

Disenfranchised Mothers and Maternity Insurance: Tracing Progressive Arguments in Ernest Hemingway's Short Stories

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ABSTRACT: Ernest Hemingway's corpus has often been analyzed towards its perceived focus on a masculine perspective and experience and has therefore taken its female characters as mere dependents and modifiers of this experience. While a number of critics have, in recent years, turned towards gender as a fruitful approach to Hemingway after all, the mother character especially has received very little scholarly attention still. In this essay I explore parallels between Hemingway's short stories "A Canary For One" and "Hills Like White Elephants" and contemporaneous Progressive, reformist arguments by Olive Schreiner and Elsie Clews Parsons. I will investigate the relationship between mother characters and tropes of maternity in Hemingway's short stories and the argumentative structures of contemporaneous Progressive texts, aiming to illustrate that the parallels I will point out allow a more differentiated analysis of the motherhood trope within this selection of Hemingway's short fiction. This essay contends that the mother character in "A Canary for One" and maternity as a concept in "Hills Like White Elephants" together illustrate two instances of non-Progressive womanhood and thereby appear as a fictionalization of the circumstances out of which Schreiner and Parsons develop their progressive arguments towards female selfhood and individuality.

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KEYWORDS: Progressive Era, Feminism, Motherhood, Reception History, Selfhood.

Introduction

Mothers are often fragmented, minor characters in Ernest Hemingway's texts. The narrative perspective rarely enters their minds and brief diegetic references to their behavior mock them with irony. While Hemingway's second short story collection *Men Without Women* (1928) mainly negotiates modern masculinity, motherhood is nevertheless a reoccurring feature in many of the stories. In the past, mother characters – as one example of female characters in Hemingway's fiction in general – have been read as evidence for the author's perceived misogyny (Fetterley 71) or as an autobiographical idiosyncrasy (Comley 416). In particular, feminist-influenced Hemingway criticism has had a part in generalizing all of

Hemingway's women as mere modifiers of the male experience (e.g.: Bell 1984; Fetterley 1978; Pullin 1983). As Hemingway biographer Carlos Baker put it in 1963,

[Hemingway's] women are truly emancipated only through an idea or ideal of service. His heroines, to make the statement exactly, are meant to show a symbolic or ritualistic function in the service of the artist and the service of man. (113)

Much current Hemingway scholarship, however, focuses on revisiting questions of gender in his work (e.g. Comley 2012; Doss 2016; Martin 1980; Modellmog 1999; Sanderson 1996; Spilka 1990; Strychacz 2012), not solely because of the posthumously published *The Garden of Eden*, which, quite surprisingly to some Hemingway scholars, negotiates the general fluidity of gender through a three-way relationship between husband and wife and another woman (Strychacz 277). In a similar vein, I will now expand the analysis of female characters towards mothers and motherhood as a reoccurring and momentous trope able to connect the fiction to its contemporaneous discursive frame. Hemingway's mother characters have not enjoyed much scholarly attention beyond comparisons with women in Hemingway's personal life (Spilka 222) and the perception that the motherhood trope constitutes a threat to independent masculinity (Fetterley 46–71). Because of the very similar treatment of this character type across most Hemingway texts, I argue that the mother figure¹ carries a certain cultural and socio-economic quality that resonates beyond the texts. Written during a time of extensive societal upheaval around gender expectations and sexuality, I argue – along with other current Hemingway critics (Doss 2016; Whitlow 1984) – that female characters in the texts display what might be considered the confusion, uncertainty, and newfound freedoms in the face of first wave feminism (Modellmog, "State of the Field" 8). In order to grasp this socio-economic moment I use contemporaneous Progressive non-fiction texts on the role of the mother in early twentieth-century society as a discursive network;² the very same texts that sought to implement these societal and economic changes by promoting women's political rights and advocated for gender equality in the social sphere. These texts will aid in explaining the behavior and motivation of the characters

¹ By 'mother figure' I mean both actual mother characters and motherhood as an abstract concept featured in the stories.

² Throughout this essay I will use 'Progressive' as a label of the historical period at hand and not as an

² Throughout this essay I will use 'Progressive' as a label of the historical period at hand and not as an endorsement of theoretical positions or reform ideas. As Progressivism has been primarily a movement among white feminists, I do, by no means, wish to appear to promote a privileged, non-intersectional, and very often racist, feminism in my work. Instead, I will engage with these Progressive ideas as a method of literary analysis, which I explain in the following.

in the short stories at hand and allow me to position these mother figures in their contemporaneous understanding of a transforming society. Both female and male characters can be mediated more closely and more complexly when those socio-economic circumstances that shaped their lives are kept in mind than when the analysis merely includes close reading evidence. For my purposes I especially focus on whether characters choose or refuse to adhere to new gender models and arrive at the conclusion that both short stories feature women unable or unwilling to accept a new, less restrictive idea of gender. My reading of the short fiction alongside Progressive sources therefore aligns itself with other current Hemingway scholarship that asserts that, rather than being misogynist, the representations of women in Hemingway highlight their limitations and dissatisfaction with their roles as women in a patriarchal and heterosexist society (Moddelmog, "State of the Field" 13).

