

A Farewell to Victorian Idealism:
Catherine Barkley's Redefining of the Victorian Woman in *A Farewell to Arms*

The 1920s, kicking off with the woman's suffrage movement and the passing of the 19th amendment giving women the right to vote, was a time of great social change for women. Women were claiming their equality with men and were casting off the illusion of the feminine mystique, a term later coined by Betty Friedan in the 1960s and defined by feminist writer, Meredith Miller, as "an ideology of female subservience, domesticity and motherhood" that valorizes "passive, nurturing and privatized femininity" (4). The feminists of the 1920s were redefining gender boundaries and roles, as they fought for equality with men, and Charles Hatten notes how this "redefinition...generated a pervasive anxiety about masculinity in modernist writers" (79). Many critics who analyze Ernest Hemingway's writing through the lens of this crisis in gender and masculinity, such as Jeffrey Meyers, comment on Hemingway's anxieties and misogynistic attitude towards women and claim that his female characters are "archetypally ideal, the quintessence of adolescent and middle-aged male desire" (Lockridge 170). From this perspective, Hemingway appears to be enforcing male Victorian values on modern women. Catherine Barkley, the heroine in one of Hemingway's most well known novels, *A Farewell to Arms*, seems to take on this role of the "submissive fawning dream-girl" (Lockridge 170). However, while Catherine Barkley may seem to embody the attributes of the Victorian Woman, she more accurately fits into the paradigm of the New Woman revealing the radically feministic nature of Hemingway's female characters.

The Victorian Woman was viewed in 19th and early 20th century as the ideal woman and was defined by specific attributes. Feminist writer, Barbara Welter, discusses the attributes of Victorian Womanhood, “by which a woman judged her-self and was judged by her husband, her neighbors and society,” and characterizes the Victorian Woman with four virtues: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity (152). These attributes were not only stressed by men on women, but also by many women’s magazines that were published at the time, of course many of these magazines were being published by men. These four attributes were ultimately employed to maintain women’s dependence on men. Of a woman’s piety, the magazine *The Ladies’ Repository* states, “Religion is exactly what a woman needs, for it gives her that dignity that best suits her dependence” (Welter 153). A woman was also expected to be pure, as “without it [purity], she was, in fact, no woman at all, but a member of some lower order” (Welter 154). The most feminine virtue was submission, as the magazine *The Young Lady’s Book* states, “It is, however, certain, that in whatever situation of life a woman is placed...a spirit of obedience and submission, pliability of temper, and humility of mind, are required from her” (Welter 159). All of these virtues culminated in the final virtue of domesticity, as “the true woman’s place was unquestionably by her own fireside as daughter, sister, but most of all as wife and mother” (Welter 162). However, these “virtues” began to be strongly challenged at the end of the 19th century and especially in the 1920s, as Carroll Smith-Rosenberg notes how the New Woman emerged in this time and “challenged existing gender relations and the distribution of power” (245).

The idea of the New Woman presented a direct threat to the Victorian Woman. Elizabeth Macleod Walls notes that as women began redefining the Victorian woman and

creating a new identity, a new woman, modern men counteractively began “decrying modernist feminism, clinging instead to nostalgia for some nebulous woman of the past, some atypical mixture of self-awareness...and submissiveness” (236). Many claim that Hemingway fits into this category. However, a close analysis of his female characters reveals contrary evidence, as his women fit more into the New Woman paradigm. Smith-Rosenberg summarizes the New Woman in her book *Disorderly Conduct* stating, “The new woman constituted a revolutionary demographic and political phenomena. Eschewing marriage, she fought for professional visibility, espoused innovative, often radical, economic and social reforms, and wielded real political power” (245). Catherine Barkley, when compared to the Victorian woman ideals of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity, actually embodies the New Woman more than she does the Victorian woman.

The first way Catherine Barkley fits into the New Woman or modern woman paradigm is her lack of piety. She is outspoken in her atheism going against the Victorian ideal of a woman being placed underneath her husband and God. Her lack of religion leads her away from marriage and another Victorian ideal, domesticity. Catherine states, “You see darling, it [marriage] would mean everything to me if I had any religion. But I haven’t any religion” (Hemingway 116). As a New Woman, she has the right to independently reject religion and create her own beliefs. Henry takes on the more feminine and Victorian role in the case of piety, as he struggles throughout the novel with the idea of religion. Catherine is a stronger character with her ability to make a decision regarding religion and to stick to her beliefs. Henry tries to fit her into this pious Victorian ideal stating, “You gave me Saint Anthony,” but Catherine disregards this

comment replying, “That was for luck. Some one gave it to me” (116). When they first meet, Catherine reveals her lack of piety and the fact that “she finds no solace in any religious afterlife” (Lockridge 174). She makes clear her disbelief in an afterlife stating that when her fiancé was killed in the war “that was the end of it” (19). Again, Henry is hesitant to claim that there is no afterlife stating, “I don’t know.” And again, Catherine takes on the dominant role claiming, “Oh yes. That’s the end of it” (19). The war changed Catherine, as her Victorian ideals were blown to bits along with her fiancé.

