

Senselessness, Indeterminacy, and Sexual Ideology in Hemingway's "The Sea Change"

By Sam Post, Wake Forest University, USA

Abstract:

"The Sea Change" is a somewhat anomalous entry in the Hemingway oeuvre. The story tells of the separation between a man and a woman at a bar. 'The girl,' we learn, is leaving 'the man' for another woman, at which the man condemns her other relationship as 'vice' and 'perversion.' Ironically, the man likely himself harbors homosexual desires, and at the promptings of the girl, comes to accept his non-normative sexuality. While many critics have attempted determinate readings of 'The Sea Change,' in this paper I show that its very evasion of determinacy is central to its thematic and narrative construction. In the first section, I treat a statement that the man makes – 'I'll kill her' – in which I find a typology illuminative of the man's ideological stance. In the following two sections, I give a detailed linguistic treatment to two conversations which, crucially, are constituted by indexicals. I find that naming is of central import in the two conversations and that sense is paired with a normative heterosexual ideology and senselessness is paired with a sexually non-normative ideology. In the final section, I treat the last act of the story in which the man undergoes his sea change. Indeterminacy and paradox, analogous to the senselessness of the two analyzed conversations, accompany the man's metamorphosis, suggesting that his sea change was one in which he detaches from a heterosexual ideology and acquires a sexually non-normative ideology, as the girl presently has.

1 "The Sea Change" is a somewhat anomalous entry in the Hemingway oeuvre. The story tells of the separation between a man and a woman at a bar. The "girl," we learn, is leaving "the man" for another woman. The man has difficulty understanding the girl's desire and eventually comes to condemn her other relationship as "vice" and "perversion." Ironically, it is likely that the man himself harbors homosexual desires, and in the final act of the story, he relinquishes his pro-heterosexual ideology and acquires a sexually non-normative ideology. This "sea change" is initiated when the girl confronts the man regarding his use of "perversion" as a label for her homosexual relationship. Throughout, the story is conspicuously cryptic, and even that the girl is leaving the man for another girl is only ever indicated, but never outright stated. The narrative is composed almost entirely of dialogue, which has led to considerably different interpretations. Though critics are uniform in their belief that the girl desires to be with the other woman, their interpretations of the deeper gender, sexual, and moral contentions are divergent.

2 While many critics have attempted determinate readings of "The Sea Change," in this paper I show that its very evasion of determinacy is central to its thematic and narrative

construction. There are several critics who have propounded upon the story's indeterminacy, but none have ventured to centralize and excavate linguistically that indeterminacy¹ as I do here. In the first section, I treat a statement that the man makes – "I'll kill her" – in which I find a typological significance that illuminates the man's ideological stance (Hemingway 306). In the subsequent two sections, I give a detailed linguistic treatment to two conversations which, crucially, are constituted and framed by indexicals – some with reference and others without. I find that sense is of central import in the two conversations and that sense is paired with a normative heterosexual ideology and that senselessness is paired with a sexually non-normative ideology. In the final section, I treat the last act of the story in which the man undergoes his sea change. Indeterminacy and paradox, analogous to the senselessness of the two analyzed conversations, accompany the man's metamorphosis, suggesting that his sea change was one in which he detaches from a heterosexual ideology and acquires a sexually non-normative ideology, as the girl presently has.

Masculine, Heterosexual Language and Ideology

3 The crucial line for understanding this story is "I'll kill her," which is spoken by the man (Hemingway 306). It immediately follows the narration that follows the opening dialogue. It elucidates the prejudice embedded in the characters' language for heterosexual values, the man's commitment to these values, and ultimately, the limits of these values' intelligibility. As an experiment, it is worth revising the line, "I'll kill her" to, "I'll kill him." In the latter statement, there are many resonances of stereotypical masculinity. They are seen in different variations of popular culture: in movies, the high school football player and Wild West gunslinger; in other media, the knight or warrior. "I'll kill him" is spoken by a male who perceives a sexual threat in which another male appears to woo the first's partner. Regardless of whether the male's partner rejects or accepts the advances of another, the male regards the other's advances, whether actually romantic or not, as threatening.

4 The male who speaks, "I'll kill him" is an archetypical alpha male. The archetypical male is violent, angry, strong, vigorous, oftentimes thickheaded, quick to fight, and popular or in a position of social standing. "I'll kill him" connotes power. Oftentimes in popular media, this

¹ See: Nakjavani 164-171; Clark-Wehinger; and Rubóczki.

statement is situated at the rising action of the story in which the archetypical male believes that his relationship with his partner may be compromised. It is positioned at the rising action to convey a sense of drama such that the encroaching male (often the protagonist) will be confronted with the impending danger of the archetypical male's intrinsic violence: the archetypical male will bring to bear the totality of his physical and social abilities to (re)secure his relationship with his partner.

5 "I'll kill him" reflects a deep interdependence of social power, which is established and reestablished through physical power, and sexual power. Social power is the means through which the archetypical male acquires sexual power, and sexual power is the means through which he acquires social power. They reinforce one another and cannot be regarded individually but as parts of a whole. Following the utterance of "I'll kill him," there is a physical confrontation, which is often the climax of the narrative, between the archetypical male and the encroaching male. Depending on the genre, it may be a fist fight, a duel, or a fight to the death. The archetypical male believes that should his sexual power be compromised, his social power would too be compromised. He must ensure his sexual position, and he accomplishes this through applying his social power to the encroaching male in the form of a fight. "I'll kill him" is the archetypical male's indication that he will attempt to maintain his power.

