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Headboards and Heartbreak: A Look Into Hemingway's Complicated Relationship with
Catholicism

The Hemingway house, a two story Spanish colonial mansion located in the heart of Key West, showcases an abundance of artifacts and possessions from the famous author's life. From typewriters to six-toed cats, everything that can be seen around the house appears to possess a fascinating backstory connected to aspects of Ernest Hemingway's life. For example, to venture upstairs and into the master bedroom, one would find two full-size beds strapped together and bound to a large, intricately designed wooden headboard. The carved walnut headboard was once the gate leading to a 17th century Spanish monastery and has been said to either have been gifted to the Hemingways or purchased by Hemingway himself whilst on one of his many tours through Spain (Schnall). Though some may see the headboard as just another piece of decor in the residence, the headboard and its religious connotations have come to reflect the troubled state of his marriage to second wife, Pauline Pfeiffer, and his own personal struggle with religion both in and outside of his works.

As previously mentioned, the headboard hailed from Spain and was on display during the Siglo de Oro, or Golden Age, a period of time in which art and literature flourished in Spain (Palmer). Hemingway would come to enjoy Spain nearly two centuries after Siglo de Oro, spending time parading around the country in the 20's and then later returning to cover the

Spanish Civil war in 1936. During his time in Spain, it has been noted that Hemingway developed a deep appreciation for the Spanish culture. It is nearly impossible to be immersed into this culture without acknowledging the Catholic religion that is so deeply rooted within it. Little, however, is recorded regarding Hemingway's experience with Catholicism in Spain specifically, save for a line or two about some of his favorite haunts, one residing in Toledo where "he would visit the great cathedral with its marvelous collection of El Grecos" (Palmer). Some historians point out that his later years in Spain would not hold any religious significance, as it was around this time in which he and Pfeiffer's marriage was deteriorating. Yet it should be recognized that Hemingway's exploration of Catholicism and religious faith was not solely defined by the boundaries of his relationship with Pfeiffer, but rather his earlier experiences as well.

Hemingway served as an ambulance driver in Italy during World War I. On July 18th, 1918, he was severely wounded by mortar fragments and machine gun rounds and taken to a field hospital. Though the accounts told during Hemingway's earlier times in the service have come to be sensationalized, owing in part to Hemingway's own exaggeration of them, Matthew Nickel's book *Hemingway's Dark Night: Catholic Influences and Intertextualities in the work of Ernest Hemingway* asserted that his Catholic faith may have been more important to him than previously believed. The book goes so far as to claim Hemingway experienced a profound religious conversion following his wound, as Hemingway once recounted that he felt his "soul or something coming right out of my body, like you'd pull a silk handkerchief out of a pocket by one corner. It flew around and then came back and went in again and I wasn't dead anymore." This sentiment, though speculation in its relation to religion, serves as an example of the

complex feelings Hemingway may have had towards the faith, a faith that would be put to the test throughout the course of his marriage to his second wife, Pauline Pfeiffer.

Pfeiffer was raised in Piggott, a small rural town located in Northeastern Arkansas. Given that her mother was a devout Catholic, Pfeiffer was raised in an “intensely religious atmosphere” that introduced to her values she would carry with her throughout her life (McIver 75). After graduating college, Pfeiffer started her career in journalism, working in Cleveland and New York before ending up in Paris, where she met Ernest Hemingway. Though the situation surrounding the beginning of their love affair was complicated, as Hemingway was already married to Pfeiffer’s good friend Hadley Richardson, Pfeiffer allegedly waited to fully begin their relationship as “she regarded extramarital sex as a sin, made even worse by adultery” (McIver 76). Once Richardson and Hemingway divorced in 1927, Pfeiffer and Hemingway were married in Paris with a Catholic ceremony. From here, they relocated to Key West where “in time, he would become what some Key West friends called a good Catholic” (McIver 76). It was Pfeiffer’s dedication to her religious beliefs, and Hemingway’s lack thereof, that set a boundary in their relationship that many speculate was the leading cause to the demise of their marriage. After undergoing two difficult childbirths, Pfeiffer’s doctor advised her to not get pregnant again. Since the Catholic Church bans any form of birth control, Pfeiffer decided she would no longer be having sex. This, in turn, led Hemingway to stray from their marriage and it was around this time where he began to engage in extramarital affairs, most notably with Jane Mason and Martha Gellhorn, the woman who would eventually become his third wife. In comparison to the devout Pfeiffer, Hemingway seems to lack in upholding the religious values he once claimed to possess. He is on record as once stating, “I am not what is called a “good” Catholic... But