Catherine also blatantly reacts against sexual purity and yields sexual dominance in her relationship with Henry. Like piety, Catherine “perceives that, in the general disruption of war, the older restraints on sexuality and courtship, like other Victorian illusions” are unnecessary and outdated (Hatten 85). Hatten goes on to explain how Catherine’s “desire for transgressions of gender boundaries...anticipates postwar society’s increased access to sexuality for women and blurring of gender boundaries” (95). Catherine starts the game of love with Henry stating, “Oh I love you so. Please put your hand there again” (30), and she also ends this game and their sexual deviance stating, “And you don’t have to say you love me. That’s all over for a while” (32). When Henry urges her to continue she states, “No. Good night” (32). Catherine also quite literally dominates her relationship with Henry when he is in the hospital, as she decides when they have sex and when she will come in and see him. Henry is quite literally nursed back to health by Catherine, as she does take on this feminine role, but this role is empowering rather than repressive. Catherine even openly expresses her desire for impurity in the scene at the cheap motel when she states, “I wish we could do something really sinful. Everything we do seems so innocent and simple” (153). This

statement is interesting seeing as how they have been secretly sleeping with each other at the hospital out of marriage for the last six months. Catherine is taking on an impulsive masculine role. She also expresses her desire to be sexually deviant like Henry stating, “I wish I’d had it to be like you. I wish I’d stayed with all your girls” (299). She is expressing the New Woman idea that there should not be a stigma on women having open sexual affairs out of marriage.

Catherine may appear to embody the third Victorian woman characteristic of submissiveness, as she is constantly trying to be a “good girl” for Henry (138), but a closer reading of the text reveals Catherine’s dominance and striving for equality in her relationship with Henry. Throughout the text Catherine stresses the equality of herself and Henry stating, “We really are the same one” (139). She even talks about cutting her hair so that then they would “both be alike” (299). In this scene she goes on to state, “Oh, darling, I want you so much I want to be you too” (299). This longing for equality both emotionally and physically is yet another way Catherine embodies the New Woman. She tends to make seemingly submissive comments to Henry, such as “I’ll say just what you wish and I’ll do what you wish” (105), but she remains the one in charge of the game. Even in the end when she is dying, she is the one calling the shots telling Henry to “go away” and demanding him to give her the gas when she starts to feel pain screaming “Give it to me” (318, 319). Henry takes on the passive role, as Catherine “both defeats him at his own make game of bravery and deprives him of the traditional role of protector of a woman” (Hatten 96). From the beginning when she tells Henry to stop playing romantic games to the end when she yells at Henry, “Don’t touch me,” she is in charge (330).

One of the ways Catherine is most dominant is in her refusal to officially marry Henry. This refusal also reveals how Catherine goes against the Victorian ideal of domesticity. Catherine refused to marry her first love for eight years because she thought it would “be bad for him” (19). She seems to regret not marrying him but more for his sake than hers, as she states, “I could have given him that anyway” (19). She “refuses a traditional feminine role of wife” multiple times even after she gets pregnant stating, “I’m not going to be married in this splendid matronly state” (Hatten 93, Hemingway 293). Catherine’s treatment of her baby also shows how she did not want to be confined by domesticity. When she tells Henry she is pregnant, she says, “I did everything. I took everything but it didn’t make any difference,” alluding to the idea that she tried to get rid of the baby (138). Rather than embracing motherhood, Catherine sees it as a hindrance and is more worried about how she looks as a pregnant woman than about making plans for after the baby is born. Even Catherine’s treatment of going to America with Henry is very non-domestic. She does not discuss going home to start a family and a life with Henry. Instead she talks about wanting to travel around the country and see different sites, such as the Golden Gate Bridge (295). Living a domestic life seems to be the last thing on Catherine’s mind.

Catherine can be regarded as a New Woman rather than a Victorian Woman by the way in which she rejects the main characteristics of piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity that are ideal for the Victorian Woman. As noted by Hatten, “Social historians have identified the decade following World War I as a watershed in the emergence of a new vision of sexuality and a reformulation of the nature of gender divisions,” and one can see this emergence of a “new vision” in Hemingway’s *A*

Farewell to Arms (Hatten 78). While many of the women's magazines at this time "sought to convince woman that a stable order of society depended upon her maintaining her traditional place," one can see how Hemingway was going against these traditional ideals with his characterization of Catherine Barkley and her non-traditional relationship with Henry (Welter 174). One must view Catherine's interaction with Henry carefully because while it may seem as if she is subjugating herself to his masculine dominance, she is the one who actually takes on the masculine role, embodies the New Woman, and dies the heroic death.

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