6 The fight between the archetypical male and his partner's suitor can be bloody and belligerent. It is not frivolous. "I'll kill him" beckons a dramatic gravity, so we, the audience, seriously regard it. We understand that the archetypical male has the physical and social ability to inflict upon the other male great harm and that the archetypical male psychologically and ethically regards his violence as reasonable means to ends. We are presented with great drama because the suitor is liable to very great danger, yet capable of success. This archetype reflects an animalistic, natural world in which an alpha male ensures his social and sexual position through strength and violence. The "fight for the girl" drama appears dramatically profound because it resembles something evolutionarily deep – at least within popular typologies.

7 In "The Sea Change," the man's utterance of "I'll kill her" projects this archetype. His reliance upon it suggests a particular ideology. The man places his partner's lover in the position of a rival and encroaching suitor. The man regards his own social and sexual position as subverted by his partner's suitor and so, according to the rules of the invoked archetype, must address the suitor with violence to reestablish his former position.

8 The irony of the line is in its change to a feminine pronoun (“I’ll kill her”). If the archetype that is called upon is one in which two males square off in a dramatic fight, then could we imagine a male and female squaring off likewise? Could we imagine the slighted popular, high school boy beating up a girl high school student? Could we imagine in the Western movie the gunslinger and brawler with grizzle on his cheeks and whiskey on his breath fighting a woman? Should we imagine a woman fighting one of the males with the same dramatic gusto that accompanies the male-male drama, we imagine a strong, masculine woman. We do not imagine the high school cheerleader in the movie brawling with the quarterback antagonist. We do not imagine the fair medieval Lady fighting for the hand of her lover against the brute knight.

9 When masculinity is divorced from both parties in these scenes, there is no struggle but one very strong person (male) brutalizing another person (female). The great evolutionary drama that implicitly condones male-male violence is inapplicable to a situation in which there is a lesbian relationship. Instead, we witness in these scenes ugly and brutal violence. The response of the crowd would likely not be spectacle but a call to the police.

10 In “The Sea Change,” the man rationalizes his partner’s affair through the archetype of the male-male struggle. The archetype provides him with a conceptual toolkit to regard infidelity. Though the archetype succeeds in addressing infidelity, it fails in addressing a non-male suitor. The struggle over a woman is a grounding dramatic trope for our culture – rightly or wrongly – but only succeeds dramatically when it is a male-male struggle. The male-male struggle incorporates the interdependent relationship of social power, established through physical power, and sexual power. When a sexual threat is introduced by a lesbian relationship, the social, physical aspect dissipates, as demonstrated by the ugly, undramatic brutality one might expect to see should a man fight a woman. “I’ll kill her,” therefore, serves as a parody of the gravity which we culturally attach to the male-male struggle for a relationship with a woman.

11 The male-male struggle prioritizes physical strength, which is traditionally greater in males than in females, and is therefore valued in masculinity. The male-male struggle is masculine and heterosexual. It conceives of heterosexuality as the only sexuality and of masculinity and femininity as the only genders. The masculine gender values male physicality, and the feminine gender values female sexualization. This is an ideology. It is not universally applicable, hence its failure to intelligibly address a homosexual relationship. The man relies upon this ideology for about two thirds of the story. From this ideology, the man condemns the girl’s homosexuality, for

the only way from which to make sense of homosexuality from the vantage of the heterosexual ideology is through condemnation.² Ultimately, the girl succeeds in distancing the man from his heterosexual ideology, at which point he is capable of accepting her homosexuality and his own non-normative sexuality.

Conversation 1

12 The opening of the story exemplifies a clash between the heterosexual ideology and the sexually non-normative ideology of the girl. There is a lack of sense in the conversation, though we as readers may be beguiled into regarding the conversation as sensible. The opening conversation is as follows:

“All right,” said the man. “What about it?”

“No,” said the girl, “I can’t.”

“You mean you won’t.”

“I can’t,” said the girl. “That’s all that I mean.”

“You mean that you won’t.”

“All right,” said the girl. “You have it your own way.”

“I don’t have it my own way. I wish to God I did.”

“You did for a long time,” the girl said. (Hemingway 306)

There are several linguistic issues that emerge. The forms of speech do not align with their contextual meanings. As a result, the conversation is either sensible, but sensible only to the characters and not to us readers, or senseless. The uncertainty of sense for the reader parallels the incomprehensibility for the man of the girl’s love for another woman.

13 The man begins the story with “All right.” Denotatively, the phrase’s meaning is an indication of agreement. For such to occur, there must be first a statement with which one can agree. However, there is none provided here. “All right” acquires meaning as an index, but there is no antecedent to make it sensible. As a kind of coupling, the man’s first line ends with, “it,” which too lacks an antecedent. We can infer as a solution to the absence of antecedents that the story opens *in medias res*, in which case we simply are not privy to previous elements of the man

² I use various types of “sexuality” throughout the paper for the sake of ease. The word presumes a sexual identity that commits one to particular attractions. However, I do not believe that the characters in “The Sea Change” are so fixed, but rather maintain sexual attractions that cannot be easily translated into one sexual identity.

and girl's conversation. Significantly though, Hemingway forces us to engage immediately with a fantasy (an exophoric index) to accommodate "All right" and "it" as sensible and, more broadly, the story itself as sensible. We will see that this method, in which an index is offered without an antecedent, appears frequently in "The Sea Change." It is used as a means to accommodate non-heterosexual relationships positively within the language, upon which the characters rely, but which prejudices the heterosexual values that "I'll kill him" represents.

