

# An Interpretation of Hemingway's *The Sea Change* from the Perspective of Queer Theory

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**Abstract.** Queer theory, an emerging perspective in literary criticism, provides a distinctive approach to reinterpreting classic literary works. This paper examines Ernest Hemingway's short story *The Sea Change* from the perspective of queer theory. The female protagonist is perceived as a "queer" figure by her male lover, the bartender, and the society. The derogatory labeling of the woman as "queer" presents a dilemma for both characters. Through an exploration of identity conflicts, the study reveals contrasting reactions from the female protagonist, who exhibits bravery, determination, and a rebellious spirit, and the male character, who struggles without finding resolution. By analyzing *The Sea Change* in conjunction with Hemingway's other works and his personal experiences, the author suggests that features of homophobia and the portrayal of female masculinity can be observed in his depictions of gender roles, which to some extent restrict his comprehensive exploration of queerness in his writing. This research expands the scholarly scope by examining one of Hemingway's less-explored short stories from an unconventional perspective, shedding new lights on its themes and implications while addressing non-mainstream sexual orientations. It also highlights the significance of applying queer theory to literary criticism and broadens interpretive possibilities and enriches scholarly discussions surrounding Hemingway's work.

**Keywords:** *The Sea Change*; Queer Theory; Hemingway.

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1. "The Sea Change"

*The Sea Change* is a short story written by American novelist Ernest Hemingway. The story portrays a tense conversation between Phil and a female within a pub. Phil forcefully insists that his lover discontinue her relationship with her same-sex partner and return to him, yet his entreaty is met with firm rejection. Consequently, Phil's anger intensifies, prompting him to make threatening remarks. However, the female character remains composed and asserts that such actions will not bring him happiness. The underlying issue lies in the female's own same-sex orientation, rather than the mere presence of another woman. Despite this, Phil stubbornly refuses to comprehend her perspective and regards her behaviors as morally reprehensible. Ultimately, when Phil asks her to leave, she departs without hesitation, content and satisfied.

The dialogues presented herein exhibit a commendable brevity and simplicity. Notwithstanding their apparent straightforwardness, the underlying theme contains profound implications. This adherence to Hemingway's iceberg theory aligns with the notion that writers ought to merely unveil a limited portion of the narrative in their literary compositions, concealing a greater depth beneath the surface akin to an iceberg. This deliberate restraint allows for ample space to foster reader engagement, enabling them to exercise their imaginative faculties and engage in personal interpretation. Therefore, the author decides to interpret this work from a different perspective.

### 1.2. Literature Review

The profound influence of Hemingway on the literary landscape has prompted extensive studies both domestically and internationally, investigating various facets of his novels, such as literary styles, writing techniques, themes, and more. However, the academic community has not thoroughly



explored gender issues in Hemingway's works. Previous studies primarily focused on male roles due to the predominant presence of male protagonists and their depiction of male lifestyles, resulting in fewer analyses and research on female characters. Nevertheless, the emergence of feminism and gender studies has sparked scholars' interest in delving deeper into the gender roles portrayed in Hemingway's novels. These scholars concentrate on the portrayal of female characters, power dynamics in gender roles, and the exploration of female identity and experiences. For instance, Xu Zhuoyi conducted a comparative analysis of the characteristics of Maria and Pilar in the novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, shedding light on the feminist consciousness prevalent during the war era (2015: 83-84). Similarly, Zuo Lu explored the depiction of idealized traditional females, masculinized women, and rebellious female characters in Hemingway's novels. Furthermore, she analyzed the employment of artistic expression techniques, such as comparison, exaggeration, and detailed portrayal (2016: 37-38).

While there has been a growing number of studies focusing on the male and female roles in Hemingway's works, few have undertaken the study of homosexual literature in his novels, let alone using queer theory as an analytical framework. However, the female protagonist does demonstrate a tendency to be "queer" and is implicitly regarded as such by other characters in the novel, which makes it appropriate to employ queer theory to analyze this work. In addition, only a few scholars have studied Hemingway's *The Sea Change*. In "Hemingway's *The Sea Change*: What Close Reading and Evolutionary Psychology Reveal", Nolan combined close reading techniques and insights from evolutionary psychology to analyze and interpret the themes, symbolism, and psychological motivations in Ernest Hemingway's short story (2001: 53-67). By examining the narrative structure, character development, and applying evolutionary principles, the author aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the story's deeper meaning and underlying psychological dynamics. Huang Yingsi analyzed the implication of the female's departure (2023: 78-80+98). She believed that the ending does not signify the conclusive break of the lovers' relationship, but a temporary avoidance strategy adopted by the woman (ibid: 78-80+98).

