

Against the Victorian Normalization of Sexuality: A Study of Hemingway's Representation of Syphilis

Yasushi Takano

Since its emergence in the sixteenth century, syphilis had been one of the most dreadful disease in Western societies. Because of its virtual incurability, syphilis was regarded as the wrath of god against promiscuity, a punishment caused by perverted sexual intercourse, and a symbol of immoral vice against society. Thus syphilis with its subtle implication was held in secrecy and closeted under the genteel surface of Victorian society. However improvement in the medical knowledge since the middle of the 19th century gradually exposed the biological aspects of this disease, if not presenting an effectual remedy. The fear as well as the sense of guilt as to contracting this stigmatic disease produced various kinds of discourses — both imaginary and factual. According to Claude Quézel, the propaganda campaign against syphilis was for the purpose of “maintaining the public in a state of alert by keeping syphilis continually in the news,” and consequently “[i]n 1926 alone, 15,000 articles in the popular press were recorded” not to mention “numerous scientific journals” (Quézel 183). Imaginary discourses as well proliferated at the turn of the century. As Elaine Showalter clearly shows us, literature about syphilis at the end of the last century is divided into two types: one is a women's version, which describes syphilis as a punishment for lust, “the most unforgivable of the sins of the fathers” and as “a punishment unjustly shared by innocent women and children”; the other is a men's version, in which “women are the enemies, whether as the femmes fatales who lure men into sexual temptation only to destroy them, the frigid wives who drive them to the brothels, or the puritanical women novelists, readers, and reviewers who would emasculate their art” (Showalter 88).

Indeed, this generation was obsessed by the notion that syphilis was everywhere, and frightened by the fact that there was no way of knowing if one had contracted syphilis or not. Taking into account the fact that Ernest Hemingway was born in the age of this general obsession, examining this disease in the context of whole problem of Hemingway's sexual attitudes must shed some light upon the previously unrecognized complexities of

his life and works. We shall investigate how syphilis functions in his texts and how it contributes to the making of his public image. To put it concretely, analyzing his representation of syphilis will make it clear that his works are marked by an equivocalness oscillating between a repugnance for the Victorian moral standard, on the one hand, and an unintentional compliance with it, on the other.

Venereal disease as well as other diseases is shaped as both biological and cultural construction, and, in the paradigm of medicine at the beginning of the 20th century, “disease is defined as a deviation from a biological norm” (Brandt 4). After due consideration of this situation, we shall assume that the social attitude toward syphilis is “a normalizing power,” which regarded patients of this disease as deviants from the society’s common assumption about sexuality; thus, “discovering” that a premarital or extramarital sexual intercourse was a “perversion.” Hemingway had, throughout his career, resisted this kind of normalization about sexual matters. He repeatedly professed to be a libertine, and created the public image of a person more sexually experienced than he really was. According to Scott Donaldson, Hemingway insisted that “he learned practically everything there was to know about sex while still a teen-ager,” and that “he’d ‘had the clap’ twice before his older friend Bill Smith ever got laid” (Donaldson 175). Whether this is true or not, this attitude toward venereal disease as a credit upon himself is typical of revolt against the Victorian morality. No matter how much his biographical evidences indicate the opposite,¹ he wore the mask of the debauchee.

His preference for libertine attitude toward sexual matters is well expressed in his early short story, “Mr. and Mrs. Elliot.” Comley and Scholes point out that this story “is based on a binary opposition, deeply embedded in American culture, between puritan and libertine,” and that the narrator despises Hubert Elliot’s puritan sex. According to them, “[t]he explicitly puritanical character of Hubert’s values is emphasized by the words *pure* and *purity*” (Comley and Scholes 83, their emphases). The passage in question is thus:

He was twenty-five years old and had never gone to bed with a woman until he married Mrs. Elliot. He wanted to keep himself *pure* so that he could bring to his wife the same *purity* of mind and body that he expected of her. He called it to himself living straight. He had been in love with various girls before he kissed Mrs. Elliot and always told them sooner or later that he had led a *clean* life. (CSS 123, my emphases)

Comley and Scholes are right about their insistence that the couple represents the puritanical evaluation, but not enough; for the words, “pure,” “purity,” and “clean” are charged not only with puritanical evaluation but also with the typical insistence of the antisymphilitic movement at that time. Compare the passage above with a lecture delivered to American soldiers in World War I: “It is not true that the absence of previous sexual experience is any handicap to a man in entering the married state. . . . On the contrary, the man who comes to his bride as *clean* and as *pure* as he expects that she will come to him will find the most perfect joy in the married state” (qtd. in Brandt 64, my emphases). It is clear that this attitude toward male sexuality is extremely similar to Hubert’s desire that he wants to “bring to his wife the same purity of mind and body that he expected of her.” Thus, we should conclude that Hubert’s sexual value is the most typical of that of the syphilologist.

