

# *English*

## **The Exploration of Female Characters' Freedom and Choice in the Dawn of 20th Century American Literature**

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Ever since the dawn of American literature, women have served as supporting characters and ideals. However, as literature evolved and women writers gained prestige, female characters began to grow more complex as well. This trend has continued up until the dawn of a new century and the advent of modernism. Readers see these characters' degrees of freedom vary in novels with characters such as Daisy in *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, Catherine in *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway, Caddy in *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner, Antonia in *My Antonia* by Willa Cather, and Lily in *The House of Mirth* by Edith Wharton. In this paper, I will explore the levels of freedom of these iconic female characters. I will do so by exploring the factors that have an impact on each individual's freedoms, historical context/environment, the characters in the story, and the author's control of the character and her fate. Through my research, I observed that these characters' varying degrees of freedom correlated with geographical location as well. *The Great Gatsby* and *The House of Mirth's* settings in New York high society are the most stringent and domineering. However, in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, which takes place in the west, characters' freedom seems greater. Although these characters' freedoms do seem to extend as one travels further west, this does not mean everything is ideal, for more freedom also leads to more consequences. Although these modern women seem "free" in their own ways, they are not, for society has handicapped them into not knowing how to live freely. This journey will begin in the old, elite New York high societies of *The House of Mirth* and *The Great Gatsby*.

*The House of Mirth* is the story of the struggle of Lily Bart, a social climber desperately trying to seek acceptance into New York high society's "A List". She is not an aristocrat herself but has wealth due to her rich Aunt Julia. As she tries to break into this elite circle, she befriends a man named Lawrence Selden, who eventually falls in love with her. Bertha is a bitter, married socialite who uses rumors and her own manipulation to climb socially. She tries to pursue Selden and is automatically jealous when she finds out about Selden's love for Lily. Envious, Bertha then spreads rumors that lead to Lily's ruin. Lily is too blinded by her dreams of superficial success to see what really matters. This ultimately

leads to her demise, as at the end of the book, Selden finds her dead with all her debts paid and a medication bottle beside her. However, Lily's ambition, Bertha's jealousy of Lily and Selden's friendship, and Aunt Julia's death eventually lead to Lily's downfall as well as her freedom. Lily fell for patriarchal society's illusion of superficiality and success, which caused Lily, as well as many other women of the time, to objectify themselves. This patriarchy not only teaches women that self-objectification is normal, but also turns women against each other. While Bertha is an obnoxious antagonist, one must also remember that marriage was the only option for women of the elite class. Forcing and breeding women into marriage right when they reached puberty probably taught women they had to compete with each other over men at a very early age. Bertha is not a good person, but one must remember she is also the product of her own society, as all of these women were. The reason they did these things may not have been because all of them were just "mean girls", but as a way for survival. Lily was not born into this world and entered it without really understanding the shark tank that it was. It is sad but not surprising that she is defeated at the end of the novel. Although it seems Lily is more free than most of the New York women on the surface, she is just as controlled by this society as much as everyone else.

Frances Restuccia, in an article for *Contemporary Literature*, says, "This story may be read as a social fable that indicts fashionable, fin-de-siècle New York Society for producing human ornaments that it has no qualms about crushing" (Restuccia 223). Society controls Lily's life by luring her into the temptation of riches in order to become elite society's "darling". However, society fools her into becoming this praised "ornament" instead of a person, as it did with all women in that time. By the time they reach adulthood, this desire to be the "belle of the ball" gradually morphs into an obsession. "Women who yield to the temptation to be a beautiful object are destroyed by the consequences of that temptation" (Restuccia 224). However, Restuccia goes on to argue that Wharton believed it was best for a woman to remain indecisive rather than display any sign of "phallogocentrism" (224), or meaningful qualities that are associated with masculinity. Of course, as forward thinking as we would like to think Edith Wharton was for her time, she was still, to some degree, a product of this aristocratic society herself.