This paper aims to investigate the "queer" identity of female characters, analyze how social prejudices against queerness jeopardize the two protagonists, and explore how they tackle their identity crises. Moreover, the paper will integrate the novel with Hemingway's other works and life experiences to unveil the limitations of his queer writing.

## 2. Queer Theory

The term "queer", which originally denoted "strange", "abnormal", or "sick", was a derogatory noun or adjective adopted by the Western mainstream culture to label those who were identified as homosexuals or effeminacy (Callis, 2009: 214). However, with the expansion of unconventional sexual minority groups and the development of their theories, many non-mainstream individuals subjectively and ironically employed "queer" as a means of self-identification (Shao, 2020: 4). It should be recognized that this "umbrella term" embraces all non-heteronormative individuals, including not only gays and lesbians but also bisexual individuals, transgender individuals, hermaphrodites, cross-dressers, individuals with gender ambiguity, and the like. In other words, queer is always an identity under construction (Jagose & Genschel, 1996: 47). Halperin (2003: 339) believes that even the very act of defining queer may restrict its potential and diminish its enchanting ability to introduce a new era of sexual radicalism and fluid gender possibilities. Just as Li said (2003: 1), queer theory can be summarized as "free life" that is not confined to heterosexuality.

As early as in the essay *Thinking Sex*, Gayle Rubin (1984) advocated for a more inclusive and sex-positive attitude towards human sexuality, which exerted a profound influence on queer theory. Afterwards, queer theory emerged as a tongue-in-cheek expression when the American professor Teresa de Lauretis coined the term "queer theory" for a conference in 1990. This deliberate and playful choice of words demonstrated her inclination to question established norms and conventions in the field of sexuality studies. Within the temporal span of the same year, in *Gender Trouble*:

*Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler challenged the traditional binary division of genders and the prevailing notion that gender was a fixed and natural category. He argued that gender was a performative and socially constructed phenomenon, and there were not such notions as “proper” social genders (Wang, 2020: 28). His performative theory also complies with Michel Foucault’s (1990) viewpoint that sex and gender are formed from the outside in. Similarly, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1990) opposed to the simplistic binary understanding of sexual orientations-- namely heterosexuality and homosexuality-- and revealed how social norms and cultural institutions had imposed limitations on our perceptions of sexuality in *The Epistemology of the Closet*. Guy Davidson claimed that there were three major factors contributing to queer theory: deconstruction, psychoanalysis and Michel Foucault’s works, all of which generate doubts about the sexual identities (2020: para 4). Despite the nuances of emphases, queer theorists criticize social norms concerning gender and sexuality, seek to challenge heteronormativity and cisnormativity, and highlight the significance of valuing diverse sexual identities. And they believe that sexual identification and orientation is the result of both cultural and social milieu.

The arguments held by queer theory touch upon literary analysis concerns (ibid: para 20). As an emerging perspective in literary criticism, queer theory offers a fresh and unique outlook on reinterpreting some classic literary works (Wang, 2011). Many studies at home and abroad have embarked on applying queer theory to analyzing literary texts. Through the cognitive scientific perspective of queer theory, Du Kun (2018: 75) explored how Alice Walker challenged traditional hegemonic systems and how the female protagonist deconstructed and reconstructed the binary opposition of gender identities in *The Color Purple*. Han Xiaomeng (2013: 182-183+215) delved into Hemingway’s *The Ending of Something*, revealed the masculinity of Majorie and the femininity of Nick, and analyzed the influence of homophobia society on the characters from the lens of queer theory. Zhang Yiqin (2020) utilized Judith Butler’s gender performativity to reveal the homosexual relationships reflected in *This Side of Paradise* from two aspects. In the essay *Representation of “Queer Troubles” in The Kite Runner and Simon vs the Homo Sapiens Agenda*, the authors examined gender troubles portrayed in *The Kite Runner* by Khalid Hosseini (2021: 1366-1374). Using queer theory to analyze literary works can reveal the significance of marginalized identities and subversive narratives, encouraging humans to reflect upon their social norms.

