

ANALYSIS

“The Sea Change” (1931)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“‘The Sea Change’ is considerably more important in the Hemingway canon than has heretofore been recognized. A coherent reading of the story requires the correct interpretation of the two literary allusions; an understanding of the interaction, even tension, between the allusions makes it clear that Phil, the male protagonist of ‘The Sea Change,’ is a writer and that his perversion is more degrading than the lesbian tendencies of his former lover. Phil wants her to come back and tell him ‘all about’ her sexual experiences not just to satisfy his morbid curiosity but to furnish the material he needs for his writing. Hemingway is dealing with meanings of ‘perversion’ in a way that recalls a key idea of Hawthorne: ‘The Unpardonable Sin might consist in a want of love and reverence for the Human Soul; in consequence of which, the investigator pried into the dark depths, not with a hope or purpose of making it better, but from a cold philosophical curiosity,—content that it should be wicked in what ever kind or degree, and only desiring to study it out. Would not this, in other words, be the separation of the intellect from the heart?’

Several prevalent misreadings of ‘The Sea Change’ arise from critics’ emphasis on the passage Phil attempts to quote from Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Man*: it reads

Vice is a monster of so frightful mien,
As, to be hated, needs but to be seen;
Yet seen too oft, familiar with her face,
We first endure, then pity, then embrace.
But where th’ Extreme of Vice, was ne’er agreed.

Following Philip Young’s lead, Joseph DeFalco centers his interpretation on this passage, arguing that Phil is in effect stating his willingness to embrace the vice that he has previously hated. DeFalco suggests that the relationship between Phil and the young woman ‘has been unrecognized vice,’ based on her remarks to Phil: ‘We’re made up of all sort of things. You’ve known that. You’ve used it well enough.’ DeFalco takes this statement to mean that ‘the woman has appealed to [Phil] on the grounds that he too has perverse tendencies.’ However, if Phil is a writer, as suggested by other elements in the story, her comment makes much more sense. He has used ‘all sorts of things’ in human nature to enrich his writing.

But the sexual motif has found continued favor with critics. J. F. Kobler is willing to go further along DeFalco’s line of reasoning to state that Hemingway is sympathetic to homosexuality in the story. The change that takes place in Phil during the course of the discussion seems to Kobler to be the result of capitulation to homosexual tendencies in himself: ‘There can be no question that he is moving toward a homosexual affair. He is about to embrace that which he earlier categorized as a vice.’ Yet even Kobler finds it hard to believe that his single experience with lesbianism should have unleashed homosexual tendencies in Phil. Sheldon Grebstein seems on far safer ground when he observes that the ending of the story ‘implies a general perversion of character, a deduction supported by the story’s conclusion which hints at the man’s degradation. By permitting the girl’s adventure, he is more culpable than she in living it.’

That homosexuality should be viewed not as Phil’s own vice but as an effective metaphor for a writer’s perverse willingness to use others for the sake of his art is suggested in an alternate ending for the story Hemingway discarded in favor of the existing conclusion. Among the manuscript versions of the story is a fragment in which Phil moves to the bar after his female companion has left the café; in view of his own recent conversion, Phil asks the bartender for the kind of drink that a ‘punk’ might order. As in the beginning of ‘The Light of the World,’ Hemingway uses the slang term ‘punk’ to mean homosexual. This discarded ending might seem to support Kobler’s contention that Phil has indeed been converted to homosexuality, and it is probably for that very reason that Hemingway omitted it; another explicit link

between Phil and homosexuality might mislead the reader into taking literally an allusion intended to be a metaphor for what Phil has discovered himself to be, an exemplar of the 'Extreme of Vice.' Thus, Hemingway does not so much condone the lesbian affair of the woman as imply that the man's vice is a worse evil; the ending he chose emphasizes Phil's feelings of guilt rather than his sin. The specific nature of that sin is most clearly suggested by the title. The 'sea change' of the title, as Philip Young pointed out so long ago, alludes to 'Ariel's Song' in *The Tempest*:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes:
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea-change
Into something rich and strange.

The sea change of 'Ariel's Song' is a transformation of decaying human materials into bright coral and rich pearls. Surely if Phil is undergoing a change from heterosexual to homosexual, Hemingway could have used such a title only to underscore the most bitter irony, for his attitude toward homosexuality is, from first to last, anything but understanding. Even Kobler briefly notes Jake Barnes' attitude toward the male homosexuals who are with Brett Ashley when she makes her first appearance in *The Sun Also Rises*. Jake says, 'somehow they always made me angry. I know they are supposed to be amusing, and you should be tolerant, but I wanted to swing on one, any one, anything to shatter that superior, simpering composure.' Other unsympathetic depictions of homosexuality appear in 'A Simple Enquiry' (1927), *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), 'The Mother of a Queen' (1933), and *A Moveable Feast* (1964). It seems unlikely that a writer who otherwise presents such a monolithic viewpoint should alter it in one short story.

Since the change from heterosexual to homosexual is unlikely to be considered positively, and since the title is unlikely to be applied only with such distorted irony, Hemingway must mean that something 'rich and strange,' something of value, was to grow from the perversion of Phil's former lover as well as from the ruins of their blighted relationship. The explanation of how this change is possible is not readily apparent in the text of the story; the key to the connection between the title and Phil's ultimate recognition of his own perversion is, in fact, 'the thing left out' of the story in accordance with Hemingway's theory of constructing his stories on what he termed 'the principle of the iceberg.' The importance of the omission was emphasized by Hemingway himself in an essay written in 1959: 'In a story called "A Sea Change," [sic] everything is left out.... I knew the story too too well.... So I left the story out. But it is all there. It is not visible but it is there.' The omission that provides a logical connection between the title of the story and its ending—as well as explains the puzzling details—is Phil's occupation.

