HOKKAIDO UNIVERSITY

Title	Iceberg Closet : Ernest Hemingway's Aesthetic Practice of Sexuality
Author(s)	Senaha, Eijun
Citation	Journal of the Faculty of Humanities and Human Sciences, 20, 1-9
Issue Date	2025-02
DOI	https://doi.org/10.14943/jfhhs.20.1
Doc URL	https://hdl.handle.net/2115/94112
Type	departmental bulletin paper
File Information	03_SENAHA.pdf

Hokkaido University Collection of Scholarly and Academic Papers : HUSCAP

Journal of the Faculty of Humanities and Human Sciences, Hokkaido University
Vol. 20; pp. 1−9, February 2025

Iceberg Closet: Ernest Hemingway's Aesthetic Practice of Sexuality

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Abstract: This essay analyzes Ernest Hemingway's short story "Soldier's Home." It was composed in April, 1924 and was included in *In Our Time*, published by Boni & Liveright in 1925.

The protagonist is a young soldier Harold Krebs. He goes to the war from a college in Kansas and comes back from Germany to his hometown in Oklahoma. No one welcomes his return because they think it is so strange that he comes home so late. He finds out that everything in the town is the same as when he left. His mother is worried about him, because he doesn't want to find a job. His father doesn't show up in the story, and his sister Helen is the only one who admires him. Krebs is not interested in the girls in the town neither, because he thinks they are so complicated. All he wants to do is to play the clarinet, watch girls from distance, and read books about the war. The story ends with a conversation between Krebs and his mother about his future. He thinks that he should go to Kansas City to find a job, after watching his sister Helen play indoor baseball. He only "wanted his life to go smoothly."

This essay reveals that Krebs disguises his own homosexuality. Many critics have attempted to investigate the truth of this work by comparing and examining Hemingway's real experiences and the reality of the war and his hometown, within the theme of lies. However, the biggest lie in this work is that Harold continues to disguise his own sexual orientation. In other words, this work is a story of a gay man skillfully locked in a closet of Hemingway's iceberg theory.

Introduction

Ernest Hemingway's "Soldier's Home," composed in April, 1924, and published in 1925 in *In Our Time*, tells a story of Harold Krebs who disguises his own homosexuality. Many critics have attempted to investigate the truth of this work by comparing and examining Hemingway's real experiences and the reality of the war and his hometown, within the theme of lies. However, the biggest lie in this work is that Harold continues to disguise his own sexual orientation. In other words, this work is a story of a gay man locked in a closet.

The protagonist is a young soldier Harold Krebs. He goes to the war from a college in Kansas and comes back from Germany to his hometown in Oklahoma. No one welcomes his return because they think it is so strange that he comes home so late. He finds out that everything in the town is the same as when he left. His mother is worried about him, because he doesn't want to find a job. His father doesn't show up in

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10.14943/jfhhs.20.1

the story, and his sister Helen is the only one who admires him. Krebs is not interested in the girls in the town neither, because he thinks they are so complicated. All he wants to do is to play the clarinet, watch girls from distance, and read books about the war. The story ends with a conversation between Krebs and his mother about his future. He thinks that he is going to Kansas City to find a job, after watching his sister Helen play indoor baseball.

Harold has devoted his life to concealing his own sexual identity. His education, the war, and his hometown all transform the outside world into a place of camouflage for himself to hide in the closet. Thus, like the sexual minorities of the time, Harold leaves his hometown for the city. It's as if he realized that keeping his sexual orientation hidden, both in and out of the closet, was too complicated.

This paper elucidates the self-deprecatingly disguised Harold in terms of queer theory. It will argue the existence of a clear basis for the sexual orientation of the protagonist. In a world premised on heteronormativity, homosexuality is extremely ambiguous and can be overlooked.[1] While many readers are inclined to heterosexual "sign," this paper carefully unearths homosexual "sign" in the light of early twentieth-century sexuality culture. Thereupon, the underground world comes into view similar to the way seven-eighths of an iceberg lurking under the surface of the water, or the so-called Iceberg theory of Ernest Hemingway.