Lily was already at a disadvantage in her attempts to assimilate into the exclusive "inner circle". Proper social decorum was supposed to be taught to young daughters by their mother until the daughter reached the age of 18. If these young daughters passed all tests of "calling cards and receptions and balls" with their mothers or sponsor, her sponsor and other kin arranged the daughter's debut ball, a rite of passage into womanhood for this aristocratic class of people. As Maureen Montgomery states, "this celebration of coming of age underlined age differences. The young gentleman somehow slips into society without formality... the underlying difference had to do, of course, with sexual reproduction and the perceived need to place daughters in marriage as early as possible upon matur-

ing" (46). Montgomery regards them as "the gatekeepers" (41) into the American upper crust society. Although women had a degree of power over social structure and decorum, the contradiction of this elaborate social code just further emphasized the submissiveness a female had to a male in society. Debuts were opportunities for mothers to put their daughters on "the marriage market", as the debutante strutted around in finery to show off her beauty and to attract the attention of adequate potential husbands.

Since the end of the Civil War, the increase of commercialism, social mobility and rising population, meant that class was distinguished more by knowledge of proper etiquette than sum of money. Lily became obsessed so much with wealth that she started to become ignorant of proper etiquette and manners. "Etiquette enabled women to deal with scrutiny and surveillance they received... however, etiquette made themselves (women) vulnerable to misrepresentation. In this regard, etiquette both empowered and disempowered women" (Montgomery 53). While this strict social code gave women more of a sense of purpose as participants in society, it also inhibited them by making them appear "fragile" and "delicate". Lily's freedom is obviously determined by her stringent society. Wharton states, "The real difficulty of her situation was that it was incommunicable to any one whose theory of values is different from her own" (Wharton 263). Basically, it was even hard for readers of the 1900's to completely understand this world Lily willingly trapped herself in. In Martha Banta's essay, titled "Wharton's Women", she states, "It is difficult to know with Wharton whether her women are stopped 'dead' by the ephemeral vagaries of the time-ideas, or if they have the obligation to judge as well as to choose-or whether they are caught by fixed fate that denies choice" (Banta 80). However, Lily is not the only sufferer of this patriarchal control. Lily has more freedom than most of New York society's women. However, since freedom is a double edged sword, one must know how to make the right choices. Lily, not bred to be completely independent, suffers from her freedom's consequences as society pulls her down, taking advantage of her naïveté.

Daisy is arguably one of the most hated female characters in American literature. Many critics call her a "femme fatale" and blame her for Gatsby's tragic ending. In *The Great Gatsby*, Nick Carraway, the narrator and Daisy's cousin, moves to New York to West Egg, a fairly affluent neighborhood. He meets his eccentric neighbor, Jay Gatsby, one night at one of Gatsby's grand parties and the two quickly become friends. Nick soon finds out that his cousin Daisy, an East Egg socialite and wife of backward and selfish businessman Tom Buchanan, and Jay Gatsby were not only once acquainted, but in love. Once Tom takes Nick to see his mistress, a mechanic's wife named Myrtle, he decides that Gatsby is the better man for Daisy and wants to help Gatsby get Daisy back. However, as events unfold, it is clear that this relationship between Gatsby and Daisy is one sided, and once Daisy accidentally runs over Myrtle in Gatsby's car, she reverts back to Tom

instead of leaving him for Gatsby. Tom and Daisy both hide in their wealth and are never heard from again after the accident. "He [Gatsby] knew that Daisy was extraordinary, but he didn't realize just how 'extraordinary' a nice girl could be. She vanished into her rich house, into her rich, full life, leaving Gatsby – nothing. He felt married to her, that was all" (Fitzgerald 149). Gatsby is tragically murdered by getting shot by Myrtle's husband, who thinks Gatsby is the one Myrtle had been cheating on him with. Many people blame Daisy for this, and they should. However, considering Daisy's degree of freedom in her restrained society, she did not have much choice.