14 As we read on in this opening conversation, we realize that there is a disagreement between the man and girl. There is a good deal of bitterness between the couple such that the meanings of "All right" and "What about it?" change. "All right" no longer serves as a statement of agreement but as a sidestepping of sorts with the purpose of ending the conversation. Its contextual meaning inverts its literal meaning such that "All right" indicates disagreement (not, perhaps, unlike a teenager "agreeing" to clean up her room). "All right," though it initiates the story, is the man's attempt to end the conversation before one can exist. Paradoxically, the man invites the continuance of the story by posing the question, "What about it?" However, this statement too inverts, for it now signals a challenge rather than a question. The man does not wish for the girl to supply him with absent knowledge, but to confront her out of frustration with her. So the first two quotes not only are absent of antecedents that could equip them with sense, but have contextual meanings that are directly opposite their literal meanings.

15 The girl answers the man's question, "What about it," with "No... I can't." This is an inappropriate answer to his question, so it seems to respond to what preceded the transcribed conversation. The man responds to her statement more sensibly: "You mean you won't." And she, "I can't... That's all that I mean." In these three statements there are two pro-verbs, "can't" and "won't," that do not have antecedents. These statements endophorically lack sense, so the conversation becomes, "Yes. No. Yes. No." The girl affirms, and the man denies. Though the girl says, "No... I can't," I regard her statement as an affirmation because with a pro-verb without an antecedent, the statement establishes the position to which the man responds. She breaks the ground of the topic of conversation. Though the denotative meaning of the statement is negation, the functional meaning of the statement is affirmation. As before, there is an inversion of literal and contextual meaning.

16 Without antecedents to contextualize these pro-verbs, the conversation, which appears to be a dialogue on face value, is in fact two concurrent monologues whose contents stand as

antipodes to one another. The girl and the man stand as representatives of two ideologies: the man, heterosexual values, and the woman, pro-homosexual values. These ideologies do not engage with one another, i.e. a conversation, but talk at one another. And as the girl and man remain committed to their respective ideologies, there will not be a place of mutual understanding in which intelligible conversation can emerge. Imagine as an analogue encountering two strangers on the street exchanging, “Yes,” “No,” “Yes,” “No,” etc., and attempting to understand their “conversation.” What appears as dialogue is anything but.

17 In that vein, the girl and man’s fight in this conversation is not about the absent portion of the conversation, but about what is meant. The man attempts to translate the girl’s words, which reflect her pro-homosexuality, into his words, which reflect his anti-homosexuality. He is unsuccessful in this attempt however. The girl says, “I can’t... That’s all that I mean,” and the man says, “You mean you won’t” (Hemingway 306). The man acquires the girl’s statement, “I can’t,” reinterprets it, and dictates to her what he believes she means: “you won’t.” The man attempts to force the girl’s statement into the frames of his comprehension because from his framework, “I can’t” is not meaningful. He is precluded from understanding her. The girl responds by telling the man that her statement, “I can’t,” is “all that [she] mean[s].” She does not accept the man’s reinterpretation of her statement and so insists upon her initial statement. As a result, there is no movement to intelligibility between the couple.

18 In this first exchange between the man and girl, we have witnessed a tension between literality and form on one end, and context on the other. As the story progresses, the tension is amplified between these two poles, in which literal meaning parallels heterosexual, normative values and language, and context parallels non-heterosexual, non-normative values and language. We will see that the man’s acceptance of non-normative sexuality coincides with an acceptance of speech that under literality is senseless, but contextually is sensible. The girl translates the man’s words out of his ideological framework and into hers just as the man had attempted in this first conversation. She is successful, at which point, the man accepts his own homosexuality and a sexually non-normative ideology.

Conversation 2

19 The girl must speak intelligibly within the heterosexual language frame to communicate her homosexuality positively. There are not words available that refer to homosexuality positively

however. To address this issue, she uses pronouns that do not have antecedents to refer to her, and the man's, homosexuality. The pronoun can interact sensibly with the heterosexual language without committing to anti-homosexuality. The result looks on face value sensible, just as in Conversation 1, but lacks sense literally. The only way to regard the girl's pronouns as sensible is to believe them to have exophoric reference, which is analogous to Hemingway's *in medias res* technique in Conversation 1. In the case of the following conversation, which is the climax of the story and in which the man accepts his homosexuality, the exophoric references are the man and girl's experiences. The girl implores the man to view the world without language, for she recognizes that the only communicable, public language that they share prioritizes heterosexual relationships and vilifies non-heterosexual relationships. The conversation is as follows:

"You can't forgive me? When you know about it?" the girl asked.

"No."

"You don't think things we've had and done should make any difference in understanding?"

"Vice is a monster of such fearful mien," the young man said bitterly, "that to be something or other needs but to be seen. Then we something, something, then embrace." He could not remember the words. "I can't quote," he said.

"Let's not say vice," she said. "That's not very polite."

"Perversion," he said.

...

"I'd like it better if you didn't use words like that," the girl said. "There's no necessity to use a word like that."

"What do you want me to call it?"

"You don't have to call it. You don't have to put any name to it."

"That's the name for it."

"No," she said. "We're made up of all sorts of things. You've known that. You've used it well enough."

"You don't have to say that again."