1. Closeting Harold Krebs

Hemingway's homophobia is well known. This may be true, but he was more fascinated by the practice of describing homosexuals. He praised "Soldier's Home" as "the best story I ever wrote."[2] One of the reasons for it is for sure that Harold's homosexuality is concealed by the author in his practice of Iceberg Theory, disguised as if it were a heterosexual story.

A close reading of the main plot of "The Soldier's Home" reveals Harold in and out of the closet. The first is the two photographs introduced at the beginning of the work:

> Krebs went to the war from a Methodist college in Kansas. There is a picture which shows him among his fraternity brothers, all of them wearing exactly the same height and style collar. …
>
> There is a picture that shows him on the Rhine with two German girls and another corporal. Krebs and the corporal look too big for their uniforms. The German girls are not beautiful. The Rhine does not show in the picture. (111)

Many critics have focused on "Methodist college," discussing the emergence of many religious colleges and universities since the nineteenth century, as well as the religious background of the Hemingway family, and nostalgically interpreting the educational background of the ubiquitous protagonist (Smith 68-74). In other words, the idea is that Harold was a serious and devout Christian until he went to war, but the war changed him. Harold's depravity was to be proved in the second paragraph by a photograph of another corporal and two German women, taken without showing the scenic Rhine River in the background.

These two contrasting, contradictory and inexplicable photographs have been taken as proof of Harold's metamorphosis in his earnestness. However, reading it on the premise of being homosexual, we can see that it is portrayed as a coherent landscape. The key to the first picture is the culture of fraternity. The "fraternity" was born in the nineteenth century as a club where women were forbidden to strengthen the bond between men and prospered in the 1890s and 1920s:

> Fraternity expanded dramatically from the 1890s to the 1920s. College students were not alone in

> this rush to fraternalism, as hundreds of thousands of American men, anxious about the perceived female influence in American culture and experiencing what some historians have termed "crisis of masculinity," joined all types of societies. ⋯ For white males, fraternity membership increasingly became a way to identify American manhood with whiteness and Protestantism. ⋯ Fraternity men identified themselves as "Greeks," associating their manliness with a cultural and civilized historical past and berating their nonfraternity classmates as less manly 'barbarians.' (Carroll, 178-79)

Fraternity's mission is to create American masculinity. In the 1920s, 11.74% of male students joined a fraternity, which had a significant impact on their post-graduation employment and networking (Syrett 207). For Harold, entering the fraternity was an act of mainstreaming himself in a heterosexual world.

However, this fraternity was also a secret society of those with a homosexual orientation. This is because the coexistence of the fraternity and homosexuality had already been noted in the early twentieth century (Syrett 207). Among other things, there was a rumor going around at the University of Kansas that the two fraternities had become a homosexual heaven (Syrett 268-69). It is unclear which "college in Kansas" Harold studied at, but Hemingway must have known that the homosexual culture was growing in the Midwest through his press experience at *The Kansas City Star*. The Krebs family of Oklahoma, therefore, subscribed to the paper, and Harold was sent to college in Kansas. It's hardly a coincidence. In any case, Harold's act of joining the fraternity is ambivalent. For instance, he disguised himself as a heterosexual and publicly participated in the construction of a legitimate career; for another, he was building a secret solidarity in the homosexual community. In and out of the closet, Harold was able to do both.

Harold chooses the same strategy as a Marine. The second photograph, which was taken in wartime Germany, also shows Harold's sexual orientation in both ways. It appears to be a heterosexual world, as two pairs of men and women are pictured together. However, it is unclear whether the four were really two heterosexual couples. It is unnatural for Hemingway to emphasize that the woman is not "beautiful" and the Rhine River, a tourist attraction, is not shown in the picture. In addition to the many critics' theories that the German women were prostitutes, a theory emerges that the "another corporal" was Harold's partner. Harold, playing a heterosexual, probably left a memorial photo of his cherished memories with the other corporal. The fact that they both had the same body type suggests that they shared clothing, food, and shelter as soldiers and as lovers. Even during the war, Harold was able to accentuate his sexual orientation. In fact, after that, Harold confessed, "On the whole, he had liked Germany better. He did not want to leave Germany." (113): Germany was a special place where the Weimar culture, which was open to homosexuality, flourished (Gordon 1-18, Mosse 23-47).