Progressive Motherhood as a Tool for Social Change

To flesh out the discursive network mentioned I use Olive Schreiner's and Elsie Clews Parsons' works and discursive positions to establish my perspective on Hemingway's short stories. Besides the often blurry, and therefore problematic, distinction between women and mothers, feminism during the Progressive Era has to be understood as a fairly liberal but, of course, also as a deeply limited and problematic position. First of all, Progressive feminists rarely included women of color or women of the working classes in their reformist ideas and overall project of changing naturalized but oppressive expectations and behaviors (Eby 41). Secondly, most reformers believed in essentialist gender distinctions and gendered behavior and believed men and women to be fundamentally different (Eby 59–60). They were nowhere near understanding sexuality and gender as socially constructed and performed markers, as pushed, for instance, by the theoretical work of Judith Butler (1990). Nevertheless, their belief in essential 'inner laws' did fuel their argument that marriage and other relationships are validated through the individual and not the state (Eby 60), but it now clashes intensely with the more modern and differentiated understanding of sex and gender (Butler 10–11). Thirdly, for most, their arguments included an idealized state of natural relationships, which had been forcefully manipulated and impaired by society. Still, a strong belief was placed on civilization as a savior of marriage through Progressive reform. Here Progressive reformers conformed to other philosophical accounts of the period, loosely

summed up under the idea of ‘antimodernism,’ an oppositional stance towards modernizing processes (Lears 7). Fourthly, and perhaps most distressingly, Progressives were especially trigger-happy to turn to eugenics as a tool of social reform. While the state had no right to regulate marriage, they argued, once marriage brought forth children, it was better to regulate reproduction and encourage certain groups to reproduce rather than others. Especially attractive to Progressive feminists was the heightened role of women in the processes of eugenic sexual selection (Eby 59–65).

While these positions – which from a twenty-first-century perspective should definitely be considered essentialist and often racist – evidently place these reformers firmly in the context of their time, their ‘datedness’ also approximates my analysis to my primary sources, as they are produced in what I will argue is the same mode of production, the same discursive frame. Most Progressives, in fact, took motherhood as a point of departure of social reform, trying to break up a woman’s dependency on her husband and most calling for better education, a salary, and insurance packages for mothers. Mothers and motherhood, limited in their options but essential in the rearing of a new generation, become the site for social reform in these texts, since Progressive feminism was convinced of the Social Darwinist idea of the constant evolving of human institutions and therefore the constant possibility of improvement of society (Eby 38). Specifically, the ideas I investigate and use in this essay are Olive Schreiner’s ‘disenfranchised mother’ and Elsie Clews Parsons’ ‘Maternity Insurance.’ Instead of projecting the feminist theories onto the fictional account, I will trace their argumentative structure and point out the shared basic premises between the theoretical and fictional texts.

Hemingway’s engagement with motherhood can be divided into two distinct categories: In the first category, the texts feature an actual female character who is also a mother and, in the second, maternity is treated as an abstract concept in the lives of young, childless protagonists. “A Canary for One” and “Hills Like White Elephants” were both originally published in the short story collection *Men Without Women* (1928). The former features an overbearing mother and the latter potential maternity as a threat to an unstable relationship. Read in the context of one another they provide conclusive material for the purpose of this essay. So far the most extensive look at mother figures in Hemingway has

been cast by Comley and Scholes (1996), who also make the distinction between mother characters and maternity. They relate the character type back to Grace Hemingway's behavior throughout Ernest's life and imply that maternity in the text always reflects his discomfort with her highly moralistic and guilt-inducing parenting methods (20; Comley 410). When dealing with maternity as a potential for his New Woman characters, they state that it is Hemingway's unrequited love for the much older World War I nurse Agnes von Kurowsky that colored Hemingway's fascination with and resentment towards motherly behavior and the idea of pregnancy (Comley and Scholes 22–40). While I will also draw on the notion that some mothers display overbearing, interfering behavior and the idea of economic and emotional pressures of maternity, investigating this character composition merely by reference to biography seems limiting to me.