"Because that explains it to you."

"All right," he said. "All right." (Hemingway 308)

20 For the sake of ease, I will italicize the pronouns in each line and provide their respective antecedents. When there are no conspicuous antecedents, I will provide my best guess for the antecedent, whether exophoric or endophoric, provide my rationale for the antecedent, and provide commentary where necessary.

“You can’t forgive me? When you know about *it*?” the girl asked.

i. *“It”: Homosexuality*

There is no antecedent to which “it” refers. Given the context of the conversation however, “it” most likely refers to *homosexuality* rather than to, say, *the girl’s homosexual relationship*. The girl apparently believes that the man could forgive her affair under the basis of “know[ing] about” something. It would be strange for the girl to ask for forgiveness based on the man knowing about her cheating. It would be reasonable, however, if she justified her affair based on its categorical difference: that is, she is homosexual and her heterosexual relationship with the man is unfulfilling. The man could personally know about an unfulfilling romantic and sexual relationship if he too were homosexual. In that case, he could sympathize with her position and indeed forgive her.

“No.”

“You don’t think things we’ve had and done should make any difference in understanding?”

““Vice is a monster of such fearful mien,”” the young man said bitterly, ““that to be something or other needs but to be seen. Then we something, something, then embrace.””

He could not remember the words. “I can’t quote,” he said.

- i. The man responds to the girl’s question with a roundabout quotation. If ever there were an instance of the man understanding himself and homosexuality through received language, it is here. The quote is a bowdlerized version of the following from Alexander Pope’s “An Essay on Man” (with the relevant lines italicized):

*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:
Ask where's the North? at York, 'tis on the Tweed;
In Scotland, at the Orcades; and there,
At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where:
No creature owns it in the first degree,
But thinks his neighbour farther gone than he.
Ev'n those who dwell beneath its very zone,
Or never feel the rage, or never own;
What happier natures shrink at with affright,
The hard inhabitant contends is right. (Pope 287)

The man adopts the moral importunities of Pope's poem as markers of proper behavior. (That said, he does not adopt the ambivalences of Pope's vice, but only its ironical absolutism.) The man evidently understands the "things [they've] had and done" within the terms of "vice." He regards himself and the girl negatively, and their respective non-heterosexualities and non-normativities negatively. From the vantage of heterosexual language, he and she are vicious people. He cannot "understand" or "forgive" the girl's homosexual relationship, for he is yet committed to the heterosexual vantage.

Significantly, the man grafts onto the "things [they've] had and done" an adopted framework. He understands these "things" not from his immediate experience, but from a mediator, which is, in this case, heterosexual language. The girl obviates this mediator in that she appreciates her actions and relationships directly (hence her use of pronouns), and this approach is what she convinces the man to acquire in the following lines.

"Let's not say vice," she said. "*That's* not very polite."

i. "*That*": *Saying vice*

"Perversion," he said.

i. "Perversion" is a rather harsh word to use to label the girl's homosexuality. It intensifies "vice." It is not an explicitly echoed word as "vice" was, but appears to be produced independently by the man. Its introduction can be regarded as

an instance of the man's heterosexual ideology coalescing into a linguistic form. It represents the heterosexual ideology's grossest antagonism against homosexuality.

....

"I'd like it better if you didn't use words like *that*," the girl said. "There's no necessity to use a word like *that*."

i. "That": *Perversion*

The pronoun "that" endophorically refers to "perversion." Any ambiguity concerning the antecedent seems far less (if any at all) than that associated with the girl's use of "it" to represent *homosexuality*. As discussed earlier, sense is paralleled to the heterosexual ideology, and senselessness is paralleled to sexually non-normative ideology. Note that when the topic matter is that of the heterosexual ideology, the language retains sense and names are made conspicuous (e.g. the antecedent-pronoun correspondence of "perversion" and "that"). Speech that is sensible, therefore, is conditioned upon the promotion of heterosexual values.

ii. "That": *Perversion*

"What do you want me to call *it*?"

i. "It": *Homosexuality*

The man has evidently nametagged "perversion" to the girl's homosexuality. As he did in the interaction in the opening conversation ("I can't." "You mean you won't."), the man attempts to make sensible the girl's words. Making sense of the girl's words, however, means rendering them through the heterosexual ideology. The man attempts, here, to solidify a name for the "it," which the girl has not named. Providing a name such as "perversion" would remedy any ambiguities of sense which the girl has occasioned through her omission of antecedents. The name ("perversion") that the man can give to the girl's homosexuality emerges from the man's ideological commitments to heterosexuality and so, inherently negatively characterizes the girl's sexuality and her relationship with the other girl.

"You don't have to call *it*. You don't have to put any name to *it*."

- i. *"It": Homosexuality*

As in the first exchange in which the man tries to make sense of the girl's words ("I can't." "You mean you won't."), and the girl resists the man ("I can't.... That's all that I mean."), the girl battles the man here on his priorities and assumptions. The issue of sense climaxes in that the girl proposes to not name and to sustain the senselessness. She recognizes that the only available words to discuss her homosexuality in the heterosexual language are negative words such as "vice" and "perversion." Her position to not name repudiates an essential, if not the essential, component of language. The man has concerned himself with maintaining and establishing sign-signified correspondence, which takes the form of antecedent-pronoun correspondence in this conversation.