When Harold returns home, a crisis looms over him. Firstly, he had to lie to the people of the town about the war. Having come home late, and surrounded by many lies already told by other soldiers, forces Harold to paint himself with lies that exaggerate the truth.

It is generally said that many sexual minorities who do not come out suffer an unlucky life by deceiving themselves in the heterosexual world. As a soldier, Harold is forced to lie further and falls into self-loathing. However, in the dressing room of the dance party, the original appearance of the gay Harold can be seen. It is the existence of a man that Harold occasionally met:

> Krebs acquired the nausea in regard to experience that is the result of untruth or exaggeration, and when he occasionally met another man who had really been a soldier and they talked a few minutes in the dressing room at a dance he fell into the easy pose of the old soldier among other

soldiers: ⋯ (112).

Harold's "easy pose" has the aspect of a biographical criticism which can be reminiscent of the war wound on Hemingway's own leg. However, if focusing on the text from a queer perspective, it is also important to note that Harold repeatedly meets with "another man who was a real soldier," as well as "another corporal" in the second photo, in the limited space of the changing room, to gain a sense of solidarity. Harold's restful place is born in a man-only world called a dressing room.

Harold positively accepts that the only things that changed in the city were the girls who have grown up. Therefore, he performatively uses "liked" excessively to the extent that he was overly conscious, and a heterosexual gaze is directed at women. However, because of the fact that "They were too complicated." (112), he avoids contact with women. Thus, the moment he sees them at the Greek Ice Cream Parlor, the tolerance is gone. For Harold, who belonged to Fraternity, or Greek, when he was in college, Greek has been a sanctuary, and even if it's an ice cream parlor, a woman cannot invade a place named Greek. For Harold, Greek is an important man's garden. Next time he repeats he "didn't want" it and spits out his true feelings that heterosexual courtship is a sham and it is worthless:

> ... He did not want to have to do any courting. He did not want to tell any more lies. It wasn't worth it.
>
> He did not want any consequences. He did not want any consequences ever again. He wanted to live along without consequences. Besides he did not really need a girl. The army had taught him that. It was all right to pose as though you had to have a girl. Nearly everybody did that. But it wasn't true. You did not need a girl. ⋯ (113).

At the foundation of Harold's consciousness is the avoidance of women as homosexuals. This is evident in his attempt to return to heterosexuality by repeating "liked" again, but immediately declaring that women are not needed as insulation. Moreover, shortly afterward, he notices the contradiction and ludicrousness of homosexuals behaving like heterosexuals and mocks himself with "That was the funny thing" (113). In the following paragraphs, however, abruptly, "lie" is used abundantly and he repeats the self-examination about the necessity of women, in order to admonish himself. Lastly, "That was all lie. ... It was all a lie both ways" (113), and it becomes clear that the world and one's self are both imaginary. Eventually, Harold realizes that "You didn't need a girl unless you thought about them." (113), in other words, "he needed a girl when he profoundly thought about it," and as if succumbing to the history of heterosexual norms, "Then sooner or later you always got one" (113) and self-deprecatingly accepts his own life as a heterosexual. Harold's ambivalent stream of consciousness prompts him to be prepared to live a life of disguised heterosexuality, both in the military and at home.

For Harold, the greatest difficulty is his mother. It is unclear whether his mother is aware of Harold's homosexual orientation, but she is clearly unsettled by his current situation and convinces him to pursue happiness within the heterosexual norm. The father does not appear within the text. We can see the typical composition of a homosexual family: a mother who is upset because she does not understand, and a father who cuts off contact without trying to understand.