The Disenfranchised Mother in “A Canary For One” (1926)

“A Canary For One,” written in 1926, features three expat Americans on a train journey from the Mediterranean coast to Paris. One of them is an elderly woman who tells the other two, husband and wife, about her daughter whom, convinced that American men make the best husbands, she has forced to move back to the States even though she fell in love with a Swiss man. It has been two years since the separation and the daughter is still heartbroken. As a consolation, her mother is bringing her home a canary bird in a cage. While the narrative focuses on the passing landscape and the overbearing character of the American mother, the story finishes with the disclosure and ironic twist that the husband and wife are going to Paris to split up and set up separate residencies.

“A Canary for One” has mainly been analyzed and characterized as a quasi-autobiographical account of Hemingway's last train journey with his first wife, Hadley (Justice 65–66). In his *Study of the Short Fiction of Ernest Hemingway* (1989), Joseph M. Flora has read the story with a focus on the shared ‘metaphorical base’ of marital endings, which he sees in the other stories in the collection as well.³ This base, he states, is enforced by the unusual structure of the story: The focalization of the story changes in the course of the train journey. What

³ James Phelan has made this same observation and places “A Canary for One” among “Now I Lay Me,” “In Another Country,” and “Hills Like White Elephants” — all stories which he argues reveal the failings of a marriage through skilled writing technique (67).

reads as a satire of the American mother through a zero focalization narrative, about a third into the story, turns out to actually be an internally focalized narrative of the husband which, through the abrupt use of the pronoun 'I,' conveys to the reader that every aspect prior to the revelation was a narrative from his perspective all along ("Canary" 102; Flora 36–38). Flora concludes that this narrative situation contributes to the overall effect of melancholy at the impending ending of a marriage. In this vein he reads the mother as one form of a destructive force on emotions (in her case: her daughter's) that is easier for the husband to focus on than to face the regrettable end of the relationship with his wife (Flora 36–39). However, because of its complex and manipulative narrative situation, it seems that the reader is supposed to question the subjective focalization of the husband character. Upon closer inspection, the mother displays behavioral structures and fears that enable a reading beyond Flora's 'destructive American mom' and do not necessarily have an emotional effect on the husband. As I will show, the American mother is quite extensively characterized as a traditional character opposed to change and modernization processes, which becomes visible in all instances of her behavior.

This opposition to change serves as a threshold between the short story and the work of Progressive writer Olive Schreiner. Her work is productive for my argument as both a reference and a foil for a more historically sensitive reading of Hemingway's story and not only so because she actually uses the image of "the caged canary" (94) in her text. South African born Schreiner had a big U.S. readership after her successful novel *Story of an African Farm* (1883), which she followed up with the non-fiction *Woman and Labour* in 1911 after more fiction successes (Eby 37), considered by some the "bible of the women's movement" (Rowold 62). More than the title might initially suggest, her argument centers on the mother as a site of socio-economic upheaval and it targets the threat of societal degeneration in order to inspire activism in support of the women's labor movement.⁴ Her trope of the caged canary, as a metaphor for the children of the declining Roman Empire, helpless in combat against the more primitive, less developed Teutonic tribes (Schreiner 94),

⁴ I would like to firmly position myself here in that I do not equate women and mothers in my work even though some of the Progressives texts might imply this. In any case, the mothers present in these reformist text appear as individuals in whom the oppression of women is especially apparent and limiting. I would argue that most reformers do not see them as interchangeable, but nevertheless this is one aspect one has to pay close attention to when dealing with this rather dated material.

is Schreiner's symbol for a society degenerating due to the lack of labor and duty for women, especially mothers (14–35).

In Hemingway's story, the American mother is convinced she is doing the right thing in forcing her daughter to return to the United States to marry an American man. As she explains, "American men make the best husbands...that was why we left the Continent, you know. My daughter fell in love with a man in Vevey...I took her away of course...I couldn't have her marrying a foreigner" ("Canary" 102). Whether this behavior can be read as a symbol for American nationalism and general skepticism towards foreign influences in the aftermath of WW I is debatable; however, the firm conviction displayed in the mother's attitudes is discussed by Schreiner as well, namely as a behavioral strategy of mothers in recently industrialized societies generally. Schreiner explains that disenfranchised motherhood is one of the main effects of industrialization and modernization processes and that modernization has divorced man from manual labor (Schreiner 14). However, Schreiner also argues that labor has increased in general, especially in the sphere of intellectual work, which enabled men to professionalize areas of work, which were previously considered domestic fields and occupied by one person alone, this person often being a woman. Therefore, the move away from manual labor was beneficial for men but disastrous for women, she concludes (15–17). In order to illustrate the severity of this development, Schreiner points to mothers as a group that is especially affected and disenfranchised as a result: in what she refers to as "primitive times" (15) bearing children was women's highest social duty; now change in the structures of labor in modern society requires less manual strength and therefore birthing numerous children becomes redundant (18–20). In addition, mothers are no longer in charge of their children's education and if they insist on holding on to this duty, Schreiner explains, they are actually harming their children due to their incompetence compared to other professional teachers (19). Stripped of all work fields previously occupied by their mothers, all women therefore depend on "female parasitism," full financial dependency on men (26–28). Womanhood is degenerated into mere "parasitism" and becomes one of the fundamental elements in the deterioration of