### **3. A Queer Reading of The Sea Change**

The title *The Sea Change* encompasses more than the mere portrayal of the female protagonist’s evolution from a conventional woman adhering to heterosexual norms to a queer individual striving for personal liberation. It also signifies the transformations experienced by the male character. Faced with societal stereotypes regarding rigid gender binaries, the former character effectively navigates the challenges associated with her identity, ultimately overcoming any internal conflicts. Conversely, the latter character becomes entangled in unresolved confusion. This disparity can be ascribed to their different levels of acceptance of queer identities.

#### **3.1. The Plight of a “Queer” Female and Her Struggling Male Lover**

Gender construction is a multifaceted process influenced by various factors and interactions. It is not a unilateral undertaking (He & Li, 2018: 120), but rather shaped by external influences while also exerting its own impact on them. In the novel *The Sea Change*, the female protagonist undergoes her lover’s verbal attack. He resorts to crude and insulting language to label his lover after discovering her romantic feelings for another woman. This situation causes discomfort for the female protagonist, prompting her to request her lover to communicate in a more polite manner. Additionally, her “queer” identity results in a complete denial of her love for her lover. The man repeatedly asserts his inability to perceive any signs of her love for him. From his perspective, there exists a binary division between homosexuality and heterosexuality. As the woman chooses the former, he assumes that she has thoroughly discarded the latter. Unfortunately, he fails to consider the possibility of a third option: she does love him, but she has become an active bisexual.

However, it is important to note that the female protagonist is not the only one affected by the situation. Despite the male protagonist's strong adherence to the societal norms of heterosexual relationships, he himself also becomes a casualty of this prevailing sexual paradigm. When confronted with his lover's decision to set aside their relationship in pursuit of a same-sex relationship, the man's emotional response is primarily characterized by feelings of shame, rather than the sadness that society expects from "normal" couples. Throughout their conversation, the male protagonist noticeably refrains from displaying affection or sentimental attachment towards his lover. Instead, he expresses that he would find it more acceptable if his lover fell in love with another man rather than a woman. His concerns about maintaining a heterosexual relationship begin to overshadow his genuine feelings for his lover. Moreover, influenced by societal stereotypes, the male protagonist even starts to question whether the woman's "queer" identity distorts his own identity. This internal conflict is highlighted by the protagonist's recurrent experience of his voice becoming unrecognizable and his appearance appearing unfamiliar. This phenomenon can be interpreted as a manifestation of his negative mindset, stemming from his fear of societal disapproval as a man who fails to uphold male chauvinism and as a partner to a "queer" woman. He fears that this deviation from societal norms could lead to his exclusion from the majority and his transformation into a marginalized individual. As a result, the man urges the woman to leave him without any intention of returning, in order to shield himself from latent social criticism and the reminder of his shame.

In this particular context, it becomes crucial to acknowledge that the responsibility for the current situation can not be solely attributed to the individual male protagonist; rather, it lies within the broader societal framework in which he exists. The portrayal of the bartender in the narrative serves as a symbolic representation of the numerous individuals who uphold a societal structure characterized by heterosexual dominance. He initially views this heterosexual couple as an ideal match and later echoes the male protagonist's critique of homosexuality, which reflects the common mindset prevalent in society. If society were to abandon its adherence to the supremacy of heterosexual relationships and embrace a more inclusive perspective, it is plausible that the male protagonist would perceive his lover's departure with a female partner as more acceptable. And in such a scenario, both of the couple would not be dreadful of getting marginalized because of their identities.

