

ANALYSIS

“Mr. and Mrs. Elliot” (1925)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“...‘Mr. and Mrs. Smith,’ although the title was later changed to ‘Mr. and Mrs. Elliot’ to avoid possible libel action, since it satirized the alleged marital inefficiencies of an American couple, Chard Powers Smith and his wife, for whom Hemingway had conceived a wholly irrational dislike.... Chard Smith...indicates that he and his wife...enjoyed a normal married life rather than the aberrational kind attributed to Mr. and Mrs. Smith in Hemingway’s story.... That Hemingway was a satirist of some skill came as no surprise to his friends. The story about Mr. and Mrs. Smith was one example....the extreme travesty of the relationship between ‘Mr. and Mrs. Elliot,’ who at last settle into an old-maid marriage, all calm and acceptable superficially, all in jagged remnants underneath.”

Carlos Baker

Hemingway: The Writer as Artist
(Princeton 1952,1973) 27, 38, 139

“...Horace Liveright had bowdlerized one story (an amusing but rather nasty piece called ‘Mr. and Mrs. Elliot’)...”

Philip Young

Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration
(Penn State 1952,1966) 29

“He had also written a malicious gossip-story called ‘Mr. and Mrs. Smith’ making fun of the alleged sexual ineptitudes of Mr. and Mrs. Chard Powers Smith.... Smith had belatedly read the story...long after its appearance in both *The Little Review* and *In Our Time*. He wrote to say that Hemingway was a contemptible worm who had failed to bring off a typical cad’s trick of character assassination. Ernest replied from Switzerland that Smith would not have dared to write him such a letter without knowing for sure that he was out of town. On his return to Paris, said he, he would take great pleasure in knocking Smith down a few times, or maybe only once, depending on his talent for getting up. He ended by expressing his hearty contempt for Smith, his past, his present, his future, and his epistolary style.”

Carlos Baker

Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story
(Scribner’s 1969) 133, 181

“It was while he was a guest under their roof that Hemingway became aware of a tension in the Smiths’ relationship that also involved a friend of theirs who was clearly in love with Smith.... A twenty-five-year-old Harvard man of independent means is married to a sickly Southern woman of forty. Following their wedding in Boston, they ‘tried very hard to have a baby.’ They tried on the boat coming over to Europe. They tried in Paris.... A woman friend who is living with them is very fond of the wife.... In order to intensify the Smiths’ discomfiture, as well as to secure his own vision of unhappiness, Hemingway heightened their marital troubles by turning Olive and the other woman into lovers, by widening the age gap between husband and wife and by insinuating that Smith was either sterile or impotent....

That he chose not to call it ‘Mr. and Mrs. Eliot’ did not...have anything to do with mercy, but stemmed rather from his habitual uncertainty about how to spell T. S. Eliot’s name. In his correspondence, he occasionally got the spelling right, but generally he referred to him as ‘Elliot’ or ‘Elliot’.... He resented Eliot because the poet had used his authority to influence the policies of the *transatlantic review* in ways that Hemingway did not approve of...he parodied Eliot’s attachment of footnotes to ‘The Waste Land’.”

Kenneth S. Lynn

Hemingway
(Simon & Schuster 1987) 244, 246

“Written in a satiric vein rarely encountered in previous stories, ‘Mr. and Mrs. Elliot’ is a sometimes savage and often hilarious attack on American mores, marriage, and writers. Hemingway casts his satiric net wide. The first paragraph debunks the (supposedly) aristocratic pretensions of Southern women, for Mrs. Elliot spends her time on the boat being ‘quite sick’ and, in a neat nursery-rhyme, ‘when she was sick she was sick as Southern women are sick.’ As expatriates, she and her husband show no regard or affinity for new cultures. Their desires are mercenary (to say they have studied at the University of Dijon) and culinary (they go to Dijon in part because ‘there is a diner on the train’). Quintessentially ugly tourists, they even snobbishly refuse to sit at the Rotonde café because ‘it is always so full of foreigners.’

Mr. Elliot is shown as sexually immature and artistically impotent. He ‘wrote very long poems very rapidly,’ and if we do not supply the implied ‘and very badly,’ Hemingway’s parody of stuffy, artificial writing in the story gives the game away. ‘He was going to bring it out in Boston and had already sent his check to, and made a contract with, a publisher’ says the narrator stiltedly, showing why Elliot needs to bring his work out by way of a vanity press. And Elliot’s sex life appears equally futile. Having kept himself idealistically pure for his wife, he is ‘disappointed’ on his wedding night and soon gives up trying hard to have a baby. With the arrival of Mrs. Elliot’s girlfriend, the Elliots’ marriage falls apart, Mrs. Elliot and the girlfriend apparently pursuing a lesbian relationship (the ‘now slept together in the big medieval bed’) while Mr. Elliot’s artistic pretensions dissolve into a great deal of (presumably bad) poetry and too much white wine. And ‘they were all quite happy,’ concludes Hemingway in this jaundiced fairy tale of idealized relationships gone astray.

The vignettes that bracket ‘Mr. and Mrs. Elliot,’ chapters 9 and 10, provide an important counterpoint to Hemingway’s sly satire. Appropriate counterparts for Mr. Elliot might be found in the two matadors who are ‘hoted’ by the crowd for their poor performances and the dying, ‘nervously wobbly’ horse of chapter 10. Chapter 9, however, has a particularly complex thematic and structural function. This story of the initiation of a ‘kid’ into manhood...the ‘kid’ who with the last bull ‘couldn’t get the sword in’ prefaces Mr. Elliot’s lugubrious sexual failures.”

Thomas Strychacz
“*In Our Time, Out of Season*”
The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway
(Cambridge U 1996) 75-76

Michael Hollister (2015)