civilizations, Schreiner asserts (32–35).⁵ In order to illuminate a mother's predicament through the restructuring of the economic system, Schreiner illustrates her arguments with an example in a footnote. Schreiner's paradigmatic mother is stubbornly yearning for her old duties, attempting to resist this development and yet unable to survive:

There is, indeed, often something pathetic in the attitude of many a good old mother of the race, who having survived, here and there, into the heart of our modern civilisation [sic], is sorely puzzled by the change in woman's duties and obligations.... "I," she cries, "always cured my own hams, and knitted my own socks, and made up all the linen by hand. We always did it when we were girls—but now my daughters object!" [...] Such women are, in truth, like a good old mother duck, who, having for years led her ducklings to the same pond, when that pond has been drained and nothing is left but baked mud, will still persist in bringing her younglings down to it, and walks about with flapping wings and anxious quack, trying to induce them to enter it...To the old mother one is inclined to say, "Ah, good old mother duck, can you not see the world has changed? You cannot bring the water back into the dried-up pond!" (52–54)

In this telling instance of a second animal metaphor added to the canary example, the disenfranchised mother becomes Schreiner's example and symbol of the plight of women in the face of the rise of industrialization and capitalism (40–94). Schreiner employs harsh and even belittling language in reference to this kind of woman, which I think is reflected and increased in her choice to compare the woman to a 'flapping, anxious duck.' One might go so far as saying that since this mother's way of communicating is merely a 'quack' she is barred from articulating her anxieties and is left with the art of seduction as her only strategy. As it turns out, the mother of Hemingway's short story displays many of the same qualities.

Firstly, even the setting of the short story conveys a similar sense of yearning as the husband continuously watches the passing landscape and documents the train moving from the less-urbanized Mediterranean coast towards the urbanized civilization of Paris. It moves past houses made from red stone and clay, past the telling image of a burning farm house, through carefully tended forests and big advertisements as it is approaching the capital where it arrives in "the dark of the Gare de Lyon" and on "the dim longness of the platform" ("Canary" 255). As a common narrative strategy in Hemingway's texts, the evaluation of

⁵ Here Schreiner subscribes to the Lamarck school of thought, proclaiming that learned qualities can be inherited (Rowold 63–64).

these images is left up to the reader, but the choice of words seems to suggest a passivity or a melancholy about these places. In addition to what Flora would read as a melancholy connected to the husband's sadness over the divorce (38), this progression suggests a similarly pessimistic yearning for the traditional away from the artificially-established in this journey as is illustrated in Schreiner's example of the duck mother. Since the journey begins before the narrative situation is revealed, I hold that this applies to the mother as well as the husband. This sense of universality of the experienced is also supported by the choice to not give the characters proper names.

Secondly, the American mother in the story appears constantly scared by the technical advancements in trains: "all night the train went very fast and the American lady lay awake and waited for a wreck" (101). When they get closer to Paris and see damaged compartments out of the window, she states, "I'll never travel on a *rapide* again at night. There must be other comfortable trains that don't go so fast" (104). Her fears at night (again, an indicator of the short story having a more universal, more omniscient narrative situation than merely being dictated from the husband's immediate perspective) point towards her opposition to modernization processes in machines as well as in society at large. She also worries about missing the train during the layovers, as she is slightly deaf and might miss the signals for departure. Here, Hemingway's mother closely resembles the stubbornness displayed by Schreiner's duck mother. Her presentiments about crashing and her deafness on the platform could be read as her resilience and opposition facing a new industrialized world, but the fact that this might make her miss her train shows that she cannot resist societal changes that affect her, her role as a mother, and her children.

