

Spaces and Sexuality in Ernest Hemingway's "A Very Short Story"

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Abstract

Ernest Hemingway is an influential writer of twentieth-century American literature. His personal experiences and involvement in the First World War have somehow emerged in many of his major works. "A Very Short Story," published as a chapter in the 1924 Paris edition titled In Our Time, covers the same underlying war dimensions found abundantly in his other works. Despite the narrative brevity of it, the two page story might present a vast cartographic experience for the readers who, along with the characters, can travel from one place to another. All spaces – both public and private – are so fleetingly transiting here that they altogether generate a fragmentary vision of the war history. The story is centered around a nurse named Luz who has developed a romantic relationship with an unnamed soldier during World War I. The major concerns of the text – the war realities and aftermath of the psycho-physical struggle of these two individuals within the spatio-temporal settings – facilitate an introspective look into the text. The text particularly deals with a variety of spaces within the narrative; for example, some major cities of two countries – Italy and America. These spaces – interior and exterior – play a significant role to form a viable textual understanding because they construct the background of the protagonists' brief romance and the following submersion into a diseased and depressed sexuality. From this perspective, the paper will attempt to discuss the intertwined functionality of spaces and sexuality in this text of Hemingway's.

Ernest Hemingway's "A Very Short Story" was published in 1924 and later reprinted in 1925. The story discusses an unsuccessful affair of a World War I soldier with a nurse named Luz. The war realities and its aftermath is the major focus of this narrative. It has also emphasized on the representation and effects of war psychology on the modern relationships between human beings. The spatial setting of the text are varied, and their significance on constructing the story play a role in interpreting it from critical viewpoints in which space and time affect the textual understanding of readers. The text particularly deals with a variety of spaces within the narrative; for example, some major cities of two countries— Italy and America— and a few interior spaces appear with a wartime dimension and restlessness that condition and affect the relationship of the protagonists. All the spaces, both public and private, interior and exterior, produce a narrative map in a two-page story, thereby placing the cartographic experiences through the narrative. In this regard, Robert Tally's words are helpful to understand such a strategy of all-embracing territorial inclusions in this text of Hemingway's:

The act of writing itself might be considered a form of mapping or cartographic activity. Like the mapmaker, the writer must survey territory, determining which features of given landscape to include, to emphasize, or to diminish. ... The writer must establish the scale and the shape, no less of the narrative than of the places in it. (45)

The narrator's position, therefore, appears in the story as of a cartographer, sharing or

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recording or reporting the private life of two individuals being transformed and transforming themselves in different spaces. In this paper, I would like to explore how those spaces construct the background of a brief romance and its transformation into a diseased sexuality, that is, a sign of closure in their mutual quest for a place to reunite.

The text tends to display a journey of two characters from one space to the next where their lives are patterned and constructed in relation with the spatio-temporal conditions. For instance, the nights at the hospital where Luz stayed for three months (at a stretch) with her lover apparently refer to their intimate longing and deep commitment for each other; the three-month sacrifice of Luz's, especially, marks on the surface the strength of their bonding in this private space. Even though the hospital is not a designated place to affirm an affair and represents the selfless love of a woman for a wounded soldier, their initial relationship status here transforms the stereotypical functionality of the space in the narrative, turning it into a breeding ground of hope and desire, not of sufferings and clichéd monotony of diseases.

However, it has also become a platform of repressed sexuality when the soldier's "thought of Luz in his bed" indicates an unfulfilled sexual yearning. The basic nature of a hospital does not suggest a romantic surrounding for lovers, and this repression, thus, might stem out as much from a personal ground as from unfavorability, though it is a social construct, of the place that might marginalize them as lovers and situate them in between the nurse-patient binary. The conflict lies between the normative social behavior and the pathological status of the place, inducing inescapable fear and anxiety in the soldier's unconscious:

The world in which we are always situated is not of our own making, but our very essence (that is, existence itself) requires us to shape our world. The human condition is, as we saw earlier, fundamentally one of "not being at home," which calls to mind Lukac's assessment of modernity as a state of "transcendental homelessness." But this then invites a discussion of the ways in which the anxiety ridden person engages with the defamiliarized or uncanny space in which [s/he] finds [him]/herself. (Tally 67)

In addition, later it transpires to be a transit point from where they can decide to move on to a further level, namely, the church, an official institution to socialize the intimacy in an established way through marriage so that their uncannily over-romanticized feelings, generated in a hospital room, come to an end in a socially and culturally coded format.

From another viewpoint, Luz's sleepless nights to attend someone who is her lover but not a patient in that sense displays an aberration from professional morality, and this deviance portrays her more as a feminine personality rather than a professional nurse. She has been objectified towards male needs, being a private attendant of a man and appearing subserviently in his repressive unconscious/dream. Conversely, it might also suggest a deep influence of patriarchal authority over Luz's actions, and so when she acts, it seems that she is not an active agent determining what her role should be in that situation; rather, she seems to have felt an inescapable force of patriarchy/patriarchal expectations set onto her psyche. Firstly, her spending nights in that hospital room tends to manifest her unconscious feminine mind setup tending to live up to the expectation of a male society the idea of which comes

on to the surface while some "they" who are the "few patients" (no reference to their sexes in the narrative though) in that hospital are happy about her active feminine role. Secondly, she seems to be a passive recipient of the consequences, when some other "they" "were glad to let her" do her nursing duty as if this particular "they" have the authority to "let her" or not. While the first assumption suggests a bit of agency within her, the next points at male authority. Here, the deictic pronoun "they" could be a proper replacement of the male gaze that is constantly observing her performances and judging her gender roles according to male "standards."