Even though the influence of Wharton's New York elite society was slowly diminishing by the 1920's, Daisy was still subject to it somewhat because of her social rank. The idea of "dating" was brand new in the twenties, but was mainly practiced by the rising middle class ladies and gentlemen. Daisy would probably not have been able to go to Gatsby's parties regularly even if she wanted to because her small secluded world that her privilege boxed her into taught her that such functions were not suitable for a lady of her class distinction. Fear of exile from the familiarity of her world forced her to succumb to it. Even though she was willing to push the boundaries of this cage for a possible chance of love, she would always eventually have to come back to it. Marriage was still an essential part of womanhood and crucial to survival in the elite world in which Daisy had been raised.

Society was not the only factor that suppressed Daisy from choosing Gatsby over Tom. The male characters, Gatsby, Tom, and even our narrator Nick, create even more difficulties in her decision. Close to the end of the story, Gatsby forces an ultimatum for Daisy. He attempts to force Daisy to tell Tom she doesn't love him. "Just tell him the truth-that you never loved him-and it's all wiped out forever" (132). Gatsby even demands Tom to tell Daisy that he cannot take care of her anymore. "Daisy's leaving you.'Nonsense.'I am, though,' she said with visible effort" (133). Daisy could have felt a guilty conscience over leaving her husband, which is why her certainty for her love for Gatsby began to fade throughout the story as Gatsby's love for Daisy only grew stronger. Gatsby was in love with the idea of Daisy and had her on a pedestal, which Daisy might have been slowly discovering. It seems that Gatsby's grandiose "love" for Daisy might not be true love for her. He may see Daisy more as a possession and a prize for all his efforts and "hard work" he had put into his criminal dealings, and as a way to justify them.

For example, in one scene, Daisy has come over to Gatsby's mansion to "visit". During her visit, Gatsby is showing Daisy all his possessions and wealth. The most famous scene at this part of the story is when he is throwing his shirts: "he began throwing them, one by one, shirts of sheer linen and thick silk and fine flannel, which lost their folds as they fell and covered the table in many colored disarray" (Fitzgerald 92). This scene, for some reason, has caused Daisy to weep. To her, it is apparent how his wealth has impacted his once pure heart. The fact

that Gatsby did not originally come from wealth made him feel the need to prove himself not only to the world, but to Daisy as well. While he dealt in shady business with Meyer Wolfsheimer, his intentions were pure. However, his obsession with money and the ideal portrait of Daisy he fantasized about every waking moment put Daisy in her own cage because of Gatsby's unrealistic expectations.

Duke University professor and contributor to the scholastic journal *American Literature*, Leland Person Jr., explains readers' misconception of Daisy in his article "'Herstory' and Daisy Buchanan". The article begins with Person describing how most literary critics see Daisy in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, such as 'Fair Goddess as bitch in which our twentieth century fiction abounds' and comparing her to "the kind of Circean figures popular in the nineteenth century, the critics tend to accept Gatsby as an essential innocent" (250), and Daisy as Gatsby's predator. Person then goes on to say that this assumption is an oversimplification of a far more complex novel, and how Daisy is more of the victim because of Tom's power over her. I agreed with this article, for it is Daisy could not do much else besides be married in the world she was born into.