The man's concerns are linguistic: his view of the "things [they've] had and done" is mediated by the ideologies of his language. The girl's priorities are opposite those of the man: she judges the "things [they've] had and done" by the experiences themselves divorced of language. Her concerns are not linguistic. She appears senseless in that matter, but her concerns allow her to view herself and her relationships without the burden of a constrictive ideology. The linguistic and sense concerns of the man are, as she tells him here, superfluous.

- ii. *"It": Homosexuality*

"That's the name for it."

- i. *"That": Perversion*
ii. *"It": Homosexuality*

"No," she said. "We're made up of all sorts of things. You've known *that*. You've used *it*² well enough."

- i. *"That": That we're made up of all sorts of things.*
ii. *"It": Homosexuality/ The girl's homosexuality/ That we're made up of all sorts of things/ That you've known that we're made up of all sorts of things*
iii. The shift in antecedents corresponds to a shift in control of the conversation. Prior to these sentences, the man has determined the direction and topic matter

of the conversation. The girl has responded to the man's invective against her with ineffectual and tepid language ("Let's not say vice. That's not very polite"; "I'd like it better..."; and, "There's no necessity..."). When the man is on the offensive and in control, the antecedent-pronoun correspondence is sustained. "It" remains attached to "homosexuality," and "that" remains attached to "perversion." When the girl here introduces a topic of her own choosing (one in which she evidently believes strongly and which best represents her motivations for being with the other girl) and thus determines the direction of the conversation, the antecedents of the pronouns "that" and "it" mutate to reflect her acquisition of power.

Beginning with "it" here, the pronouns no longer have definite antecedents. The pronouns reasonably manage to stand in for many phrases, ideas, and experiences. The multiplicity of reasonable antecedents linguistically reflects the girl's admonition, "we're made up of all sorts of things."

These sentences are some of the first indications that the man is sexually non-normative, a topic that the man is very sensitive about. The girl denies the man's belief that "perversion" is the name for homosexuality on the basis that "we're made up of all sorts of things." Given that and that the man has evidently "known that," it is reasonable to believe that the man has either known non-heterosexuality because he himself, like the girl, has homosexual attractions, or that he has known non-heterosexuality beyond the confines of perversion through the girl's homosexuality. I side on the former due to the apparent personal nature of the man's knowledge of being "made up of all sorts of things." However, neither option can be absolutely confirmed or rejected based solely on these lines.

"You don't have to say *that* again."

- i. "That": *That we're made up of all sorts of things/ [I've] known that we're made up of all sorts of things/ [I've] used it ["it" from the preceding line] well enough*

The first two options seem reasonable antecedents. The third, though within the immediate sentence is reasonable, contextually seems unlikely as an option. Should the issues which the man backs away from be "you've used [the

girl's homosexuality and/or relationships] well enough," the reason for the girl leaving the man would presumably be out of spite. He would have taken advantage of her, and she is now separating from him because he is a bad partner.

Given that there remains a camaraderie between the couple and given that the girl offers and nearly commits to returning to the man ("But I'll come back. I told you I'd come back. I'll come back right away."), it seems unlikely that the girl is leaving the man because of what he did in the past. It is more likely that the girl is leaving him – at least for the time being – to pursue a homosexual relationship absent of the man.

If the third antecedent is not an option, the other options centralize the man's homosexuality. Tellingly, the man says "again," which implies that the girl has urged the man in the past to pursue his own homosexuality. There are suggestions throughout the story ("I understand. That's the trouble. I understand [said the man]. 'You do,' she said. 'That makes it worse, of course'." And: "But when we do understand each other there's no use to pretend we don't [she said]. 'No,' he said. 'I suppose not.'" (Hemingway 308)). These suggestions are not accusatory however. They are phrased communally such that the man and girl are paired in their desires. Now that the girl is separating from that pairing, each person must choose how to proceed without the crutch of the other. The man, ostensibly, has relied upon his partnership with the girl in the past to obscure his homosexuality, whether through private or public denial.

Now that the girl is leaving the man, the man must confront his homosexuality: he no longer has the crutch of the heterosexual relationship to prevent himself. Or he no longer has the appearance of heterosexuality, which may have furnished him with a public "virtue" to accommodate his private "vice." The latter seems more likely given the girl's accusation "You've use it well enough." As before however, there are many more possibilities than there are certainties.

"Because *that* explains *it* to you."

- i. *“That”*: *That we’re made up of all sorts of things/ You’ve known that we’re made up of all sorts of things/ Homosexuality*
- ii. *“It”*: *Homosexuality/ That we’re made up of all sorts of things/ You’ve known that we’re made up of all sorts of things*
- iii. The ambiguity of the antecedent of “that” in the line preceding this one (“You don’t have to say that again.”) makes the antecedent of “that” in this line all the more troublesome to determine. In fact, it is difficult to know if the pronouns “that” and “it” maintain their antecedents at all.

The topic that the man chafes at (“You don’t have to say that again.”) is that “we’re made up of all sorts of things” or that he has known that “we’re made up of all sorts of things.” Both possibilities are refutations of homosexuality as “perversion.” This line, then, serves as an explanation of the girl’s homosexuality, her relationship with the other woman, and the man’s homosexuality. The negative rendering of homosexuality has been dissolved. Correspondingly, the pronouns “that” and “it” can connect to several antecedents. The sense of this line is not conspicuous nor absolute: this is the linguistic refutation of the heterosexual language’s prioritizing of sense, which is sign-signified correspondence. As a multiplicity of sexualities are offered in response to heterosexuality as the only sexuality, a multiplicity of antecedents is offered for these pronouns.

