Universidad Complutense de Madrid, Madrid, Spain
JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research
2024, VOL. 12, NO. 1, 1-11
ISSN 2340-650X
https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research

The Double Iceberg in Ernest Hemingway's *Men without Women*: An Implied Crisis of Masculinity[1]

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Abstract:

Ernest Hemingway's short stories have been largely analyzed as individual examples of his writing principle of the iceberg. However, *Men without Women* has received little attention as a short story composite, in which the form and content of the whole and of its individual stories reflect on each other. As relatively new approaches to the short story composite as a genre emerge, it becomes necessary to reread critically these kinds of works. In *Men without Women*, Hemingway's grouping of the stories into a single work adds a different dimension to themselves: the composite – in which the stories become utterly interrelated to each other. In this larger iceberg, the postwar crisis of masculinities gains more visibility than in the individual stories, reinforcing the subversion of gender identities subtly present in them.

Keywords: *Men without Women*, short story, composite, masculinities, iceberg, narrativity.

1. Introduction

Given the deep correlation between form and content in *Men without Women*, I consider it indispensable to address the text in more appropriate terms with regard to its formal aspects. Critics have focused so far either on the form and themes of individual stories or on the thematic connections between them, but, to my knowledge, none of them has approached *Men without Women* in relation to its only recently defined genre:

[1] **Recommended Citation**
Carretero-Román, Diego. "The Double Iceberg in Ernest Hemingway's *Men without Women*: An Implied Crisis of Masculinity." *JACLR: Journal of Artistic Creation and Literary Research*, vol. 12, no. 1, 2024, pp. 1-11:
<https://www.ucm.es/siim/journal-of-artistic-creation-and-literary-research>

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the short story composite. For this reason, in the first part of this essay, I intend to analyze *Men without Women* from a theoretical basis provided by Lunden's study of the short story composite as a genre in *The United Stories of America*. As the genre gains solidity, it becomes unavoidable to reread and reclassify short story composites outside the traditional definition as mere collections of short stories. For this purpose, I find Lunden's terminology and taxonomy the most complete ones among the different definitions of the genre.

2. Clusters and Icebergs

As Hemingway himself claimed in a letter to the editor of Scribner's magazine in 1933, "a book of stories, that is a good one, is just as much a unit as a novel" (Beall 94). Indeed, a "book of stories" differs from a "collection of stories" in its higher degree of unity, and hence, of closure. Assuming that *Men without Women* is a "unit", implies that, more than "a remarkable collection of short stories", as Beall (101) defines it, it must be categorized as a composite, and, more specifically, as a cluster, in Lunden's definition of the term. He defines the "cluster" as the most "open" and "loosely structured" type of composite, characterized by the wideness of the "gaps between the stories", which can make them, apparently, resilient to cohere with the whole (38). Exactly as it happens in *Men without Women*, "interconnections between stories are not obvious, but will have to be constructed by readers" (Lunden 38), which relates perfectly to Hemingway's principle of the iceberg, as stated in an interview to *The Paris Review*:

> I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is (sic.) seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn't show. If a writer omits something because he does not know it then there is a hole in the story. (The Art of Fiction No. 21)

On the contrary, the "collection of stories" (Lunden 44) lacks the implied unity of the cluster. Thus, seeing *Men without Women* as a cluster doubles Hemingway's iceberg:

not only each individual story is an iceberg, but also part of the larger iceberg of the composite.

However, Beall's article proves that Lunden's view of composites and collections as author-constructed and editor-constructed, respectively (48), which must also be reconsidered. The correspondence between Hemingway and Perkins analyzed by Beall demonstrates that during the construction process of *Men without Women* both the editor and the author were actively involved. Therefore, although Perkins recognized Hemingway his right to ultimately decide the order and stories included (Beall 99), the decision was taken in collaboration. Lunden's taxonomy, in this case, turns too simplistic. As a way of recognizing the editor's participation, my suggestion is to subdivide the composites into dominantly or entirely constructed by the author or the editor. *Men without Women*, in this subcategorization, would be a dominantly-author constructed composite.