In this case, she is positioned as a mother/wife, nursing a child/husband in time of necessity, especially when the safety of a nation is at stake. The war time responsibility of a woman is what Luz is performing at the very outset of the novel, that is, taking care of a wounded nation in the form of her lover, and which is what the patriarchy expects from women. According to Asha Sen, a postcolonial feminist writer, the sanctity and purity of middle-class women, be they white or colored, had been an integral part of the society in a way that the patriarch nation then decides to make a demarcation of social spaces into home and world and suggests to put its women into the "ghar" (or "home") while the "bahir" (or "world") is to be explored by the men (125). This idea stems from the nationalist point of view:

The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world – and woman is its representation. (Chatterjee 120)

However, the discourse seeks to hide, but unfortunately reflects, the sheer inability of a nation-state to give its women shelter outside of the "home," thereby delimiting their access to the "world." This sense of curtailed/limited freedom for women imposed by the normative nationalist discourse indirectly makes them vulnerable outside of the "ghar." It appears that when the nation-state itself does not prescribe "bahir" for its women, their sanctity faces risks outside of "ghar." "Home" is still a place where women are supposed to perform while the "world" is designed/considered as challenging and masculine in every sense. In one survey done by ONS analysis of research, it is found that British women still do more household chores and are involved in childcare more than men in England: "The Office for National Statistics said that, when it came to unpaid chores at home, women were doing almost 40% more than men on average" (BBC News). This number suggests that the hegemonic discourse of gender roles that comes from the patriarchal center is also practiced beyond the periphery of third world nations. Therefore, the category of women in the world universally slides into the portrayal of subjugation in the face of male-dominance. If the picture is so crude in the east, it seems rather subtle and thin in the west. The conflict, therefore, lies in between the center and periphery, and the entrapment of women is not only a political issue, as it seemed at first in the works of first wave feminists, but also a cultural and historical facticity.

Given this home/world binary discussed above, the representation of the hospital generates a picture of the “home” where Luz, like other women, takes care of her lover while the “world,” a designated place for males, can, of course, be the “battlefield/front” where he should actively participate. Thus, the hospital and battlefield might work out as two metaphors for “home” and the “world” in the story, and if we put the metaphors into perspective, they might take the interpretation further towards the dichotomy of central and periphery, the same center and periphery state that draws a demarcation line between home and the world. Since the hospital represents the functionality of home, giving a different kind of bedroom image, it acts as a peripheral zone in the context of the story, marginalizing the romanticism of Luz that cannot grow or mature out of that diseased area. On the contrary, the battle front as a power symbol of male strength, and therefore of a nation, cannot respond to female emotions verbally put into letters, fifteen of which, thus, remain unheard and unanswered. In this way, the relationship ends up trapped in two different conflicting places which are gendered in either way.

A British geographer Doreen Massey writes in her book *Space, Place and Gender* that all places are inevitably gendered:

Space and place, spaces and places, and our senses of them (and such related things as our degrees of mobility) are gendered through and through. Moreover, they are gendered in myriad different ways which vary between cultures and over time, and this gendering of space and place both reflects and has effects back on the ways in which gender is constructed and understood in the society in which we live. (185-186)

To reduce the possibility of entrapment in such oxymoronic gendered spaces, the protagonists both, therefore, go to church because “they wanted to get married, but there was not enough time for the banns, and neither of them had birth certificates” (65). The only way out of this spatial distances is to find out a neutral space for both, where they can socially acknowledge the affair and place it in an unbiased space. The attempt to search for that imagined space (which is an impossibility in the context of the story) has been an essential part of their commitment, a space called “home” where their “boy and girl affair” gets acknowledged and fulfillment through marriage, a normative social status.

Luz’s attention to the “home,” far from the real spaces involved in their life, stereotypes her gender role. The home she imagines makes a difference with the places in Italy she experiences at present, the places that could deny and suppress her sexuality. They might need a neutral space elsewhere, be it New York, far from Italy that allows her identity to shift from a lover to a wife, from marginalized section to center. In addition, the transformation becomes necessary to alleviate her status in the social hierarchy, and it has not been possible in war-torn spaces of Italy, so she wants to cross the border of the real spaces and plans to move to her imagined space where raising a family with a successful man with a job and financial security will facilitate desires traced to her female genetics.

However, the quest for the space has been more intensified in their journey by train from Padua to Milan. The Milan Station separates them; it is the separator like all other spaces

they belonged to earlier. Even though the desired home in New York could function as a connector, it cannot work out (he does not return there ever nor is there any mention of his return) in a good way either and it never appears in the narrative after that. Interestingly, the two separate places – Pordenone and Chicago – they go to from Milan are quite similar in what consequences they bring to life. Luz cannot marry the Major she meets in Pordenone, and the soldier contracts a sexual disease by mating a girl in a taxi cab at a Chicago loop. All their hopes and desires do not find fulfillment in any place whatsoever; rather, the uncanny representation and refusal tendency of all the spaces take them far away from constructing a utopian space essential for their relationship to sustain.

The apparent failure of the places in the text is more deeply connected with fragmented visions of their life that tend to survive the aftereffects of war. Their separation from each other is intensified through unfulfilled sexual/family bonding, and the impact of distressed spaces invite excruciating experiences of diseased sexuality and repressed desires in life. Thus, to make a family/home seems as impossible as to take refuge at a homely space, be that in United States or Italy. The void in between is of an engulfing kind – so much so that it might make the Chicago loop incident a palpable possibility. Therefore, the characters of Hemingway's story are entrapped eternally in an unfavorable time and space together from which no return has been possible. The narrative structure presents layers of different places that fleet so fast that their journey records the time of failure and the restlessness of modernity.

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