Thirdly, she explains to the couple that for twenty years now she has bought her clothes from the same shop in Paris. She seems to take pride in the fact that those items are handmade but do not look excessively expensive. She is also happy to state that she knows the shop assistants by name. Excited that her daughter has finished growing, she now sends her measurements to the same *maison de couture* as there is "not much chance of their changing now" (254). Stripped of the domestic duties of her ancestors this character asserts the significance of her role as a mother therefore in her tastes in clothing retailers. These shops use personal assistance and strong customer service as a strategy against

corporations, a surrogate for domestic production of things such as clothes. In this example of her preferences and their economic background therefore, the power she exerts over her daughter's life, uprooting her supposedly in her own best interest, arises as an attempt at unnaturally long childrearing, and inflicting harm in the process in the face of her losing her productive, domestic role.

Schreiner's views can be applied to the short story in a productive manner, because, in her text, she not only displays the force of the resilient, stubborn mother but also delves into the reasoning and motives behind these behavioral structures as symptoms of the shirking of the sphere of women's traditional domestic duties in the face of the advancement of modern civilization. The story does not feed the analysis of Hemingway's women as representations of his own personal struggles with the women in his life. This position was put forward as a probable connection by feminist critics of the 1970s and 1980s (Moddelmog, "State of the Field" 13) who attempted to explain most portrayals of women in Hemingway's works by referring to his difficult relationships with his mother Grace and the author Gertrude Stein, neglecting any complexities that fell outside of such straightforward categorization (Comley 416). Instead, the resentment towards the American mother, as displayed by the satirical undertones of the story, closely compares to the resentment felt in Schreiner's account. Not a personal affair, Schreiner criticizes mothers for their neglect to accept and adapt to new labor and societal opportunities for women, but in both the Progressive text and the short story their behavior is explained and mediated as a symptom of this change in the economic and gender structures of the Western world. In opposition to contemporaneous conservatives prioritizing social cohesion over individuality, Schreiner, as a Progressive writer, advocates responsible individuality through fulfilling work with social cohesion as a consequence. Progressive thinkers believed that the individual pursuit of happiness, freedom, and responsibility would simultaneously lead to social improvements and would therefore dictate a more equal society, and it thus became their most crucial concern (Eby 34). Therefore, both texts display what might be considered a Progressive attitude and strategy along the following lines: if the eccentricities of the mother character, manifested in fears, dress and habits, are interpreted as a pre-modern mode of behavior, then change, realization, and the implementation of Progressive ideas, such as wide-spread support for the women's labor movement, are projected as possible and attainable.

Consequently, Hemingway's portrayal of the American mother protrudes as a rather liberal and feminist choice. His and Schreiner's canaries aid the portrayal and characterization of degenerated and disenfranchised motherhood and both stand as warnings against 'parasitic' womanhood and overbearing childrearing. The American mother surpasses the position of mere modifier of the male experience by her extensive characterization, made more palpable through my application of Schreiner, and thereby might even function as positive, and not at all melancholic, social commentary on the couple's separation. In general, then, the composition of the story — the before mentioned forceful revelation of the husband and wife's separation at the very end ("We were returning to Paris to set up separate residences", "Hills" 104), which urges readers to reread the conversations for clues giving away discrepancies in the husband and wife's relationship — supports a reading of the mother as social commentary rather than merely an irritating presence in the husband's point of view.

Modern Parenting Through "Maternity Insurance" in "Hills Like White Elephants" (1927)

In her 2007 article "Making Modern Parents in Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" and Viña Delmar's *Bad Girl*," Meg Gillette explains how the modern aesthetic of "Hills Like White Elephants" and its themes of modern parenthood and more widely accessible abortions are linked despite the supposed disinterest of modernism in familial and feminine concerns. As a method, she relates the story to its discursive frame as she states that the story is self-conscious about its own position in what might be considered the first public bout of controversy surrounding the accessibility and practices of abortions during the early twentieth century (51–59). "Hills Like White Elephants" consists of a conversation between two Americans, an unnamed man and a woman whom he calls Jig, waiting for a train at a station in Spain. Without any mention of a pregnancy or an abortion, their choppy, antagonistic conversation reveals deep conflicts within their relationship. Both characters make half-hearted attempts to point out new alcoholic beverages and the landscape in the beginning, until the man states, "It's really an awfully simple operation [...]. It's not really an operation at all" ("Hills" 40). After this allusion to an abortion, the woman jumps between selflessly subordinating herself completely to the man's wishes and deep nihilism until she asks him to just stop talking. The man proposes that he will "go through

with it if it means anything to [her]" (41), but, as if to convince her nonetheless that an abortion would be the better option, simultaneously refers to other people he knows to have had an abortion and says to her "I don't want anybody but you. I don't want anyone else" (42).