Zelda, Fitzgerald's wife, was also a big influence on Daisy's character, as Zelda lurked behind many of Fitzgerald's works. In Fitzgerald's biography, *The Far Side of Paradise*, Arthur Mizener mentions how Fitzgerald's emotion was intensely involved in Zelda's suffering. He adds that Fitzgerald happened to have his notebook out in the hospital room and was writing down everything Zelda was blabbering about when she fell into one of her mental breakdowns. Daisy's quote of girls being beautiful little fools was actually taken from Zelda herself (Mizener 63). One can see Daisy's sadness over her suppressed life and freedom when Daisy herself says "to be a beautiful little fool is the best thing a girl can be in this world" (17). Both Gatsby and Lily have a lot in common, for they both have an idealistic distorted view of elite New York instead of a realistic one, which instead makes them outsiders of this society. Unfortunately, in Daisy's case, both East Egg society and Gatsby limited the amount of freedom she did have. Daisy, whose life is mainly controlled by Tom Buchanan, and is also a character created mostly by Gatsby's point of view, seems to be aware of the consequences that she would suffer if she had run away with Gatsby. Daisy decides these consequences are not worth the risk, for she would lose everything, and, a realist instead of a romantic, she decides to stay exactly where she is. She is a result of her materialistic patriarchal society, and does not think the consequences are worth the loss, even if it is not just for love, but for her own freedom.

In the American South, things were much different. In the era of the Reconstruction South of 1865–1877 and into the twentieth century, the old world slowly diminished. One of the most renowned authors writing about this setting and era was William Faulkner. Although William Faulkner did not live in the Reconstruction era, he grew up in one of these small southern towns, Oxford, Mississippi, where he lived most of his life. Many of these towns were caught in transition,

and Faulkner was no doubt absolutely fascinated with them. As Joseph Blotner points out in his biography of William Faulkner, Faulkner was always hearing stories of Southern folklore mixed with history, such as tales of the Klu Klux Klan, slavery, and the Civil War. He had a deep understanding of the South and the darkest parts of Southern heritage at an early age. Many of his works portray the fallen Old South, such as *Absalom! Absalom!*, *As I Lay Dying*, and others. However, the most significant work, which not only represents the Reconstruction era of turmoil, but also the representation of Faulkner's female characters is his first notable work, *The Sound and the Fury*. His work portrayed the duality of Southern life, not only depending on race, but also on gender. Dr. Williams, LaGrange College Professor of English, states in his dissertation, *Time, Voice, and Vision in the Sound and the Fury*: "The Sound and the Fury is characterized by a formal indecisiveness that is one of its key defining qualities."

In *The Sound and the Fury*, the Compson family of Jefferson, Mississippi, a former prominent Southern aristocratic family, is experiencing a downfall. Mr. Compson is an alcoholic father and Mrs. Compson is a negligent mother. They have four children, three boys and one girl. The boys are named Benjy, Jason, and Quentin, and are the multi part narrators of the story. They all talk about their sister Caddy's pregnancy and how their lives are controlled by her. All the reader knows of Caddy is what they are told through her brothers' accounts. Even though Caddy never speaks in the novel, she is the center of the novel because she remains the center of her brothers' lives. Caddy's promiscuity leads to her out of wedlock pregnancy and has affected everyone. Quentin, the oldest, drowns himself in the Charles River largely over his despair of Caddy's indiscretion. Benjy, who is mentally challenged, has fits of crying and screaming, and Jason steals the money Caddy sends to her daughter. Jason is the common Faulkner anti-hero, much like Anse Bundren from Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying*. Both Anse and Jason are the most selfish, loathsome characters in their stories, yet they both end up "all right". Anse is the only character who has the chance to start over with a new wife, and Jason becomes head of the Compson household since he is the eldest son after Quentin commits suicide. Jason treats Caddy's daughter, Miss Quentin, very badly. Miss Quentin, unfortunately, has acquired her mother's horrible flaw; her promiscuity. She even tries to steal money from Jason and attempts to flee with a traveling showman. Jason has to chase her down as the rest of the family attends Easter Sunday service. To me, the brothers do not control Caddy's freedom, but she seems to unintentionally to control theirs. For example, in the first third of the novel, Benjy's account of the Compson family memories, and what is happening in present day, is mixed up and difficult to decipher. Although Benjy's account is the most objective of these accounts, it is the style of this first section that shows how Caddy's sin has destroyed Benjy's life. Caddy's departure has thrown off Benjy's order in life and left it askew. For example, at the beginning of the story, when Benjy is playing with Luster, the Compsons' black maid's grandson in 1928, he starts to

go into one of his fits because in his mind, "Caddy smelled like trees in the rain" (Faulkner 19). The going back and forth between italicized text and plain text also shows the distortion of time in Benjy's already mentally ill mind.