As a cluster of short stories, *Men without Women* exemplifies exponentially Hemingway's principle of the iceberg. Elliptical omissions, the most common device used in the stories for the creation of the iceberg, transgress the story level and occur at the composite level in the unspecified gaps between the stories. Such ellipses result in an ambiguity which, left unresolved, invites the reader "to represent their own fantasies" and "voice their ideological biases" (57) not only in order to interpret individual stories, as Maisonnat (57) meant, but also in order to find interconnections among the stories. The fact that elliptical omissions occur at both levels stands as a perfect metaphor for the cluster. They partly close the composite insofar as they establish a common device among the stories, but, at the same time, they also open it insofar as they become open containers to be filled by the reader.

Furthermore, the stories even invite us to distrust their different narrators, whose reliability, even as extradiegetic narrators, is subdued to a character. In "An Alpine Idyll", the innkeeper repeatedly tells Nick and John "You wouldn't believe it" (73), referring to the story about one of the locals, Olz's, which he is about to tell them. Gadjusek defines this story as "most exemplary" of the "iceberg technique" (164), and sees Olz's use of his wife's corpse as a symbol of a temporal suspension of natural cycles.

However, given the narrator's encouragement to distrust the story, I argue that, possibly, as in other stories such as "Hill like White Elephants" and "A Simple Enquiry", there is a taboo in the story, unmentioned explicitly, and that taboo is necrophilia. The "grotesque deformation of the woman's mouth" (Gajdusek 167) is caused – such is Olz's alibi – by the introduction and hanging of a lantern in it which, not by chance, can be considered a phallic symbol. In any case, the story deals with the profanation of a corpse and the transgression of the taboo that defines it as an abject object; for Olz, unaffected by the taboo, it turns into a different type of object, be it a sexual one, or a piece of furniture.

3. Gapping the Narration, Narrating the Gaps

Similarly, the perspective of the third person extradiegetic narrator of "The Killers" and "Ten Indians", rather than omniscient, is also limited to Nick's perspective. In "The Killers", Nick "wonder[s] what he [Ole Anderson] did?" (39) to be prosecuted by the mafia, but the answer to the question remains uncertain: our perspective as readers is as limited as Nick's. In the same way, the narrator's reliability in "Ten Indians" is subdued to not only the perspective and reliability of Nick, but of his memory: "he remembered there were nine" (64), but the extradiegetic narrator neither confirms it nor denies it. Rather than totally omniscient, as this heterodiegetic, extradiegetic narrator has traditionally been, it is limited-omniscient.

Actually, the narrator of Nick Adams' stories follows a process of subjectivization that increases the closer it gets to Nick's trauma. As Ficken noticed, in the stories set during Nick's younger years, the heterodiegetic narrator predominates, but "in the stories around the wound, the narrative perspective is most complex" (94), leading into an autodiegetic narrator in stories like "In Another Country" or "Now I Lay Me". In the latter, the complexity of the narrativity lies on the different diegetic levels created by Nick's remembrance: he – Nick, the extradiegetic narrator – remembers himself – the intradiegetic narrator – remembering his childhood – the metadiegetic level. Macdonald sees this as an ineffective attempt to "escape the traumatic experience" (218), which keeps the insomniac Nick awake. In trauma studies, this unending return to the

aforementioned traumatic experience – in Nick's case, being shelled during the war – is caused by the subject's necessity to rewrite that memory; until then, as it happens to Nick, he is borne back ceaselessly into that past.

Apart from Nick, who appears in the five previously mentioned stories, the American couple of "Hills like White Elephants" can be said to appear again in two other stories: "Che ti Dice la Patria" and "A Canary for One". The different perspectives from which the couple is seen – together with their namelessness – make it ambiguous to claim that the characters are the same; at least, they can be enclosed into the same character archetype: the (American) couple formed by a middle-aged man and a young woman. In "Hills like White Elephants" the heterodiegetic narrator provides only the name of the "girl" (29), "Jig" (30); unlike her, the American man that accompanies her remains unnamed. In "Che ti Dice la Patria", the couple at the restaurant seem to echo them, with the "middle-aged" man and the "young" woman who "wore black" (44), probably as a sign of mourning, which would explain why "they seemed very sad" (44). As it has been commonly assumed that "Hills like White Elephants" "deals implicitly with abortion" (Abouddahab 34), "Che te Dice la Patria" would complete it by presenting the couple after the child is aborted – significantly, only mourned by the young woman, Jig. Then, in "A Canary for One", the American lady's statement that "No foreigner can make an American girl a good husband" (69) implies that she is indeed talking to a girl – who had already acknowledged that her husband and her were American. In this story, the husband becomes the autodiegetic narrator, and eventually recognizes that they were "returning to Paris to set up separate residences" (70). So, their story – or rather, the end of their story – is portrayed across three different stories. Nevertheless, as I have acknowledged above, the unspecified gaps between the three stories open them for interpretation, denying the totality of any.