Bringing the socio-historical background to the short story, Gillette explains that the modern family, less concerned with birthing many children as laborers, becomes an optional and more affectionate concept concerned with the emotional wellbeing of children and parents (Gillette 52–53). Therefore, concerns over both the overbearing mother and the unsentimental New Woman constitute two extremes in the development of the modern family (53). Gillette states that family experts throughout the 1920s tended to think of women as too emotional and consequently unable to appropriately manage their affection for their children in a productive manner (either too much or too little affection) and that the role of the father consequently was bestowed with more significance than ever before. Modern fathers were both thought of as and expected to be more practical and less sentimental and therefore actually the more appropriate parental figure for children (52–54). Against this historical background, "Hills Like White Elephants" appears to Gillette to signify the uncertainty of when to display emotion and the consequent breaking down of meaningful conversation over the decision of whether to have a child: "The couple's reproductive crisis materializes through their miserable attempts to regulate their emotions" (54). Gillette then continues her analysis in a close reading of the ineffective speech acts of the two protagonists in the face of the very clearly defined but unnamed moral underpinning that only the nuclear family would provide happiness. While actually there are four possible endings to the problem (together with a child, together without a child, apart with a child, apart without a child), the three latter ones are quickly disqualified by the protagonists. Every mention of the abortion ignites further fighting suggesting that the relationship cannot sustain an abortion and would fail because of it. However, the end of the relationship is out of the question, as in Jig's mind happiness requires heterosexual coupling. She tentatively asks "and if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you'll love me?" ("Hills" 40), which seems to eliminate single motherhood and a separation as an option for her. Therefore, Gillette asserts, in a desperate but unproductive attempt to cling to the only option that is believed to provide both characters with happiness, a very stark,

inflexible moral code is established (Gillette 55). Additionally, Gillette states that the metaphor of the hills like white elephants signifies this breaking down of communication. The metaphor falls flat, as the man is not willing to engage with it in the same manner as Jig, and it consequently starts to symbolize both characters' frustrations (55–56). More generally then, the self-consciousness of the white elephants remark reflects on the story and its own self-consciousness regarding the discourse of modern parenthood. Gillette concludes that through the awkward ineffectiveness of the characters argumentative styles the story “avers a need for an alternative literary discourse able to resolve their modern reproductive crisis” and thereby directly engages with its thematic, discursive frame (57).

This is where my argument departs from Gillette's as I draw on Elsie Clews Parsons' concept of “Maternity Insurance” as an alternative discourse, and one that might provide a solution for the rhetoric and moral crisis in the story and which I take from the story's contemporaneous discourse of feminist progressivism (Parsons 55–57). While the story appears to take for granted that abortion only produces unhappiness and that single motherhood is not a viable option, the ineffectiveness of the communication and the self-consciousness of the story within its theme seem to invite the reader to question and to undermine these convictions. Elsie Clews Parsons, an American sociologist and feminist, published her “Feminism and the Family” in *The International Journal of Ethics* in 1917. In it she argues for private “Maternity Insurance,” a parents' registry and parent contract system, as opposed to a marriage contract,⁶ as the solution to the problems of illegitimacy and economic dependency in parenthood.

Parsons was an influential and radical figure. She was the first female president of the American Anthropological Association and a lecturer at Barnard College (Eby 3). Parsons first gained attention through her 1906 textbook *The Family*, which is an ethnographical guide based on her teaching at Barnard that validated her in her own fight against traditional models of marriage and gender roles (Deacon 61). Disenchanted with contemporaneous discussions on sexuality and disappointed in her college education for not providing herself

⁶ Most Progressives at the time held the belief that the union of two individuals and sexual behavior was a distinctively private matter, while parenthood most definitely entered the realm of the public (Eby 63).

and her peers with more enlightened information, she advocates that more open sex education is needed to dispel unnecessary sexual morality in order to change the economic situation of women (62–64). After all, she was “convinced that sexual mores were more impervious to innovation than any other area of social life” (qtd. in Deacon 62). Her publication was met with unfavorable reviews from religious and educational authorities, journalists, and public speakers, who believed that Parsons’ explicit material was harmful to young people (Deacon 64, Zumwalt 46). Besides these reviews, often in the form of religious sermons (Zumwalt 49), one can assume that she was read nonetheless, favorably or unfavorably, by a wide readership and that, starting with *The Family*, her Progressive ideas entered public discourse at large, even though she attempted, out of privacy reasons, to keep them out of the public eye later on (51). Due to the overlap of her perspectives as both a scholar and wife of a congressman, her influence counted within various spheres and she published widely in journals reaching from *Harper’s Weekly* to Floyd Dell’s *The Masses* (Eby xii–xiii, 3). Even if people did not purchase her notorious book, they were able to get an idea of Parsons’ innovations as, due to its controversy, excerpts from *The Family* were published in newspapers (Zumwalt 48).