Linda Wagner, a University of North Carolina professor and writer for Southern Literary Journal, opens her article with a discussion of Caddy's unquestionable significance in the novel, *The Sound and the Fury*. Wagner even quotes Faulkner, who states this book is 'about Caddy' (49). The article discusses Caddy's important role in the novel as, as Wagner puts it, "Language Creator and Giver" (50). Even though Caddy is not actively participating in the book's progression, the book does not exist without her. The men of *The Sound and the Fury* have a distorted view of Caddy, much like Gatsby has of Daisy in *The Great Gatsby*. These men expected Caddy and Daisy to be pure goddesses of chastity, and both became disappointed in the result when Caddy and Daisy let their flaws show. In this way, the men imprison themselves because of the high standards they set for the most important women in their lives. When these women commit any kind of sin, the male characters' views of these women becomes tainted. In this way, the brothers allow Caddy to control their lives. Caddy is freer, for she is away from the east. Although Wagner also states how the book cannot function without Caddy, she forgets to mention one thing. Even though the brothers have allowed Caddy to dictate their lives in some way, the reader's view of Caddy is also distorted. Since we never hear from Caddy herself anywhere in the novel one could say that the reader's view of Caddy is incomplete and therefore difficult to really understand the person Caddy was altogether.

Caddy is also an example of Faulkner's view of the modern woman, and serves as his warning to society if one lets a female have too much freedom. In American Studies journalist Andre Bleikasten's essay, "The Ink of Melancholy", he states, "Faulkner is finally led to signify reconciliation with indeterminacy and the idea of loss by the act of writing" (Bleikasten 437). In this interview with Faulkner, Faulkner states Caddy was the characterization of something that he felt was missing in his life. Faulkner even calls Caddy his "heart's darling" (Blotner). Even though Caddy does eventually gain her freedom in a way by the end of the novel, she has had to sacrifice everything for it. After Caddy's promiscuity gets her pregnant, her father and mother seem to be indifferent about it, but not Quentin. Caddy hurriedly marries another man, Herbert Head, but he immediately divorces her when he believes Quentin's lie that Caddy and Quentin had committed incest. All of this leads to the Compsons disowning Caddy, and even though she has to leave her family and society, it also sets her free from the binds of it as well. Once again, we see society and characters imprisoning her, for her brothers are the only accounts we have on her character, and not all three are even reliable because of Benjy's mental illness and Jason's scheming ways. Society has bound Caddy much in the way F. Scott Fitzgerald and Edith Wharton's upper class New York society bound Daisy and Lily. If Caddy had been obedient, the family would not have broken, but



Caddy would have ended up miserable and probably a lot like Daisy. If Daisy had chosen Gatsby, a man who's not sure if he's really in love with her or just the idealized memory of her (like Caddy), she would have gained her freedom, but would have had to sacrifice everything for it. Unlike Caddy, however, not all American women were this restricted by social boundaries. Caddy has had to deal with consequences of her freedom by being cut off from her family and her daughter. Unlike Daisy, however, it is a risk she is willing to take.