“All right,” he said. “All right.”

- i. The girl has won the conversation. She has convinced the man. From this precipice, the rest of the story unfurls. The man concedes to the girl’s desires to leave him, and he embarks upon a reconceptualization of his ideology. He has been detached from the heterosexual ideology by this quote’s saying, at which point his sea change commences (“strange” and “different” invade the story).

Strangeness and Difference in the Story’s Final Act

20 As discussed at length above, the man relies upon the heterosexual ideology. His efforts to dissuade the girl of her homosexual relationship can be figured as sustentions of a normative ideology. Not only is the man at personal risk from the girl’s homosexual relationship, but the

heterosexual ideology is at risk of destabilization: the success of the girl's relationship limns the applicability, intelligibility, and, therefore, claim to normativity that the heterosexual ideology presumes.

21 Hardly can it be said that the girl is a minor or simple character in this story. However, given that the final scene of the story does not include the girl, the story's central character is the man (in true Hemingway fashion). The girl is, I would argue, well committed to her relationship with the other woman. Though she does behave far more kindly and politely to the man than he to her, which perhaps takes the mask of ambivalence regarding her sexual choices, her sexuality and her recognition of her sexuality are never dubious. The titular "sea change" refers to her not at all or only in that she has metamorphosed prior to this story.

22 The man is, however, the journeyer in this story. We witness his sea change in which he moves from the heterosexual ideology to a sexually non-normative ideology. This movement is variously figured through a matrix of binary crossings, each iteration of which carries particular resonances. They are:

Out of place	In place
Periphery	Center
Foreign	Domestic
Uncomfortable	Comfortable
Uncanny	Canny ³
Strange	Norm
Difference	Norm

When we first happen upon the couple, we are told that they looked "out of place." Their skin, recently tanned, suggests a vacation. They are marked as different, and their difference is reticulated with foreignness. Though they have recouped centrality in the form of metropolitan Paris, they bear the mark of the periphery. They are indeed "out of place." They are, however, residents of Paris, given that James the barman "knew these two" – a counter suggesting that they

³ I highly recommend Rubóczki regarding the uncanny: her approach to the man's sea change is considerably parallel to mine, though from a psychoanalytic perspective, in that she finds the reification of normative binaries inapplicable to the story. Rather, she finds the man's ultimate conception of non-normative sexuality more naturally aligned with the uncanny which can contain the man's heterosexuality whilst successfully admitting his voyeurism and the girl's homosexuality.

are in place. There is a paradoxical convergence of foreignness/domesticity, periphery/centrality, and out of place/in place.

23 In Conversation 2, the man, speaking from the heterosexual ideology, attempts to locate and stabilize the girl's homosexuality in the words "vice" and "perversion" - attempts to put her homosexuality in place, so to speak. However, the words "vice" and "perversion" locate homosexuality past the borders of the normative ideology. They locate it as foreign and peripheral. This firm binary of in/out commits its user to identify himself and the objects of his perception categorically as one or the other. That is, each person and each object is identified as in/out with certainty, the same certainty that the man purposed in his attempts to name the girl's homosexuality.

24 The girl's coup de grâce in which the man submits to her ("Because that explains it to you"), reflected in the resistance to naming and the indeterminacy of the pronoun's antecedents, initiates the man's distancing from the heterosexual ideology and his acceptance of a sexually non-normative ideology. The trajectory is heralded with the words "strange" and "difference." "Strange" naturally recalls, as so many commentators have noted, Ariel's song in *The Tempest* from which the term "sea-change" comes. Remarking upon Alonso's status, Ariel sings to Ferdinand, "Full five fathoms thy father lies/... Nothing of him that doth fade/ But doth suffer a sea-change/ Into something rich and strange" (1.2.400-405). The pairing of "rich" and "strange" positively posit Alonso's metamorphosis. "Strange" here may be regarded fondly as a kind of positive exoticism – a crossing of the final boundary one might say. We should note the history of the word however: the OED records "strange" as deriving from the Latin *extrāneus*, meaning "external, foreign."

25 However, "strange" in *The Tempest* is used in ways which reflect the play's preoccupations with the transgression and complication of border rather than the preservation of border. The island of *The Tempest* is, of course, on the periphery, or perhaps even without orientable place. The colonial reflections within the play suggest a dissemination of power emanating from a centered nation; that, though, is complicated by the political displacement that Prospero has suffered in that he no longer carries the titles or enforceability of his home nation. Magic and mundanity compete and complement. The island is a place of political and historical opportunity and freedom, reflected in Gonzalo's utopic Golden Age proposals (2.1.142-164), despite the inherently forbidding presence of beings indigenous (and therefore with claim) to the island. It is a place in which

dynasties simultaneously are rescued (Prospero to Miranda) and alchemized (Miranda and Ferdinand). Too, in the first use of “strange” in the play, Prospero, in describing his art, recollects, “In dignity, and for the liberal arts/ Without a parallel; those being all my study,/ The government I cast upon my brother/ And to my state grew stranger, being transported/ And rapt in secret studies” (1.2.73-77). While at home in Milan, he is “transported” out of place, made strange. Yet while on the island, with which his strange state is most apposite, he is politically, culturally, and spatially displaced.