Hemingway also had been brought up in this rigid puritanical tradition as seen in his autobiographical story, “Fathers and Sons.” “His [Nick’s] father had summed up the whole matter by stating that masturbation produced blindness, insanity, and death, while a man who went with prostitutes would contract hideous venereal diseases and that the thing to do was to keep your hands off of people” (CSS 371). This kind of statement epitomizes the Victorian morality as well as appears as the foremost principle of the anti-symphilitic movement. As Brandt states, “Continence . . . became the hallmark of all sexual prescription” (Brandt 26).

In the light of this context, it should be said that Hubert advocates then the dominant ideology of the antisymphilitic movement and conforms to the overarching system of evaluation constituted in the fight against the disease. In other words, leading a “clean life” is primarily the moral standard at that time, and the narrator’s mocking tone against Hubert implies that the narrator — or Hemingway, it might be said — resists this normalizing power. The story insists that the value assumed by Hubert — and by syphilologists as well — does not necessarily produce a satisfactory result. In fact, the couple’s sex aiming only at procreativity remains futile; and, what is more, the wife engages in a kind of lesbianism with her friend, while the husband is infatuated with alcohol. Thus “Mr. and Mrs. Elliot” is a protest against the antisymphilitic movement, or the Victorian morality.

“A Very Short Story,” however, offers us a contradictory evidence about Hemingway’s sexual morality. Most critics agree that this story was written based on Hemingway’s own experience, through the using of which he tried to express his anger against a woman who jilted him. The story, for the most part, records their actual love affair except for the

vicious ending, in which their doom is presented:

The major [Luz's expected fiancé] did not marry her in the spring, or any other time. Luz never got an answer to the letter to Chicago about it. A short time after he contracted gonorrhoea from a sales girl in a loop department store while riding in a taxicab through Lincoln Park. (CSS 108)

The story's ending reflects Showalter's "men's version" of syphilitic literature which we have seen at the beginning of this paper. Luz is, for the narrator, nothing but the femme fatale who lures the protagonist into venereal disease, or she is equated with the frigid wife who drives him to the brothel. In short, the venereal disease in this story is a trap or a vice into which men are involuntarily entangled by women. And, in that sense, we can conclude that the story is incorporated into the antisymphilitic discourse.

These two stories show us Hemingway's contradictory attitude toward sexual morality: "Mr. and Mrs. Elliot" maliciously mocks traditional sexuality, while, on the contrary, "A Very Short Story" is unintentionally incorporated into such Victorian evaluation. We shall next investigate the works directly referring to syphilis in order to clarify his moral conception which is oscillating between two extreme poles. *A Farewell to Arms* will be the most useful starting point for our discussion. The quotation below is the scene in which Rinaldi first exposes his anxiety about contracting syphilis.

"To hell with you," Rinaldi said. "They try to get rid of me. Every night they try to get rid of me. I fight them off. What if I have it. Everybody has it. The whole world's got it. First," he went on, assuming the manner of a lecturer, "it's a little pimple. Then we notice a rash between the shoulders. Then we notice nothing at all. We put our faith in mercury."

"Or salvarsan," the major interrupted quietly.