Willa Cather wrote about a newer America at the time of the late nineteenth century that transformed into the picturesque ideal of the hard working, industrious American pioneer man and woman. Willa Cather grew up in this newer part of America in the Nebraska countryside. In Cather's self-published collection of essays and interviews, *Willa Cather in Person: Interviews, Speeches, and Letters*, one of her interviews titled "1921 New York", describes Cather's Nebraska roots and how they inspired her characters in her novels. In Latrobe Carroll's interview with Cather, Cather stated, "The ideas for all my novels have come from things that happened around Red Cloud, Nebraska when I was a child. I was all over the country, on foot, on horseback; in farm wagons...It happened that my mind was constructed for the particular purpose of absorbing impressions and retaining them. I always intended to write, and there were certain persons I studied. I seldom had much idea of the plot, but I used my eyes and ears" (Cather 45). Her childhood memories inspired many of her greatest works, one such being *My Antonia*. She said she based Antonia on a woman who acted as the mother of her neighborhood buddies, and decided to write about her when she received word of her death (Cather 46). One could say Willa Cather had an incredible memory, since much of her subject matter, as she says, is not "gathered but absorbed" (Cather 47).

The setting of *My Antonia* is between 1880 -1910, for it is a memoir of the life of Jim, an intelligent young man who meets Bohemian immigrant Antonia when he moves to Nebraska, and the two become friends. This time frame occurs at the very end of Manifest Destiny. Manifest Destiny was the belief that America was destined to go west, for it represented a new beginning and promise and a second chance of social and economic affluence. The first Americans to venture into this newly discovered territory were called pioneers. Sheryl Meyering, author of *Understanding My Antonia*, explains that pioneering "was viewed as a mostly male experience" (15). This predominantly masculine portrayal of pioneering is demonstrated in other novels such as Lenny and George in John Steinbeck's novel, *Of Mice and Men*. Although the setting is in a more modern era, both men traveled from place to place, looking for a chance at a new start. Pioneer is the term western men and women are now referred to as, and they had very different, and more difficult, lives than the elite and middle classes of the Northern and Southern regions of United States. Even though the stereotype of the pioneer woman is painted as a melancholy and doting wife, real pioneer women still manage to "toil bravely in the face of overwhelming sorrow and adversity" (Meyering 130). This



was not really the case. Even though this stereotype was partially true, women did share the same optimistic view of the future with their husbands. Meyering takes a quote from one of these women's diaries, "Farewell's a word that breaks my heart/ And fills my soul with woe /But the fertile fields of Oregon /Encourage me to go" (131). The hope of freedom drove not only these women, but men as well, to pursue this dangerous new land.

My Antonia paints a beautiful portrait of this new way of American life at the end of the nineteenth century. My Antonia is a fictional memoir about a young man named Jim Burden who moves out to the Nebraskan prairie and meets a Bohemian immigrant girl named Antonia, who serves as the center of his life as they grow up, grow apart, but always keep coming back to each other. Jim is shipped out to Nebraska to live with his grandparents after becoming an orphan. On the train there, he meets the Shimerdas, a Bohemian family, and they travel together and become neighbors. Jim meets the Shimerda daughter closest to his age, and the two hit it off as Jim teaches Antonia English. Everything is going well until Antonia's father's suicide, the first part of the plot that drives the two apart. Although they eventually come back together again, others' actions have seemed to always get in the way of their relationship. The second obstacle appears when Antonia and a Denver boy become engaged but then he abandons her after he learns of Antonia's pregnancy, and she moves back to Nebraska heartbroken. Jim does not even hear of Antonia's situation until a year after when he visits his grandparents' home back in Nebraska. They once again visit and reminisce together of memories, and Jim promises to return again sooner this time. However, twenty years pass until they see each other again. Both are successful, but in different, very "gendered" ways. Jim is a successful New York lawyer, and Antonia is married to a Bohemian named Cuzack and is the happy mother of many children. Jim and Antonia reconnect once more, and Jim once again promises close contact with the Cuzacks. The story ends with Jim strolling in the moonlight, thinking of the comfort Antonia always brought him.