cannot imagine taking any other religion seriously” (Hemingway) which highlights the boundaries in which religion is often boxed. The idea that one must be fully committed to the Catholic religion and its values to be considered a “good” Catholic is a dilemma that Hemingway seemed to face in his own life that translated into his works of fiction as well.

It has been noted that Hemingway had a penchant for writing characters in his fiction works that reflected actual people from his personal life, no matter how much he may have denied the comparisons. Inscribed on the back of the first page of his novel *To Have and Have Not* is a small disclaimer that reads: “This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are products of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events or locales or persons living or dead, is entirely coincidental.” With this being said, *To Have and Have Not* still appears to suggest a parallel between the characters Richard and Helen Gordon and the nature of his relationship with Pfeiffer. In the novel, the Gordons engage in a fight that effectively ends their marriage. During this fight, Helen Gordon delivers a monologue that describes the fictional couple’s conflicting views regarding religion. Gordon states,

Love is just another dirty lie. Love is ergoapiol pills to make me come around because you were afraid to have a baby. Love is quinine and quinine and quinine until I’m deaf with it. Love is that dirty aborting horror that you took me to. Love is my insides all messed up. It’s half catheters and half whirling douches. I know about love. Love always hangs up behind the bathroom door. It smells like Lysol. To hell with love. Love is you making me happy and then going off to sleep with your mouth open while I lie awake all

night afraid to say my prayers even because I know I have no right to any more.

(Hemingway 185-86)

Here, Hemingway utilizes metaphor to highlight the problems within the Gordon's marriage. The word "love" is applied to instances that do not reflect love at all, but instead imply something much darker. The phrases "ergoapiol pills" and "aborting horror" reveal Mr. Gordon had pressured Mrs. Gordon into having an abortion, as he claims they weren't ready to financially support a baby. Ultimately, this passage demonstrates how Mrs. Gordon sacrificed her religious beliefs in the name of "love," which consequently provoked her to feel guilty while indulging in practices as simple as praying.

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, Hemingway's novels were not intentionally written to align with actual people or events from his own life; however, due to the biographical information we are provided about his marriage to Pfeiffer, obvious parallels to the novel can be made. Unlike the fictional Mrs. Gordon, Pfeiffer did not bend her religious beliefs to cater toward her husband's wants. Unwilling to use birth control to combat unwanted pregnancy, she refused to have sex. This, in turn, negatively affected the state of her and Hemingway's marriage and they later divorced in 1940. Contrary to Hemingway and Pfeiffer's marriage, the Gordon's marriage falls apart because Mrs. Gordon's religious beliefs had already been disregarded, leaving her feeling unhappy and unfulfilled in their life together. Though the situation presented in *To Have and Have Not* is not identical to the troubles in his own marriage with Pfeiffer, it highlights the role of religion as a divisive power when it comes to relationships, a sentiment that still reads relevant today.

Overall, it can be argued that the sprawling wooden headboard hung over the bed that Hemingway and Pfeiffer once shared serves not only as aesthetically pleasing decor, but as a sort of twisted symbol of the way in which Catholicism may have affected their marriage. The headboard coming to be this symbol of their ruined marriage is ironic, as both instances of marriage, Hemingway and Pfeiffer's and the fictional Richardsons, ended due to conflicting religious beliefs that involved acts that would happen in a bedroom. Even though this artifact sparks speculation about Hemingway's religious tendencies, it is important to remember that no one can ever know the true depth or sincerity to anyone's faith, yet it is still more than likely that Hemingway's own exploration of the Catholic faith never reached its full potential.

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