One of the clearest examples of this is the American automobile culture. In the 1920s, the car was an essential part of dating among young people. The automobile created a private space and was diverted not only as a means of transportation for dating but also as a place for car sex (D'Emilio and Freedman 240). Therefore, in rural areas, it was very difficult to get a partner without a car (D'Emilio and Freedman 259). Withal, fortunately, his father did not allow Harold to drive a car before he left, keeping him away from

what he probably thought the obscene automotive youth culture that encouraged this heterosexuality. One morning after returning home, however, the "misunderstanding and upset mother" tries to save her son by borrowing his father's words: He said he had permission to use it at night. The father, who runs a real estate business that cares about the reputation of the community and has conservative values, has allegedly told his mother that he will now tolerate it. Of course, it is unclear whether that is the case or not, and Harold doubts his mother by saying "I'll bet you made him" (114).

Hemingway describes Harold, who holds his heart tightly closed due to his sexuality, in a hard-boiled manner as "Krebs looked at the bacon fat hardening on his plate" (115), by alluding his mother, like the bacon fat on his plate, whose greasiness sticks to his mind. The mother expects her son to follow the guideline of the heterosexual norm: birth, marriage, childbirth, and longevity; she hopes that he will get a female lover, get married, find a job, and become a typical man.

> "Your father is worried, too," his mother went on. "He thinks you have lost your ambition, that you haven't got a definite aim in life. Charley Simmons, who is just your age, has a good job and is going to be married. The boys are all settling down; they're all determined to get somewhere; you can see that boys like Charley Simmons are on their way to being really a credit to the community." Krebs said nothing. (115)

She does not give up and next beseech through motherhood, "Don't you love your mother, dear boy?" (116). Harold, on the other hand, cannot accept the heterosexism his mother desires and rejects it with "I don't love anybody" (116). Indubitably, Harold, knowing that his real feeling would not reach his mother, tries to make it up by saying "I was just angry at something" (116), but his mother breaks down in tears. Eventually, Harold pretends to compromise with his mother by saying another lie, "I'll try and be a good boy for you" (116).

As a last resort, the mother seeks salvation in religion. Once again, Harold rejects it, due to the fact that Christianity is the religion on which heterosexual norms are based. Even though he studied at a Methodist college, Harold refuses to pray himself and lets his mother pray for him. He kisses his mother in gratitude, but this is clearly an act of deception. Harold finally decides to leave the house.

The story concludes with Harold heading to Kansas City. In the early part of the twentieth century, gays and lesbians began to flock to American metropolitan cities in search of freedom (D'Emilio and Freedman 228, 290-91). Chicago, which is very close to Hemingway's hometown of Oak Park, and St. Louis, Missouri, were already reputed for their homosexual communities. Thence, later in the 1940s, gay bars opened in Kansas City, which became recognized as a sacred place for homosexuals (D'Emilio and Freedman 291). It is easy to imagine that Kansas City, which was a major Midwestern metropolis around 1920, at the time of the work's background and writing, was developing into a gay city. His hometown Oklahoma was a place where Harold kept his sexual orientation in the closet. In contrast, Kansas City was the closest yearning destination for him to behave like himself.

2. Outing Harold Krebs

In addition to the main plot, "Soldier's Home" incorporates scenes that seem inexplicable and unnecessary by heterosexual norms and biographical criticism. These are anecdotes that candidly illustrate the protagonist's homosexual orientation and are essential to know him. As a result, inside the closet called the iceberg created by Hemingway, the real image of Harold in isolation can be observed.

The first is a “clarinet”. Hemingway suddenly inserts the sentence “In the evening he practiced on his clarinet” (112). Focusing on Hemingway’s family tradition of music, there is biographical evidence that his mother aspired to be a musician, his sister Marcelline went to Oberlin College, his father’s alma mater, and his sister Sunny played the harp in the Memphis Symphony Orchestra, Hemingway himself was a member of the glee club in high school and played the cello in the orchestra at the same time (Tyler 136-43). Harold’s interest in musical instruments may have been a natural choice for Hemingway. Why, then, did he choose the clarinet rather than the singing or playing the cello?