Although there are setbacks for Antonia, she has the most freedom in her life than any of the other characters discussed thus far. Much of this has to do with setting, for it seems the further west one travels, the more freedom and fewer restrictions that one discovers. It is strange to think that ladies like Antonia and Lily Bart lived in the same country, for one is restricted by society and one is not as much, but both women lived in the Gilded Age of American society between the years 1880 to 1910. Although Antonia is not allowed to follow the same pursuits as Jim, such as going to Harvard and becoming a lawyer, she still ends up successful and happy, but in a different gendered way. Jim went to college, travelled, married, and had a successful job. Antonia, her gender limiting her, could only do one of those things, which was to get married. However, Antonia's life is only the one most women of her time dreamed of, for it is the highest status one could reach as a lady, which was motherhood and being a wife. For Antonia's time period, she

is the most free a woman could be in the straitlaced society her family tried to escape from, but then adopted some of its same principles. Antonia's freedom does not give her too many repercussions as the others do, for her freedom is most influenced by the American west setting as well as by Cather's feminism. Of all the characters discussed, Antonia is the most free of them all.

Even though geography and setting are keys to judging these female characters' liberties, they are not the only determinants of freedom in their lives. At the beginning of the early twentieth century, so was World War I. Post World War I brought America into a new age called "the lost generation", which is described as an air of "uncertainty of American experience in the post war years" (Gumery). Among this group of writers of the lost generation, one that stands out the most was Ernest Hemingway. He "gave a voice to the uncertainty of America... addressing the moral void left by the mechanized war. He surrounded himself with other greats such as Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Pablo Picasso, and many others, in which he found much influence" (Gumery). He transformed himself into a sort of literary celebrity with a very "macho" reputation and was a womanizer. However, his books speak for themselves, for he had a "succinct prose that nobody could quite match" (Gumery). One such work was his most personal and favorite literary masterpiece, *A Farewell to Arms*.

*A Farewell to Arms* is a semi-autobiographical account of Ernest Hemingway's life when he was an ambulance driver in World War I. After he was struck with a trench mortar shell bomb when he was on the battlefield with other soldiers, he was sent to the Milan Red Cross hospice, where he met a nurse he fell in love with. Even though Hemingway would exaggerate the story over the years, he eventually turned this experience into one of his best novels. *A Farewell to Arms* is the story of young ambulance driver named Frederic Henry who joins the Italian army during World War I. He meets a nurse's aide, Catherine Barkley, whom Henry's friend Rinaldi has a crush on. However, Rinaldi slowly disappears from the story as Catherine and Henry slowly fall in love. Their relationship grows from "friends with benefits" to love after Henry is injured in war and Catherine is his nurse. After Henry is released from recovery, Catherine tells him of her pregnancy, and Henry becomes ill. However, the army thinks Henry is using his illness as an excuse to escape his duty as a soldier, and plans to send him back to the army once his illness is better. He promises Catherine he will be back for her, and after much turmoil, finally meets her again in a remote town, Stresa, and they escape to Switzerland and leave the horrors of war behind. Even though they make it and spend a little time together, Catherine delivers a stillborn baby and both the baby and Catherine die in labor. Unable to say goodbye, he walks back to his hotel in the rain.

Many critics regard the story as strictly about Henry and the horrors of war. This is partly true, but many overlook the character of Catherine and dismiss her as one of Hemingway's typical female characters, the ideal woman that men only dream of. In Charles Hatten's essay, "The Crisis of Masculinity, Reified Desire,

and Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*” in the *Journal of History of Sexuality*, Hatten confirms this: “Many critics have claimed Barkley’s character as vitiated because she is the embodiment of male sexual fantasy”(Hatten76). However, Hatten believes Catherine’s character is more complex than this. “I wish to offer the perspective on Catherine and sexuality in the novel that her relation to sexuality is not too obvious, and indeed a historically informed consideration of the role of sexuality in the novel will allow us to think beyond the simple polarities that have structured both character and novel” (Hatten 77). He then goes on to discuss the theme of heroism in the novel. Many think Henry is the only hero, while Catherine serves as the stereotypical female character of “subservient follower” to Henry. Catherine seems a passive character, abandoning the army and her entire life to be with one man. Ever since the reader learns of her fiancé’s death, we already meet a person who is most likely already broken at the beginning of the story. Her life seems to be determined by the whims of not only Henry, but the author Ernest Hemingway as well.