"A mercurial product," Rinaldi said. He acted very elated now. "I know something worth two of that. Good old priest," he said. "You'll never get it. Baby will get it. It's an industrial accident. It's a simple industrial accident." (FTA 175)

His detailed explanation of the condition reveals that he is in an incubation period between the secondary and tertiary stage.² Disease having incubation periods, such as syphilis, costs its patients extreme anxiety because they have to endure the possible coming of the next stage not knowing whether they are cured of it or not. Rinaldi here is under

the pressure of such anxiety. Moreover the treatment referred to in this passage, which was common before the discovery of penicillin, causes venereal patients inordinate pain: “Massive doses of mercury and iodides of potasium [sic] often led to serious complications: loss of teeth, tongue fissures, and hemorrhaging of the bowel. . . . These therapies . . . also entailed considerable pain, demonstrating the punitive position of the profession regarding diseases communicated in ‘immoral congress’ ” (Brandt 12). Rinaldi’s depressed and irritated attitudes might be the result of these painful sufferings, and, what is more, for he is at once a doctor and a patient, he has to take “the punitive position” over himself.

In this passage, moreover, we should notice Rinaldi’s strategy, by which he attempts to reduce the stigmatic nature of the disease. Syphilis has been attached to the notion of moral violation, the notion of degradation into the realm of depravity. Thus he tries to consider that “Everybody has it. The whole world’s got it.” For him, syphilis must be “an industrial accident.” The conception of syphilis as a punishment for moral violation, or as the wrath of god is primarily a religious feeling. Rinaldi’s vicious attacking of the priest at the mess can be explained by this association. The very existence of the priest is, for him, nothing but an accusation against his depravity.

This paranoid apprehension, in effect, resulted from his particular conception of womanhood. “I tell you something about your good women. Your goddesses. There is only one difference between taking a girl who has always been good and a woman. With a girl it is painful. That’s all I know. . . . And you never know if the girl will really like it” (*FTA* 66). Here he divides females into two categories: one is “girls” who have no sexual desire, and the other is “women” who have one. This is the notion most typical of the Victorian genteel tradition which had been strongly supported by syphilologists. “These reports of the high rates of infection among prostitutes confirmed for many the notion of two types of women — good and bad, pure and impure, innocent and sensual. Venereal epidemiology was socially constructed upon this bifurcation” (Brandt 31). This stereotypical notion of womanhood not only exposes and denounces the Victorian double standard but, at the same time, supports the very male-centered ideology; for “[t]hese views make clear the way in which disease functioned metaphorically to define gender roles,” and the women’s role is, for those syphilologists, primarily “motherhood” (Brandt 16). In Rinaldi’s term, “girls” are for childbearing, and “women” for sexual pleasure. On account of these assumptions, Rinaldi’s precept foreshadows, ominously, his contracting syphilis and, again ominously, Catherine’s pregnancy.

Rinaldi himself notices the cause of his plight so that he is forced to express a keen

regret for his own behavior. "I am pure. . . . I am like you, baby. I will get an English girl too. As a matter of fact I knew your girl first but she was a little tall for me" (*FTA* 171). Indeed it is he who approached Catherine first, but he gave her up to Frederic. And this decision consequently leads to Rinaldi's syphilis and to Frederic's bereavement. As Rinaldi remarks, they are essentially the same kind of people. Frederic had also incessantly been to the brothel, and, what is more, he had even contracted gonorrhoea (*FTA* 299). It is Catherine who divides them into different fates. The men who have intercourse with "women" is to contract syphilis, to be punished, or to pay the wages of their own moral violation; while the men who have to do with "girls" stay out of such peril. Thus the normalizing power functions throughout this novel, for the normative sexual attitudes are strictly established by way of showing both Frederic's and Rinaldi's different fates.

Frederic's fate with Catherine, however, is also painful, for the story ends in Catherine's death. Meditating on her impending death, Frederic, in the famous passage, remarks thus:

Now Catherine would die. That was what you did. You died. You did not know what it was about. You never had time to learn. They threw you in and told you the rules and the first time they caught you off base they killed you. Or they killed you gratuitously like Aymo. Or gave you the syphilis like Rinaldi. But they killed you in the end. You could count on that. Stay around and they would kill you. (*FTA* 327)

Frederic's Hardy-like anger against the gratuitousness of one's destiny seems to equate his own position with Rinaldi's contracting syphilis. One may conclude that Frederic also regards Rinaldi's infection as gratuitous, or as, what Rinaldi calls, "an industrial accident," which, by definition, means an unexpected result beyond human ability. However, Catherine's death is caused by her pregnancy, and the responsibility of the pregnancy, at least half of it, rests with Frederic. Then, Frederic's juxtaposition of her death with Rinaldi's syphilis seems to assume a different tone. As Rinaldi justifies himself by way of regarding syphilis as "an industrial accident," Frederic also justifies himself by this juxtaposition: Catherine's death is also "an industrial accident." Frederic must feel responsible for her pregnancy; thus, it is necessary for him to mitigate his sense of guilt, to think that her death is caused by something other than himself, namely, by a "gratuitous" reason.