26 The same strangeness, the same complication of border, attends the man in Hemingway’s “The Sea Change.” Strangeness intrudes upon the man in its first use: “his voice sounded strange to him.” Notably, the man recognizes the strangeness, yet the strangeness of his voice evidently surprises him. Its presence arrives upon the heels of the man urging the girl to leave. Some commentators have regarded the man’s urging the girl to “go on” contextualized by his desire for the girl – to “tell [him] all about” her affair with the other woman when she comes back to him (Hemingway 309).⁴ Others regard the man as detaching from heterosexuality and embarking upon homosexuality.⁵ In either interpretation, save for Rubóczki’s, the man “embraces,” to use Pope’s word, vice. The man’s sea change is, to them, an acceptance not of a sexually non-normative ideology but of a non-normative sexuality characterized by vice, which continues to sustain the ugly connotations that the man had levied against the girl in Conversation 2.

27 I balk at the interpretation in which the man suddenly capitalizes upon his voyeuristic opportunity. These critics have regarded the man’s desire to “tell [him] all about it” as a kind of epiphany in which the man could benefit from the girl’s affair. However, the girl has already offered the man a voyeuristic window to her affair at the beginning of the story: “‘It doesn’t do any good to say I’m sorry’ [she said]. ‘No.’ ‘Nor to tell you how it is?’ ‘I’d rather not hear’” (Hemingway 306). His early resistance to voyeurism suggests that the girl’s departure from the relationship and physical departure from the man signify another problem, and that his later desire to be told of the girl’s relationship is superficial. Specifically, the man responds to the girl’s question “‘You want me to go?’” with “‘Yes,’ he said seriously. ‘Right away.’... ‘Now,’ he said” (Hemingway 309). The immediacy with which the man wishes the girl’s departure does not align

⁴ See: Tylers and Rubóczki.

⁵ See: Kobler; Comley and Scholes; and Bennet.

with any sudden realization of voyeuristic titillation: there would be no necessity for immediacy, for the voyeuristic payout would inherently be delayed.

28 I baulk as well at critics' claims that the man has embraced a vice characterized as he conceived of it when condemning the girl's homosexuality. As discussed, strangeness is central to *The Tempest*, and the in/out binary is seriously complicated. The same complexity and boundary crossing are what the man embraces. The ideology from which he distances himself is the heterosexual ideology, which demands certainty and the preservation of border. Should he embrace non-normative sexuality contextualized as vice he is transported to the non-normative pole, but the essential fixity of the binary and its border are preserved.

29 The only vocalization of "strange" occurs in the following dialogue between the man and James the barman:

"I'm a different man, James," he said to the barman. "You see in me quite a different man."

"Yes, sir?" said James.

"Vice," said the brown young man, "is a very strange thing."

...

"You're right there, sir," James said. (Hemingway 309)

"Strange," bearing the allusive significance of *The Tempest's* treatment of border, is paired with "vice," thereby complicating the strict in/out, center/periphery, domestic/foreign, normative/non-normative (which the man specifically attached to "vice") binaries. If we regard the latter lines of Pope's "An Essay on Man," from which the man derives "vice," we witness a similar complication of border:

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:
Ask where's the North? at York, 'tis on the Tweed;
In Scotland, at the Orcades; and there,
At Greenland, Zembla, or the Lord knows where:
No creature owns it in the first degree,

But thinks his neighbour farther gone than he.
Ev'n those who dwell beneath its very zone,
Or never feel the rage, or never own;
What happier natures shrink at with affright,
The hard inhabitant contends is right.

Pope, perhaps ironically, attempts to geographically locate the border of vice to give it firm boundary, yet “th’extreme of vice... was ne’er agreed.” He only succeeds in relativizing “vice,” which in turn subverts the certitude with which the first four lines treat “vice.” The certitude of one’s rightness is similarly challenged in the final lines: those who are most liable to vice are those most close to it. The complication of border pervading *The Tempest* is echoed in Pope’s poem. That is, the in/out, center/periphery, domestic/foreign, normative/non-normative binaries do not have clear delineation: “vice” becomes relativized, unsteady certitude.

30 Critics have nearly unilaterally quoted the first four lines of Pope’s poem. They track the man’s narrative trajectory from endurance, to pity, to embrace. It is no wonder that they regard the final movement of the story as an embrace of vice, with vice maintaining its earlier negative connotations. Yet, in ignoring the latter lines of the poem, they have foregone the relativistic figurations so crucial to understanding the man’s trajectory in “The Sea Change.” The man acknowledges the relativity of “vice” and echoes Pope’s latter lines in the quote, “Vice is a very strange thing.” There is a temptation to read this line as the man yet subscribing to a firm in/out binary in that “strange” can refer to foreignness, which implicitly substantiates the domestic/foreign binary. Further, one might interpret the man’s quote, especially given that the line is interjected by an emphasis on the man’s foreignness (“said the brown young man”), as sustaining the certitude of the binary, yet depositing the man on the “out” pole of it. This interpretation would presumably support critics with the view that the man embraces vice, a euphemism for homosexuality.

31 However, the line following, “You’re right there, sir,” paradoxically endorses and subverts the firmness of the binary. The line can be read bivalently: either James agrees with the man’s statement (endorsing the foreign/domestic and, therefore, in/out binary), which would confine the man to the “out” pole, or James indicates the man’s seat, putting him “in place” and giving him centrality. Bordering “You’re right there, sir,” there are two sentences in which the patrons at the bar move to “make room” for the man so that the man “would be quite comfortable.” The bar has

been established prior as the place of comfort: immediately following the man's utterance of "perversion" in Conversation 2, the narration cuts to a scene at the bar between the patrons and James. We are told that "The two at the bar looked over at the two at the table, then looked back at the barman again. toward the barman was the comfortable direction." The couple, or the area in the periphery of the bar, is established as uncomfortable, whereas the direction toward the barman is comfortable. The man has spatially journeyed from discomfort to comfort, from periphery to center, and from, as at the story's open, "out of place" to in place.