In her article, Parsons states that to suppress sexual desires is unhealthy and that, as a result of the biological make-up of male and female reproductive systems, society and the individual has to accept the fact that the consequences of sexual intercourses are more grave for women. Parsons further infers that because the woman gives birth to a child, she has greater responsibility. Only by giving a mother the means to accept and enact that responsibility will the greater social problems of illegitimacy and an imbalance in the monetary power distribution in parenthood be dealt with in a productive and effective manner (55).⁷ It is on these three premises that Parsons grounds her argument, the

⁷ From a twenty-first-century feminist, intersectional perspective, Parsons unfortunately only makes a meager attempt to make her policy inclusive of race and class in this essay. She recognizes that to implement individual, private “Maternity Insurance” plans requires a certain social standing and not all women or families would have the same sort of funds to make themselves/their daughters resistant to economic dependency in pregnancy. Parsons counters that the ultimate goal would be to pass a system of state insurance of maternity, but that in the meantime any such device would be favorable. While wealthy women might ask for a “Maternity Insurance” package instead of the abundance of wedding presents they will receive, Parsons recommends that lower class women should save some of their own earnings in order to provide for themselves during pregnancy: “A man is supposed to earn his right to have children. Why not *a priori* a woman?” Overall Parsons perspective in this essay remains one of

development of which can be traced in the short story as follows.

As stated by Gillette, Jig is seemingly very fixed on the idea that her happiness depends on the continuation of the relationship and the birth of a child (58). Here she very clearly displays her economic, and her emotional, dependency on the male party. She participates in the uncomfortable conversation mainly by asking questions such as “then what will we do afterward?”; “But if I do it, then it’ll be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you’ll like it?”; as well as statements which show that she is not convinced by the concept of happiness after abortion, such as “and you think then we’ll be all right and be happy” (“Hills” 40). As opposed to the man, who steers the conversation and mainly answers in definitive statements, she is very responsive to him and the subtext communicated by him, such as his, seemingly conditional, reassurance “I love you now. You know I love you” (40). Realizing this condition, Jig makes herself the passive object of the man’s judgment. She states, “then I’ll do it. Because I don’t care about me...And I’ll do it and then everything will be fine” (40–41). Parsons also addresses this problem of dependency in her essay and points it out as the main problem that leads to an imbalanced relationship between men and women, founded in economic dependency in marriage (Parsons 54). She relates an anecdote of a physician convinced that withholding information about birth control would be the only feasible method of preventing increased spreading of sexually transmitted diseases, as the fear of getting pregnant would promote celibacy: “It was, therefore, the duty of the physician to keep the knowledge of contraception esoteric” (55). For part of the conversation within the story, Jig almost asks for the information to be withheld from her then. Her statement that she does not care about herself invites the man to decide without her input. He, in turn, actually provides little information about the nature of the abortion, seemingly operating in the same manner as Parson’s physician: “It’s just to let the air in [...] They just let the air in and then it’s all perfectly natural” (40).

Parsons argues that it is this imbalance that has actually misdirected feminism to an extent and has bred greedy, imperialist feminists “who [...] [are] out for all [they] can get for women” (Parsons 53). Presented with inequality and

privilege unable or unwilling to appropriately include the concerns of lower class women (Parsons 56–57).

bred to this type of control by men [...] women would in turn make use of it against men. Instead of taking nature or reality as it is and by facing it learning to control it, women, like men, overlook it and would work their will on other human beings. (55)

Parsons here refers to some branches of feminists calling for absolute, state-enforced compulsion of men to provide financial support for any legitimate or illegitimate children (53–54). Parsons criticizes that this section of feminists, besides promoting antagonism between the sexes, pays little attention to education opportunities for women that would provide them with an increased capacity to support themselves. Jig is in no way able to enforce this kind of compulsion, neither financially nor emotionally, but she does try to exert the little control she has within the conversation. Towards the end she seems more animated and asks the man, “does it mean anything to you? We could get along” and “would you do something for me now?” (“Hills” 41–42), but instead of continuing to share her emotional state, she puts an end to the conversation: “Would you please please please please please please stop talking? [...] I’ll scream” (42). Realizing she has lost control of the situation and, therefore, of an end to it that would benefit her, Jig carries out the antagonistic behavior towards the man even to the microcosmic point of regaining control over their communication by cutting it off completely.