### **3.2. The Outlets for Identity Crises in a Heteronormative World**

Despite the man's harsh criticism of the female protagonist's "queer" identity, the woman achieves genuine liberation by steadfastly heeding the call of her awakened self-awareness. She directly points out her lover's tendency to act according to his own desires and to show little regard for the thoughts and feelings of others. Throughout their conversation, the woman maintains an exceptional level of composure and rationality, striving to engage her lover in a reasoned discussion. However, upon realizing her lover's unwavering stubbornness, unreasonableness, and immaturity, she abandons this strategy. When her lover ultimately asks her to leave, she departs without hesitation. Remarkably, she experiences no shame, neither for her lover nor for herself. Instead, she attains true liberation of both body and mind. The female protagonist successfully deconstructs the confines of heterosexuality and reconstructs her sexual identity. She discovers that what really matters in a sexual relationship are not genders but love. In her pursuit of self-liberation, the female protagonist not only resists societal norms regarding gender and sexual orientation but also challenges the male-dominated power structures. With unwavering determination and courage, she breaks free from the passive acceptance of societal norms and explores her true inner world. By embracing her authentic identity and establishing a relationship based on equality and respect, the female protagonist opens a door to freedom for herself. She no longer allows gender to be a limiting constraint but believes in love as the most genuine and significant force. She seeks a profound human connection, irrespective of whether it is with a man or a woman, aiming for spiritual alignment and genuine emotions.

In stark contrast, the male protagonist finds himself entangled in a prolonged state of confusion. His bewildering predicament stems not from an inherent incapacity to adapt to the ever-shifting landscape

of his identity, but rather from an unwavering reluctance to fully embrace these dramatic changes. This reluctance, however, is not without reason. It lies in the weighty implications that come with acknowledging and embracing a “queer” identity, for such an acceptance would inevitably grant his lover a newfound freedom, challenging his established authority and control over her life. Right from the outset of their conversations, he senses a gradual erosion of his dominion: as he desperately strives to prevent his lover from exploring a relationship with another woman, she no longer conforms to his desires, instead asserting her own needs and wants with little regard for his opinions. This unexpected turn of events, a departure from the male chauvinism that he has grown accustomed to, overwhelms him and leaves him reeling in uncertainty. Driven by an instinct to halt any further deterioration of their relationship, he chooses to avoid confronting the issue, offering a stiff permission for her to depart. Subsequently, he seeks solace in explicitly and deliberately expressing his disapproval of his lover’s “queer” identity to the bartender, as if attempting to prove to a representative of society that he aligns with the prevailing heterosexual norms and opposes all unconventional and unacceptable sexual practices. However, this external projection of his beliefs proves to be an ineffective outlet, as it merely seeks to persuade others without truly addressing his own internal conflicts. The male protagonist is left grappling with an unresolved confusion, left to ponder the motivations behind “queer” behaviors and the roots of his own distorted sense of self.

In essence, he finds himself trapped in a dilemma. He is devoid of viable means to confront his identity crisis. The courage necessary to challenge the deeply ingrained societal beliefs that uphold the heterosexual hegemony, which in turn maintains male privilege and status within both the family and society, eludes him. As previously discussed, gender is an intricate construct molded by societal performances, and within the confines of heterosexuality, traditional gender roles bestow significant advantages upon males. Consequently, the male protagonist faces formidable hurdles in reorienting his perspective to embrace a queer identity. This perpetual state of dilemma, a perpetual grappling with conflicting forces, engulfs him, leaving him adrift in a sea of uncertainty.

This story is not just about a woman’s self-identification and liberation in terms of sexual identity, but it is also a universal tale about freedom, equality, and love. It demonstrates the power of individual awakened consciousness and, how we can transcend social constraints and pursue true happiness and freedom through steadfast self-belief and courageous actions.

#### **4. The Interplay of Culture and Environment on Hemingway’s Queer Research**

Hemingway’s queer writing also reflects the influence of his surrounding culture and social environment on his gender identity and sexual orientation, aligning with perspectives from queer theory.

##### **4.1. Partial Affirmation of Homophobia**

In the novel *The Sea Change*, the male protagonist serves as a megaphone of Hemingway. The male protagonist’s reactions throughout the narrative can be interpreted as reflections of Hemingway’s own responses in similar situations. One notable example is the protagonist’s harsh criticism of his lover’s homosexuality and his subsequent struggle to confront his own beliefs as well as the consequences of his unsuccessful attempts to dissuade her.