32 There is a temptation to regard the man's movement to the bar as an embrace of his homosexuality. In the lines in which the barman's direction is established as comfortable, the patrons and the couple are each referred to as "the two." This correspondence may lead one to believe that there is a comparison between these two "couples." One may well take the bar's patrons as a couple standing for homosexuality and the peripheral couple standing for heterosexuality; that they are paired with comfort and discomfort, respectively, may lead one to interpret the man's movement to the bar as a movement away from an uncomfortable heterosexuality toward a comfortable homosexuality. I would caution against such a determinate reading however. The patrons at the bar are suspiciously never given gender in "The Sea Change." The bar cannot be said to be the place of men and therefore male homosexuality. Too, the man and girl depart on good terms. It appears that they will see each other again, at the very least, and likely be romantic with one another. The man maintains heterosexual attraction.

33 Rather, the man's journey, figurative and literal, is not from one sexuality to another, but from one ideology to another, and is accompanied by a recognition of his homosexual attractions and non-normative sexuality. His journey is one of self-reflection, which is simultaneously a renunciation of the heterosexual ideology. Immediately after the man's vocalization of vice's strangeness, and after the narrator has described the man as "brown" and "young," the man sees his reflection and sees that his statement to James – "You see in me quite a different man" – is quite true. Prior to the man's reflection in the mirror and the narrator's description of the man, there are no descriptions of the man individually. There is significant description given to the girl and even to James. The moments in which the man is physically described always are filtered through a description of the man within the couple, and even those are small in number.

34 The emphasis on the man's individual appearance suggests that the man has detached from an identity defined by his relationship with the girl. He ceases to "see" himself in such terms, but

now sees himself independent of his heterosexual relationship. Again, I caution against an interpretation in which the man renounces heterosexual attractions. Rather, I take him to renounce the heterosexual ideology. The binaries listed in the matrix above remain; their borders, however, are porous to the extent that their poles cease to delineate and instead converge.

35 So indeed, there remains the man's "difference." What kind of difference, peculiarly, goes unnamed. "Strange," following its pairing with "vice," ceases to be a descriptor of the man, and so the spatiality of domestic/foreign and center/periphery is dissolved. What is left is "difference," which the man recognizes, but does not evaluate. Rather, it is James who regards the man's look positively: "You look very well, sir... You must have had a very good summer." James recognizes the different look of the man, yet condones the man's difference and provides a place for it ("You're right there, sir"). The man is both in and out.

36 It may be optimistically interpreted that the paradoxical crossings of the binaries' borders in "The Sea Change" are a detachment of the heterosexual ideology from normativity, and that normativity itself is restructured to entail heterosexual and non-heterosexual preferences, the combination of which constitutes a novel non-heterosexual ideology. I would argue that it is this ideology that the man acquires in his final placement at the bar, and in which he embodies and conceives a host of porous binaries. I believe that this ideology enables the man's homosexual attractions but does not demand his enactment of them. Rather, the man has "embraced" the girl's homosexuality and his own non-normative sexuality. The various paradoxes and indeterminacies that attend the story's final act may be taken as the man's response to the heterosexual ideology, a resounding parallel to the girl's own response of senselessness to the language of the heterosexual ideology.

Works Cited

- Bennet, Warren. "Sexual Identity in 'The Sea Change'." *Hemingway's Neglected Short Fiction: New Perspectives*, edited by Susan F. Beegel, UMI Research Press, 1989, pp. 225-245.
- Clark-Wehinger, Alice. "Deviation and In-Betweenness in 'The Sea Change'." *Journal of the Short Story in English*, vol. 49, 2008, pp. 67-82.
- Comley, Nancy R., and Robert Scholes. *Hemingway's Genders: Rereading the Hemingway Text*. Yale University Press, 1994.
- Kobler, J. F. "Hemingway's 'The Sea Change': A Sympathetic View of Homosexuality." *Arizona Quarterly*, vol. 26, 1970, pp. 319-329.
- Hemingway, Ernest. "The Sea Change." *The Collected Stories*, Everyman's Library, 1995 pp. 306-309.
- Nakjavani, Erik. "The Rest is Silence: A Psychoanalytic Study of Hemingway's Theory of Omission and its Adaptation to 'The Sea Change'." *North Dakota Quarterly*, vol. 65, no. 3, 1998, pp. 145-173.
- Pope, Alexander. "An Essay on Man." *The Major Works*, Oxford University Press, 2008 pp. 270-308.
- Rubóczki, Babet. "Queering Perspectives of the Uncanny in Ernest Hemingway's 'Mr. and Mrs. Elliot' and 'The Sea Change'." *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies*, vol. 22, no. 2, 2016 pp. 387-402.
- Tyler, Lisa. "'I'd Rather Not Hear': Women and Men in Conversation in 'Cat in the Rain' and 'The Sea Change'." *Hemingway and Women: Female Critics and the Female Voice*. Edited by Lawrence R. Broer and Gloria Holland, University of Alabama Press, 2002, pp. 70-80.