Your letter of November 13th was sent after you had received a cable of congratulation for your twenty-first birthday by your friends and well wishers here. . .

I had received your previous letter before your birthday. But I remembered how you had nearly always been away from home on your birthdays, and so it had been neglected as a fiesta. Since your 21st was a very special birthday, I thought you would like to hear from people who were fond of you and wished you well.

I would like to see you straighten up and fly right.

Mary has been very patient with you. The night before your obscene threatening letter came, we had been awake late in bed and we were remembering places, and the colours of things, and the fine times we had. Then in the morning with the breakfast mail your letter came. It was as pleasant and charming and as decent as a dead buzzard, and about as popular. In some ways a dead buzzard is comic. In some ways the letter was comic. But it was the Chattahoochee [*sic*] Choo-Choo comic, and that is the sort of comic you want to avoid. That's the train to keep off of.

Straighten up and fly right, Gig. I have learned from your letters, if I did not know it before, that I am not always a charming character. But I am not a gin-soaked monster going around ruining people's lives and all my friends are not sycophants [*sic*] (You

spell it). George Brown is not, Charlie Sweeny is not . . . (and here Ernest went on to list at least twenty of his friends who most definitely were not sycophants.) (Hemingway 2007b, 99)

He told Gregory that he was not being “bawled out” and reiterated that he wanted a quick reply to Mary and that from then on he didn’t want to hear from his son unless his letters were necessary “business letters.” He commented that his son’s handwriting was ill-formed and illegible. “When you have time on your hands you might work on that. It has shown a progressive degeneration since you left prep-school. Sometimes the degeneration in it has been shocking” (Hemingway 2007b, 100).

My father wrote back to Ernest that he had no apologies to make. He admitted that he had called Mary a “goody-goody,” but that sometimes she was one. He wrote that neither she nor Ernest was perfect and that he had just as much right to criticize them when he thought they deserved it. He said that he was painfully hurt by Mary’s reaction to Ernest’s discovery that he had lied about the clothes:

The clothes business is something that I have never been able to control, understand very little, and I am terribly ashamed of. I have lied about it before, mainly to people I am fond of, because I was afraid they would not like me as much if they found out. It has been a terribly destructive influence on my life and is undoubtedly responsible for a lot of moral disintegration. I was very hurt by the cold way she treated me when I was done there with Jane. Well, that’s O.K., maybe I deserved it. But I want you two to realize that you are not Gods. . . . No apologies, Miss Mary, but a lot of love to you. (Hemingway 2007b, 101)

He finished by telling his father that he did not want to be ordered around any more, but that he still had a lot to love him for, and that maybe this would eventually bring them back together again.

What I find interesting in these letters is how the two of them essentially skate around the issue of Gregory’s cross-dressing/gender confusion with Ernest’s veiled references to his son’s “degeneration” and Gregory’s talk of his own “moral disintegration,” as if the condition wasn’t shared by both of them. Ernest was certainly aware of their similarities, as was my father. Cross-dressing was Gregory’s passion, but hair and its color and how to dye it were my grandfather’s, as I discovered from a letter that Ernest had written to Mary in 1948 where he describes how he “wants to be her girl” and how he tried to dye his hair blond to look the part.

Throughout the 1950s, this “moral disintegration” was something that they both had to face again and again. My father started to have his manic phases on or around the anniversaries of his mother’s death. In 1955, he joined the paratroopers on the anniversary of his mother’s death in an effort to imitate his brother (who had been a paratrooper during World War II) and probably impress his father, but was given a psychiatric discharge after he went manic during his first jump and wouldn’t leave

the plane. The second time was a year later when he threatened to kill himself after his coffee-growing business in Africa went bad. In both cases, and in many others, his father was there to pick up the pieces, putting him in a hospital for shock treatments to cure his depression, paying all his bills, and even flying to Miami to meet him whenever he was released from a clinic.

In 1959, my father managed to get accepted to the University of Miami medical school and as someone studying medicine he wrote to his “colleagues” at the hospital where his mother had died in Los Angeles asking for her autopsy. He found out that her hemorrhaging had been caused by a rare form of pituitary cancer and that this cancer in moments of extreme stress (such as her argument with her ex-husband about their cross-dressing son and his arrest) could cause her blood pressure to rise to lethal levels. He wrote a letter to his father telling him about the cancer and the blood pressure, saying “it wasn’t me who killed her, you bastard, you did!”

Those who were with Ernest say that when he first received my father’s letter in the morning he was furious, but that by the afternoon he wasn’t saying anything at all and that a few months later the depression set in that would eventually lead to his suicide. When he died, my father blamed himself again for the death of one of his parents, taking on another load of guilt that he would carry with him for the rest of his life for the most part in silence.

His manic episodes continued with his periods of deep, clinical depression growing longer as he grew older. Perhaps, if people had known how similar he was to his father, that might have been different for him. But who would have believed him? Ernest was and continues to be a macho ideal of the twentieth century and so while there were days when he thought that having his sex change was the best thing that he’d ever done in his life, there were others when he thought that he was nothing but a freak and deserved to be treated as such. There was no middle ground for my father and the idea of a union of the sexes, “a more African sexuality beyond all tribal law” as Ernest called it in the *Garden of Eden*, remained as elusive for him as it had been for his father.

The last time my father was arrested it was for walking naked down a road on Key Biscayne in Miami. He spent five days in the Miami Dade County Women’s Correctional Facility, where having been abandoned by his wife and alone in his cell, he died when his heart went into fibrillation at five in the morning on October 1, 2001. Exactly fifty years to the day and to the hour of his mother’s death.

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