Since the shape of the clarinet invokes the image of male genitalia, a Freudian interpretation that Harold is dreaming of oral sex in the evening might be possible, albeit imperceptive. Even more interesting and compelling is an article published in the homosexual advocacy magazine, *The Advocate* (Mubarak n. p.). According to the report, Mark Stoner, who works for an advertising company, discovered a correlation between clarinets and gays as the result of “unscientific research which he has been doing on his own for 20 years.” According to him, “three out of four boys who played the clarinet in early childhood turned out to be gay.” He concludes that, usually, “boys want to play the trumpet, but dainty boys tend to choose the clarinet, and that’s what makes us gay.” Is Harold one of them? Was the clarinet an unconscious coming-out instrument for gays? Why did Hemingway make Harold play the clarinet? At the very least, Harold’s sexual orientation is more persuasive than Hemingway’s family tradition. The clarinet is likely a tool that reveals his homosexuality.

Another scene is a conversation between Harold and his sister Helen. If you read the following, it is possible to read them as if they were lovers, even though they are actual siblings:

> “Couldn’t your brother really be your beau just because he’s your brother?”
> “I don’t know.”
> “Sure you know. Couldn’t you be my beau, Hare, if I was old enough and if you wanted to?”
> “Sure. You’re my girl now.”
> “Am I really your girl?”
> “Sure” (114).

For the two sisters, Harold is written as a hero. Especially for Helen, Harold is so special that it is enough to affect one’s own future, and their relationship is full of mystery. It’s impossible to interpret it as a pure expression of affection from a naive sister. Furthermore, it’s not just incest that this conversation begets.

The first key to solving the mystery is Helen’s self-identification and sexual orientation. Helen, who has been assigned as a pitcher for indoor baseball, looks down on the girls on her team, thinks of them as inferior, and brags that she is better than most of the boys. Unsatisfied with indoor baseball, which is reminiscent of a closet, Helen has more physical prowess than males, and she doesn’t resemble a typical heterosexually oriented woman on the inside either. In other words, Helen may be a female to male transgender person (FtM), who is biologically female but has a male gender identity. Moreover, the fact that Helen claims to want to be her brother’s lover means that Helen’s sexual orientation is gay. More clearly, Helen transcends not only incest but also existing sexual norms in her sexual identity and sexual orientation. In contrast to Harold’s search for peace in the closet, Helen excitedly persuades her brother. From the way Harold accepts his sister’s desire to soother her with “my girl,” it suggests that the two of them have forged a tacit understanding regarding each other’s sexuality and a bond as two closeted people. The siblings are more sympathetic supporters to each other than their parents.

A second, more valid key to solving the mystery of the sibling’s relationship is the source. It seems

that Hemingway did not simply conceive this scene, but based it on his mentor Gertrude Stein's work "Miss Furr and Miss Skeene," who was already a well-known lesbian at the time. This short story, which was published within the July issue of *Vanity Fair* in 1923, is a lesbian tale about the free-spirited life of the married Miss Helen Furr and her mistress, Miss Skeene (Behling 127-29). This short story makes full use of Stein's repetitive expression technique known as "stylistics" (Leick 86-87). The word "gay," which was an underground term at the time, is often used, and the two of them talk relentlessly about their excessive training of "beautiful voices."[3]

More importantly, however, a short parody of "Miss Furr and Miss Skene" was published in the same *Vanity Fair* in the October 1923 issue, six months before "The Soldier's Home" was written. In the short advertisement parody, titled "When Helen Furr Got Gay with Harold Moose," Helen Furr marries brooding Harold Moose. But because she's too gay, Harold hits her over the head three times with his walking stick one day and declares that he does "'already feel a little more gay.' But to be '*extraordinarily* gay,' he subscribes to the 'gayest magazine in the world,' which by this time readers have guessed is *Vanity Fair*" (Behling 37) in a violent end to the story. This short advertisement story, written by an anonymous person named K.D., was said to be aimed at "gaining heterosexual readers by allowing husbands to punish lesbian wives" (DuPlessis 21). The theme is an inversion of Stein's "Miss Furr and Miss Skeene." However, K.D. 's work not only tells the story of Helen, an openly lesbian woman who professes her sexual orientation, but also the story of Harold, who has been hiding in the closet, suppressing his own homosexual orientation, finally coming to terms with his sexual orientation. Harold confesses to being gay. After all, it is the story of open homosexuals who are re-reversed, as in, both the husband Harold and the wife Helen of the Moose family admit to being homosexuals.