To some extent, this mirrors Hemingway’s own homophobia. His dread of male homosexuality can be attributed to a variety of factors, including societal influences and personal experiences. Growing up in a conservative family environment, Hemingway would have been exposed to traditional gender roles and societal expectations. It is plausible that his father’s adherence to these norms influenced Hemingway’s views on masculinity and sexuality, consequently leading to his discomfort and aversion towards male homosexuality. These familial and societal influences likely contributed to the limitations evident in his portrayal of queer individuals. While it is true that Hemingway does explore homosexual themes in his works, it is noteworthy that his focus tends to center more on lesbian relationships. This observation suggests that Hemingway may have been more tolerant of female

queerness compared to that of his own gender. As a result, Hemingway's depiction of queer experiences in *The Sea Change*, as well as his broader body of work, may have an inherent deficiency in addressing male homosexuality. The emphasis on lesbian relationships and the presence of homophobia within the narrative underscore the necessity for a critical examination of Hemingway's perspective on gender and sexuality.

#### 4.2. Partial Acceptance of Gender Fluidity

In addition to homophobia, the female protagonist in *The Sea Change* embodies a fluidity of genders in both her physical appearance and psychological disposition. With regards to appearance, she boldly defies societal norms by cutting her long, blonde hair short. This act subverts the conventional image associated with southern ladies, who are often expected to maintain a certain standard of femininity. By boldly defying this expectation, the protagonist asserts her individuality and rejects the limitations imposed by gender norms. Moreover, her psychology reflects distinctly masculine traits, as evidenced by her display of a strong rebellious spirit through her assertive words and actions. By portraying a female character who embodies such traits, Hemingway explores the idea that gender is fluid and is not strictly tied to societal expectations.

This representation of female masculinity emerges as a recurring characteristic prevalent throughout Hemingway's literary works. In *The Sun Also Rises*, the character Brett Ashley is depicted as a woman with a masculine manner. She is socially adept, confident, and independent. Brett often dresses in men's clothes and engages in various adventures alongside male characters. In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, María displays resilience and courage, showcasing some masculine qualities in her struggle during the Spanish Civil War. Additionally, in *To Have and Have Not*, Marie is depicted as a strong and independent woman who takes control of her own destiny.

In comparison, Hemingway's works depicting feminine qualities in men are far fewer than those depicting masculine qualities in women. This is because he himself is probably skeptical of feminine qualities in men. According to some biographies and memoirs, Ernest Hemingway's mother had hoped that he would be a girl and held a negative view towards his display of masculine traits. This familial environment may have caused Hemingway to experience confusion and unease during his upbringing, leading to questions about his own gender identity and sexual orientation. Such experiences could have influenced his portrayal of men with feminine qualities, as he may have been reluctant to expose his inner conflicts and insecurities in his works. Thus, he might have avoided discussing these sensitive and complex topics in his writing and keep them hidden.

#### 5. Conclusion

In conclusion, the short story *The Sea Change* by Ernest Hemingway can be analyzed through the lens of queer theory, offering a fresh perspective on the theme and implications of the story as well as non-mainstream sexual orientations. The female protagonist in the story can be seen as a "queer" figure according to the viewpoint of her male lover, the bartender, and the broader society in which they exist. The derogatory labeling of the woman as "queer" creates a dilemma for both characters. The woman faces verbal criticism and spiritual insults, while the man grapples with questions about his own identity and fears being marginalized due to his lover's "queer" status.

Their identity conflicts spark off contrasting responses from the female protagonist, who exhibits courage, determination, and a rebellious spirit, and the male character, who struggles and finds no resolution. By examining *The Sea Change* alongside Hemingway's other works and his own social experiences and cultural background, the author suggests that partial homophobia and the approval of female masculinity can be observed in some of his portrayals of gender roles, which, to some extent, impose limitations on his comprehensive exploration of queerness in his writing.

This study expands the research scope by examining one of Hemingway's lesser-explored novels from a perspective not commonly associated with his work. It provides readers with a new understanding of the themes and implications of "The Sea Change" while addressing non-mainstream

sexual orientations. Furthermore, it highlights the significance of applying queer theory to literary criticism to unravel the complexities of gender, sexuality, and identity within literary texts. By embracing queer theory, this analysis broadens the interpretive possibilities and enriches the scholarly discourse surrounding Hemingway's work and its engagement with diverse sexual identities and orientations. The findings of this study provide insights for future studies and encourage scholars and readers alike to explore the significance of diversity and inclusiveness in literature.

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