Ernest Hemingway grew up in a world which still clung onto Victorian values, including traditional gender roles. In Richard Fantina’s essay, he says Ernest Hemingway grew up in an environment where his mother was dominant over his father, who later committed suicide. Fantina says Ernest thought that his mother was partially to blame for his father’s suicide, for her dominance had, Fantina put it, “emasculated” his father (85). This created the “Hemingway Hero”, an ultra-masculine character stripped from any remotely female qualities. “He wanted to be ‘masculine’ and protect his women...His life and work reflect extremes that alternately reinforce and undermine prevailing gender values of the era into which he was born” (Fantina 86). Catherine may be passive because she feels like it is her only choice, and her perseverance is perhaps what makes her strong in the conventional way women were ideally supposed to be back then. I agree with Hatten in a way, but I believe Catherine’s perseverance and fierce loyalty to Henry, even though it is her choice to do so, isolates her, which makes her more of a tragic heroine than an ideal one. She is also largely controlled by the whim of Hemingway himself. She dies in childbirth at the end of the novel, making her death not only tragic, but making the cause of her death her femininity, for only women can have babies. What I have discovered through research is that it is not that Hemingway hated women, but it seems his male characters were always more three dimensional than his female ones. This was not only because of Hemingway’s gender, but because he tried to create his male protagonists into the man his father never could be for him, as Fantina mentioned earlier. As strong as Catherine is, Hemingway limits her strength in this way, which thereby limits her freedom, for death is obviously permanent.

These characters do show there are ways of earning freedom to certain degrees, such as the Compsons disowning Caddy, Catherine fleeing the war with Henry, Lily’s fall from grace at Bertha’s jealous acts that lead to her death, Daisy’s

car accident that kills Tom's mistress Myrtle, and Antonia's marriage to Cuzack. Each female character, Daisy, Antonia, Lily, Caddy, and Catherine are impacted by men and their authors (especially Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*), and reflect how societal constrictions and restrictions determine each one's degree of freedom. Even though the female characters are controlled by mostly external factors mentioned above, they impact the male characters greatly, at least internally. It can be concluded that Henry's abandonment of the army was not only for his hatred of war, but also for his love for Catherine. Gatsby's entire lifestyle centers on Daisy as he stares at the green light, wishing for a woman that only exists in his idealist mind. Lawrence keeps waiting on Lily to open her eyes to his love for her, but it is too late when he finally decides to declare his love for her. Caddy's brothers' lives revolve around Caddy's presence and decisions, and the fact that Caddy is only present in males' memories imprisons her as in she is not able to express herself and her point of view of events, causing the readers to have a very biased view of her. Jim keeps being drawn back to his childhood friend and intimate memory, Antonia, so much that he writes a whole memoir of it, *My Antonia*, although he never once tries to help Antonia or play a very active role in her life after they both grow up. However, because these influences were unintentional on the women's parts, the fact that the men allow these women to dictate their lives not only imprisons their freedom, but these women's as well.

Even though male characters and the patriarchal society in these novels' settings and authors' lives influenced much of these female characters' freedom, if one is defining freedom by having a choice, then all of these characters have freedom to some degree. In reality, freedom comes with a price, just as choice also comes with a consequence. It would be ignorant to say these women would have total freedom if they could do what they pleased without consequence, because that is not how life works. However, their freedom, if defined as choice, can still provide them happiness, whether the reader judges them to be happy or not. It does not matter if one thinks Catherine's decision isolates her from the world; what matters is it was her decision. In such imperfect worlds, maybe that was the best these characters, and perhaps even authors, could do.

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