Identifying Phil as a writer causes the details of the story to fall into place. First of all, if Phil is a writer, 'Ariel's Song' reads perfectly as a description of the creative process of transforming life or reality into something more enduring, more beautiful—art. An author takes the materials of life, which he may obtain through a sort of heartless observation of fellow human beings and even of himself, and transmutes them, if he is lucky, into something that is indeed 'rich and strange.' Morley Callaghan reports that Hemingway told him during their apprenticeship on the *Toronto Star*, 'even if your father is dying and you are there at his side and heartbroken you have to be noting every little thing going on, no matter how much it hurts'; at about this same time, Hemingway also told Callaghan, 'a writer is like a priest. He has to have the same feeling about his work.'

A second reason why it is logical to assume that Phil is a writer is that Hemingway so frequently uses writers as characters in his fiction, which contains a whole gallery of authors treated rather unsympathetically. In *The Sun Also Rises* Jake Barnes is an unpretentious journalist who is contrasted with writers such as Robert Prentiss, Braddock (Cohn's 'literary friend'), and Robert Cohn himself, who may be capable of using his 'affair with a lady of title' in some future book. Hubert Elliot writes about a life he is too timid to experience in 'Mr. and Mrs. Elliot,' and the ruined writer Harry, of 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro,' has made a living by prostituting his own vitality, first for readers and then for a succession of wealthy wives. Mr. Frazer of 'The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio' is an ineffectual observer who is contrasted with the Mexican gambler who lives by a code, as the phrase-maker apparently cannot.

Although there are some positive examples of writers as well, from Bill Gorton of *The Sun Also Rises* to Robert Jordan of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Hemingway more often than not depicts authors unfavorably or at least ambiguously.

Hemingway recognized that it was possible for the writer to go even further in his abandonment of his humanity in favor of art if he manipulated other people so that he could use them as sources for his fiction. Richard Gordon of *To Have and Have Not* is such a writer. In a lengthy argument with Gordon, his wife Helen suggests that his sexual affair with the wealthy and exotic Helene Bradley is motivated by his curiosity: basically he is searching for new material. The ultimate insult that Helen can think of in her fight with Gordon is simply, 'you writer.' Grebstein is correct when he asserts that Phil is 'more culpable' than the woman in 'The Sea Change' because Phil is motivated not by emotional attachment or something within his own sexual nature that he cannot resist but by a cool and detached intellectual certainty that he has more to gain if he lets his mistress go than if he convinces her to give up her lover and stay with him.

Phil is overcome by the Faustian desire to barter his personal and human relationship with the woman in exchange for the chance to use her possible tragic experience as material for his fiction. Little wonder that his voice changes to such a degree that he cannot recognize it as his own when he sends her away; he is aware of the depth to which he has fallen, the temptation to which he has succumbed, by sacrificing the relationship they share for his art. Underscoring his self-realization and the internal change which has taken place, Hemingway states that Phil 'was not the same-looking man as he had been before he had told her to go' and Phil says to the barman, 'I'm a different man James.... You see in me quite a different man.' Like Hawthorne's Roger Chillingworth, Phil feels that his external appearance should reflect his inner corruption. While Phil feels perverted and dirty and comments that 'vice...is a very strange thing,' the barman in a characteristic touch of Hemingway irony, sees only externals and assures him he looks 'very well.'

Both literary allusions thus have a logical organic relationship to the story when the reader realizes that Phil is a writer. In fact the allusions work together, producing a tension that reflects the writer's dilemma. Phil's desire to embalm his mistress as a character in a literary work of art becomes so strong that his roles as man and lover are secondary to his role as an artist; in spite of his realization of what he is doing, at the end of the story he embraces the 'monster of Vice,' perhaps even the 'Extreme of Vice.' He has been seduced by the possibility that the product of the writer's unprincipled violation of confidence can be something as 'rich and strange' as the pearls and coral of Shakespeare's own somewhat macabre sea change. The negative aspects of Pope's words and the positive connotations of Shakespeare's provide symbolic poles for the conflict and the nature of the artist. Both allusions are implicit in the words of Phil's mistress: 'We're made up of all sorts of things. You've known that. You've used it well enough.'

Like Hawthorne characters such as Ethan Brand and Dr. Rappaccini, Phil is risking his integrity to achieve something he believes in totally. The story is open-ended: the reader cannot know whether the creative work of art will justify Phil's sacrifice, whether Phil the human being will survive the ruthlessness of Phil the artist. But the implications of the title, with its suggestion of a miraculous transformation of corrupt materials may be indicative of Hemingway's own point of view on the nature of art and the function of the artist. Aside from possible autobiographical implications, 'The Sea Change,' read as a writer's moment of self-recognition, at the very least offers yet another aspect of Hemingway's exploration of the writer and the demands of his art."

Robert E. Fleming
"Perversion and the Writer in 'The Sea Change'"
Studies in American Fiction 14 (1986)
reprinted in *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*
(Duke 1990) 347-52