These unspecified gaps construct the underwater part of the larger iceberg of the composite; invisible to us, we as readers reconstruct it with our interpretations. As a cluster of short stories, each one is self-sufficient, but at the same time expanded by the rest. Their publication history – most of the stories were published individually, with the exceptions of "A Simple Enquiry", "Ten Indians", and "A Pursuit Race" (Abouddahab

208) – proves them to be "independent", but their inclusion in the composite signifies an "interlink" (Lunden 47), which establishes a dialogic relationship between them. In the same way, Nick Adams' stories, and *Men without Women* itself, can be read, as Beall does in his article, in relation to *In Our Time*, but the stories of the former do not necessarily connect with the stories of the latter, as Beall (100) claims. *Men without Women* is as autonomous as any of its stories.

Such interlinks contribute to the construction of the iceberg inasmuch as they are never explicit. As Giger noted, these silences become "a new way of communicating with the reader" (37), which Lunden identifies as an anti-closural strategy. Critic Cassandre Meunier relates Hemingway's writing style with Jack Brennan's boxing style in "Fifty Grand": Jack "doesn't waste any juice" (59), which, for Meunier "is, of course, a characteristic of the author" (89). This expands Ann Putnam's claim (186) that "sporting events" are used as "the gathering metaphor" of many stories, including "A Pursuit Race" or "Fifty Grand". In this case, a feature of one of the participants in the sporting event is extrapolated to the style of the author. Hence, while the form reflects and reinforces the content, this content reciprocally reinforces and reflects on its own form.

4. The Iceberg as a Taboo: Masquerading the Crisis of Masculinity

The short stories of *Men without Women* minimize the clusters' ascribed "tension "between unity and variety" (Lunden 12) by presenting a very low degree of narrativity within themselves. This favors the construction of the double iceberg: the anti-closural strategies and anti-teleological features present in each story – with the exceptions of "Fifty Grand" and "The Undefeated", which show a higher degree of narrativity – pave the way for their different and even "contradictory interpretations" (Maisonnat 57). The lack of resolution of "stories in which the principal action is the activity of waiting [for the end]", such as "Hills like White Elephants", "Now I Lay Me", "A Canary for One", and "The Killers" (Putnam 187) turns them into narratives made of "middles", whose conclusion never comes. This correlates to short story composites themselves, which, unlike traditional novels, have no global conclusion, or are left for the reader to draw.

While at the composite level the elliptical omissions occur in the aforementioned gaps between the stories – intentionally left unspecified by the narrator –, at the story level they occur as a consequence of the character's refusal to address a taboo word or topic explicitly. The major's "simple enquiry" in its homonymous story is complicated, firstly, by the "elliptical questions" (Nolan 220) such as ""And you don't really want –[?]"; "That your great desire isn't really –[?]" (63), and secondly, by his use of the word "corrupt" instead of homosexual (Brenner 198). While for Nolan the major is presented as "overtly" homosexual (218), for Brenner, his behavior signifies a perfectly "professional" attitude, not necessarily pointing towards homosexuality (202). The major's enquiry, eventually, is whether Pinin is homosexual, but whether "he lied to [him]" (63). Similarly, the conversation in "Hills like White Elephants" is commonly read "as a pivotal moment in the relationship where the man tries to convince the woman to get an abortion" (Wright 335), but Maisonnat sees the story as a metaphor of "creation, inspiration, and the process of writing" (58). I contend that the stories' main concern in relation to the composite is the ambiguous way in which these topics are approached in the dialogues due to their status as taboos. For this reason, the stories resemble Hemingway's short story play "Today is Friday", as the narrator's interventions are diminished to the minimum.