The concept of "an industrial accident," which we have discussed above, appears again

in one of Hemingway's works. In *Death in the Afternoon*, an essay written three years after *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway writes thus:

Syphilis was the disease of the crusaders in the middle ages. It was supposed to be brought to Europe by them, and it is a disease of all people who lead lives in which a disregard of consequences dominates. It is *an industrial accident*, to be expected by all those who lead irregular sexual lives and from their habits of mind would rather take chances than use prophylactics, and it is a to-be-expected end, or rather phase, of the life of all fornicators who continue their careers far enough. (*DIA* 101, my emphasis)

As we have seen above, Rinaldi also states, to mitigate his agonizing pain, that syphilis is "an industrial accident." In spite of the superficial affinity, Hemingway's use of this term seems different from Rinaldi's in its significance. Although Hemingway insists that syphilis is an accident, he also maintains that the cause of infection is "irregular sexual lives." If such a life causes one to contract syphilis, if one's own behavior triggers infection, syphilis cannot be considered merely as an accident. Brought up in the stern Victorian tradition, Hemingway could not conceive of libertine lives as morally acceptable, whereas he also had a strong desire to be a libertine; thus, denouncing the patients, while, at the same time, mitigating the sense of guilt of leading such lives. Resisting the normalizing power, Hemingway, as well as Rinaldi, wants to regard such moral violators as "the normal." The environment in which he had been brought up and the environment in which he reforms his evaluation in the period of sexual liberation always conflict with each other in his discourse, and the very conflict generates the equivocal attitude toward sexual matters.

"One Reader Writes," which directly deals with syphilis and which is one of the stories most neglected by Hemingway critics,³ justifies our theory. The story is based on an existent letter written by a woman, who, in the letter, consults a doctor whom she found in a newspaper column. And she states that she "found he [her husband] is taking a course of injections and I naturally ask, and found he is being treated for I don't know how to spell the word but it sound like this 'sifilus'..." (*CSS* 320). After presenting the contents of the letter, the story describes the wife desperately praying God to help her. She has been waiting for her husband for a long time, while it is very likely, from the fact that he contracted syphilis, that he instantly gratified his lust by having intercourse with prostitutes during military service in Shanghai. This scheme puts the story among, what Showalter calls, the

female version of syphilitic literature. Syphilis here is “the most unforgivable of the sins of the fathers” and “a punishment unjustly shared by innocent women and children.” We can easily observe Hemingway’s censure of the Victorian double standard which is based on the clearly established norm about sexuality.

As we have seen above, Hemingway’s attitude toward sexual matters wavers between a repugnance for the Victorian morality and, if uncsciously, a covert conforming to it. Though he was notorious for the exaggerative bragging of his sexual experience, such demonstrations could be his wishful attempt to escape from the environment in which he was raised in the formative years. The attempt, however, as we have already discussed, was never achieved because of the cultural morality deeply inscribed in his body. As Carl P. Eby made clear in *Hemingway’s Fetishism*, and taking into account the posthumous publication of *The Garden of Eden*, Hemingway must have been outside of the sexual norm accepted at his time — in short, his sexual preference might be branded as “abnormal.” Being repulsive to such an imposition of a standard, and, at the same time, being unable to abandon it, Hemingway might feel in a dilemma just as Rinaldi is nearly driven to desperation. Hemingway as well as Rinaldi must have wanted to regard syphilis as an industrial accident.

Notes

*This is the revised version of the paper presented at the 11th General Conference of the Hemingway Society of Japan held on October 16, 2000, at Doshisha University.

¹ Almost all the biographies of Hemingway mention that he could never escape from the stern Victorian influence about sexual matters. See, for a laconic summary, Donaldson 179-81.

² Normally syphilis is divided into three stages. For the details about each stage, see Quétel 80.

³ According to Paul Smith, “The only extended analysis of the story is Mark Edelson’s” (299). In Japan, however, we have a significant study which intends to reevaluate this story. See 新聞 300-302.

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