The "indoor" relationship between Helen and Harold is profoundly meaningful. The story of the two reflects the dilemma between the openness and secrecy within the homosexual culture in the early twentieth century. As stated in "He had tried so to keep his life from being complicated." (116), Harold manages to hide himself in a closet in his complicated hometown, but eventually gives up on staying there and decides to leave on his own. After going to an indoor baseball game to pay respect to his sister Helen, whom he calls a compatriot, he decides to travel alone to Kansas City in search of a smooth, uncomplicated life, and freedom in the metropolis.

Hemingway might have been inspired by "When Helen Furr Got Gay With Harold Moose," a parody of "Miss Furr and Miss Skeene," to write "Soldier's Home." It is evidenced by his usage of the names, Harold and Helen, the same as the parody version. Hemingway may have been deriding not only Harold and Helen but also Stein, a homosexual, by transcribing "friendship marriages," which can disguise as heterosexual marriages between homosexuals, into incest.

Conclusion

"Soldier's Home" is a work depicting homosexuality. A close examination of the characters' behavior and lines from the perspective of queer theory reveals that the main plot and scenes are synergistically intertwined and consistently describe homosexuality. Harold journeys in and out of the closet and self-deprecatingly disguises his homosexuality.

Homophobic writer Hemingway never admitted that Harold was gay all his life. In a world of his own creation, Hemingway depicts the figure of Harold, who wanders repetitively and is isolated both in the

heterosexual and the homosexual world, destined to vanish. In other words, he regularly made full use of the "iceberg theory" and did not allow Harold to come out and be free. It is probably due to this reason why he praised himself as "the best story."

Hemingway uses the subject of homosexuality, in the "Soldier's Home," to trap the protagonist, Harold, in a cold iceberg. On the other hand, this paper produces an outing critique that crushes the iceberg and visualizes the real image of Harold. There are other works, to say the least, within *IOT* which await a queer interpretation. In order to rescue other characters from closets buried in icebergs, further research is much expected.

Notes

* This paper is a revised English version of a Japanese article published as, in translation, "Harold in Disguise: Closet in Iceberg," pp.93-104, *The Hemingway Review of Japan* 21 (June, 2020).

1 In 2011, Debra A. Moddelmog, the author of *Reading Desire: In Pursuit of Ernest Hemingway*, 1999, in personal correspondence with the author, explained the difficulty of persuading readers to read homosexuality by referring to Eve Sedgwick.

> Eve Sedgwick has pointed out that there are many ways in which the homoerotic or homosexual component of a text can be downplayed or even ignored because we demand so much evidence of that type of desire, much more than we would demand if we were looking for signs of heterosexuality. (n.p.)

The solution, she says, is to scrutinize the work in a socio-historical context. The same is true regarding the "Soldier's Home". "One of the things we can do is to carefully consider the historical and social context in which the story is set. This is what I try to do in my book, where I note that Hemingway lived during a time when words like 'homosexual' and 'heterosexual' were coming into existence through the work of the sexologists who constructed a 'homosexual' identity that carried with it suggestions of abnormality or pathology (at worst) and aberration or anomaly (at best). With the introduction of such an identity, relations that had once been viewed as homosocial now began to be viewed with suspicion, and men had to adjust their behavior when in the company of other men in order not to be 'read' as homosexual. So interesting readings can be done that tease out the new meanings of the line between homosexual and homosocial that arose in the early twentieth century." (Moddelmog)

2 For a critical history of Hemingway's "Soldier's Home," see Rena Sanderson 15, Carlos Baker 139, and James R. Mellow 168, and for homophobia, see Una W. Fahy 60-61, 318.

3 From this source alone, rather than "Soldier's Home," "Mr. and Mrs. Elliot," 1924, comes to mind. On the grounds that, in addition to Mrs. Furr being married to Mr. Furr; not only Mrs. Furr's situation bears a striking resemblance to the story of Cornelia Elliot's same-sex partner who enters the Elliots' newlywed life, but also the two utter "many a good cry". Hemingway seems to have written a lesbian story called "Mr. and Mrs. Elliot" inspired by Stein's work.

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