Whereas the character's homosexuality depends on the reader's interpretation, it is not the case with the androgyny that some critics have ascribed to characters like the major. Quoting from Brenner, "the major's androgyny [is] a recurring feature of many of Hemingway's characters and an especially appropriate feature for characters in this 1927 volume of stories, *Men without Women*" (203). Yet this androgyny is defined as the combination of both culturally constructed gender identities – masculinity and femininity – and must be hence reconsidered. Brennen labels the major as androgynous for his exhibition of different features that he, influenced by the cultural construction of genders, associates with femininity. Rather, the major's possession of such "feminine" features proves these gender identities as fluid, and hence, not biological, but cultural.

A similar case occurs with Maisonnat's interpretation of "Hills like White Elephants". He argues that "Hemingway falls back on the old tradition of the writer as

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an androgynous creature" (61) in his blending of the voice of both Jig and the American man "into the voice of the androgynous narrative agent" (61). On a closer look at the story, we see that the narrator's comments are very scarce, as well as limited to the description of the character's movements. Moreover, as I have argued before, in "A Canary for One" the American man becomes the focalizer, symbolizing his gender, culturally constructed, superiority. This male perspective reflects the patriarchal order, reinforced by the supremacy of the American man's decision over the abortion, which leaves Jig voiceless – towards him as well as narratively – in the following stories. Their eventual separation symbolizes the breakup with the patriarchal tradition embodied by men in *Men without Women*.

The composite presents a patriarchal society whose masculinity, and hence its male hegemony, is in crisis due to the absence not of women, as the title suggests, but of femininity in male characters. The war was "the final proof of male symbolic power's impotence; [it] was the devastating result of collective belief in those transcendental signifiers of insufficient skepticism toward national, patriarchal and theological authority" (Foster 56). The consequence was "a social and psychological crisis of masculinity helped shape both the thematic concerns and formal innovations of the early Modernist revolution in the arts" (Izenburg 2). Male characters turned impotent are certainly frequent in *Men without Women*, beginning with the protagonist of the first story. Manolo García's bravado combines with his impotence – the natural consequence of aging – with fatal consequences for him. His "coleta", the very symbol of his phallic power, is ridiculed – the narrator refers to it as a "pigtail" – and eventually cut off: he is castrated (23). His death in "A Banal Story" also proves the masculine frailty of his comrades: "bullfighters were very relieved he was dead, because he did always in the bullring the things they could only do sometimes" (81).

As Manolo's death, the crisis of masculinity is the consequence of its own values. Their lust to dominate everything – including animals (in bullfighting and fishing), women (like the prostitutes in "Che te Dice la Patria"), and other men (as in any war) – leads them into a war, in which men themselves are wounded, like Nick. Their traumas and wounds turn them impotent, lacking self-control, and thus, loveless and

emasculated. Even Jack Brennan, whose self-control in the ring of "Fifty Grand" is undeniable, moves away from the man's world of boxing and its exaltation of violence, in order to return with his wife and children. In this sense, Jack is also emasculated, insofar as he does not comply with the archetype of the undefeatable, manly boxer; he refuses to do it for "fifty grand" (53). His retirement is literally a punch "five inches below the belt" (60) to the masculinity embodied by his opponent, Walcott.

5. Conclusion

All the stories relate, sometimes in a very subtle way, to the crisis of hegemonic, culturally constructed masculinity. In order to portray the challenging of these strongly established gender identities in a more realistic way, the transgression of such taboo is narrated as a taboo itself, which requires the reader's implication in order to decipher it. This way, form and content correlate to each other, as much as the container – the composite – correlates to the content – the short stories. In the double iceberg of *Men without Women*, what the iceberg of each story hides reflects what the composite itself hides. Eventually, the stories are not about what is told, but about the way it is told, and mostly about how the content shapes the way they are narrated, a connection that usually remains invisible in the underwater part of the iceberg.

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