Parsons uses this conventionally enforced imbalance and dependency and the resulting gender antagonism, also displayed by Jig and the man, as a set-up to introduce an alternative, non-competitive perspective on the economic issues of maternity. Parsons goes on to state,

the consequences of sexual intercourse are more grave for women than for men. Why dodge the fact? [...] Why not then in our social theory put the responsibility where it belongs, at the same time giving the more responsible sex means to meet their responsibility. (Parsons 55)

Parsons advocates to provide women, whom she assumes to be biologically predetermined to hold more responsibility over their offspring, with the financial and ideological means to meet this responsibility through social devices such as a marriage insurance system, paid for by a man, parents or themselves (55–57). To accept the responsibility through a social device such as this would cancel out the compulsion imperial feminists are trying to enact over men and would benefit women who, once they can provide for children by themselves, no longer have to base their interaction with men on an antagonistic foundation. Jig, again, is nowhere near a position to acquire this vantage point but does reflect on her dependency

and her distinctive position as a woman in an accepting manner. Quite peacefully, almost out of earshot of the man, she states, “And we could have all this [...] And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible” (“Hills” 41). As the man realizes what Jig is saying he counters “We *can* have everything” (41, emphasis mine). But Jig is adamant: “No, we can’t. [The world] isn’t ours any more [...] And once they take it away, you never get it back” (41). Jig realizes her pregnancy puts her in a disadvantaged position, thereby providing the sober acceptance that Parsons calls for. Since she has no means to overcome this imbalance and to profit from her acceptance, however, she projects her misery onto the relationship itself using the pronoun ‘we,’ instead of ‘I.’ Jig is the precursor and archetype of Parsons call to reform, unable to separate herself from the relationship but accepting of what she perceives to be her biological pre-determination. This acceptance is what characterizes Jig as a woman, her style of arguing, and also gives the narrative its punch at the very end. The last line of the story is Jig’s assertion “I feel fine [...] There is nothing wrong with me. I feel fine” and she even smiles at the man (42), which might cause the reader to go back and reread to look for any clues as to whether she will abort or not, a similar device as is used in “A Canary For One.”

I am not arguing that Jig’s discomfort is exclusively based on worries about her financial stability. She appears very concerned about her romantic relationship with the unnamed man, but I hold that Parsons’ text provides the alternative discourse Gillette is looking for. It is impossible to differentiate within this analysis how much of her perceived love for the man is actually just her economic dependency on him, even though the impossibility of setting apart her emotions actually increases the urgency of her dependency. Either way, social devices such as Parsons proposes – despite their inherent problems of white feminist privilege – would indeed even out the playing field if accessible to all women and would result in a more productive feminism, i.e. one that, in turn, would enable Jig to argue her own case more effectively than through her ineffective behavior as the dependent party. With these premises that aid Parsons argumentative structure in mind, the short story’s basic structure and conflict becomes visible, despite the rhetorically ineffective conversation. Understanding a woman’s situation and inner conflict in the same way that Parsons negotiates in her essay explains Jig’s reactions, which might otherwise be read as hysterical, unstructured, and insignificant. Applying Parsons’ innovations to the short story

enables a reading sensitive to the limited options presented to this character type and also provides a solution to the moral dilemma. With “Maternity Insurance” single motherhood would be an option that does not ruin a mother.

Conclusion

In both short stories under scrutiny here, motherhood — as represented by the fictional characters in the texts and as a concept — is stylized in a similar fashion to the negative examples, or the worst case of female dependency, in the Progressive theoretical texts at hand by Schreiner and Parsons. In their texts and in Hemingway’s short stories, the mother examples have not yet acquired full, responsible individuality within the restructured capitalist system and the repercussions are severe, for their position within society, their ability to communicate and their influence on others. Through Schreiner and Parsons, the behavior the mother in “A Canary For One” and Jig display can be approached and mediated via the socio-economic motives of middle- and upper-class mothers at the turn of the century as explained in the Progressive feminist argument, which displays their “degenerated” existence in an effort towards reform and change. Thereby, they seem to become fictionalized precursors of the Progressive feminist reform movement, i.e. they display the kind of behavior that propels Progressives to call for a reform of the economic and emotional position of women within society. While a simplifying feminist or biographical reading of these instances of motherhood oftentimes seems plausible, the parallels between the short stories and the Progressive texts enable a Progressive feminist reading. The prevalence of the overbearing mother and maternity as a point of conflict between the younger generation in Hemingway’s texts reassures me in my approach with which I would like to add to the vibrant scholarly work on Hemingway and gender. My analysis has pointed out the elements in narrative and character composition that bear similarities to the structure of the arguments provided in Olive Schreiner’s and Elsie Clews Parsons’ works. In this way, a more historically-sensitive reading and understanding of these female characters becomes possible.

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