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HEMINGWAY AND THE SHAPING INFLUENCE OF HIS OAK PARK HOMES

Abstract

Taking their cue from Ernest Hemingway, who avoided writing about his childhood years growing up in Oak Park, Illinois, critics and scholars have focused mostly on the importance of the summers that the Hemingway family spent together at Walloon Lake “Up in Michigan.” However, there are interesting insights to be gained from even a brief study of the architectural spaces that defined the two Oak Park houses in which young Ernest was reared – spaces that helped to shape the author’s sense of self in relation to interior space and in relation to family dynamics. Such early spatial influences would surface later in Hemingway’s fictions and also in his habitual choices of future dwellings.

“Most American writers at some point in their careers use their hometown in their fiction,” wrote Michael Reynolds, citing Eugene O’Neill, William Faulkner, Sherwood Anderson, Mark Twain, Henry James, Thornton

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Wilder, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Sinclair Lewis as prime examples (qtd. in Nagel 33). Given how common it is for writers to draw upon childhood memories, it's all the more remarkable that Hemingway never, as James Nagel summarized, "wrote a story specifically set in Oak Park, never used the details of his youth to portray the life he had known, never represented his childhood friends and his neighborhood in his early work" (14) – though at least two character names, Macomber and Krebs, are derived from the Oak Park social register.¹

One assumption on the part of many critics is that Hemingway wanted nothing to do with Oak Park—whose residents, brother Leicester recalled, proudly referred to it as "the place where the saloons end and the churches begin" (21) and whose newspaper ripped his fiction (Reynolds, *The Paris Years* 338) – or with parents whose marital tensions he tried to avoid (Baker 8). But in 1918 Hemingway wrote his father from his first job as a cub reporter in Kansas City, "I've got to have a vacation or bust and so on the first of May I am leaving on the Santa Fe for Chicago. If you folks want me to I will be glad to spend a couple of days in O.P. And see you all and all my old pals" (Spanier and Trogdon 119). That doesn't sound like an estranged son, nor does it when Hemingway's alter ego Nick Adams admits, "His original plan had been to go down home and get a job" (*In Our Time* 47). Even after his parents reacted strongly to his writing, Hemingway still maintained a mostly cordial relationship, as the letters prove, and still seemed willing, even glad to visit his hometown. As Reynolds suggests:

Had Hemingway truly hated Oak Park, which was so quick to judge him, the world would have known of it in chapter and verse. When he disliked schoolmates, he wrote their names on a list. When he disliked Harold Loeb, he immortalized him as Robert Cohn in *The Sun Also Rises*. When he disliked Gertrude Stein, he made her fatuous and silly in *A Moveable Feast*. But Hemingway never wrote a word about Oak Park (qtd. in Nagel 33)

¹ The Oak Park newspapers are full of numerous references to prominent citizens named Macomber and Krebs. See, for example, *The Daily Reporter-Argus* (8 April 1906, p. 1; 28 July 1906, p. 3; 20 September 1906, p. 3; 15 August 1906, p. 3) and *Oak Leaves* (17 February 1906, p. 17; 28 April 1906, p. 12). Though my research was limited to the time period in which the house at 600 N. Kenilworth was built, because the families were generational it's likely that for at least a decade or two their names would have continued to appear in Oak Park newspaper society columns.

It would be a mistake, though, to think that Oak Park was not much of an influence, especially in the matter of domiciles. As Reynolds astutely observes, “Ernest may have left Oak Park in 1919, but he carried a piece of the village with him always. After his years in Paris he bought and maintained homes in Key West and in Cuba, large, lawned, and walled houses with swimming pools, gardens and gardeners, cooks and nannies, homes like those in Oak Park” (qtd. in Nagel 34). Young Hemingway was arguably influenced by not only the architectural spaces of his early domiciles, but by the imposing figures whose presences helped to define those spaces.

Hemingway was born in a Victorian house at 439 North Oak Park Avenue, “in the home of his mother’s father, Ernest Hall, from whom he inherited his first name.” Here, as critic Morris Buske notes, Hemingway “spent his first six years, the most important years of his life in a home of comparative comfort where the arts and literature were much emphasized.” The effect was obvious. Had Ernest been “born across the street, at 444 North Oak Park Avenue, the home of Anson Hemingway, his father’s father, the underlying values of his early years would have been very different” (Buske 210-11). The Ernest Hall house was full of music, with Hall a gentle and tolerant man whose “only vice was tobacco, which he consumed after dinner in the small library behind closed doors” (Baker 2). Anson Hemingway, meanwhile, was “a deeply religious man whose opinion was valued in local political issues” (Reynolds, *The Young Hemingway* 3) – a more serious man who demanded order and restraint in his house.

Environment plays a crucial part in childhood development, but so does the physical aspect of “home.” Victorian homes – like the kind in which Ernest spent his first six years – were compartmentalized, labyrinthine affairs with some rooms removed from traffic patterns and architectural features such as turrets creating additional distinctive interior spaces. The emphasis was on individual rooms, rather than the kind of open-plan flow that is popular in the 2000s. Because of design, it was easy to find solitude in a nook or cranny or small room even on the main floor of the house on North Oak Park Avenue, and as the author of *House as a Mirror of Self* explains, “secret settings” are a common and important part of childhood development. “Part of the process of growing up is learning to do without our parents, to move bit by bit away from their nurturance and watchful eyes, and to test ourselves in those parts of the environment that are ‘not home’” (Marcus 21). This includes “creating a secret space (cubby, clubhouse, den,

hideout) which our parents may not ever know about” (Marcus 21), spaces which can range from the simple and mostly imaginative refuges found under a table or quiet corner to more elaborate clubhouses and hideaways established in yards and nearby vacant lots – of which there were many in turn-of-the-century Oak Park. Grace Hall Hemingway described her two-year old son as “a strongly independent child” (L. Hemingway 22) who by age three had his own fishing rod and “went everywhere with a trout creel over his shoulder” (L. Hemingway 22,24), and it’s fair to imagine young Ernest enjoyed a similar freedom in his relatively safe Oak Park neighborhood. No doubt, his love of independence and places “not home” was first nurtured in the old Victorian house in which he was reared. Still under the watchful eye of adults, a crawling or toddling Hemingway likely found his initial “secret” spaces in the rounded area of the first-floor turret near the fireplace and main sitting area, or in the butler’s pantry near the dining room as adults sat around the table, or in the small library just off the dining room behind the swung-open door that was closed only when a phone call was being made or when Ernest Hall and Uncle Tyley Hancock were smoking. Even today, the faithful recreation of that small, cozy room – with its large paintings and shelves full of books, specimens, and taxidermy mounts – feels private and semi-secretive to adult visitors to the Hemingway Birthplace Home. At the turn of the century and to a very young boy it must have seemed like a wonderland to explore in a house that prominently featured a piano in the living room and paintings and photographs lining the walls. And, of course, early exposure to the arts and nature – something that would continue at the Kenilworth house, where “[a]rt and science contested for mastery” (Baker 8) – would result in lifelong passions for Hemingway.

As John S. Hendrix notes, “Architecture at its best is an expression and reflection of the human psyche, in which cultural identity plays an important role” (Hendrix), and Hemingway’s early exposure to the arts and the natural world was powerful and influential. But also according to Hendrix, “The unconsciousness of the individual, and the collective unconscious of a culture, are known as an absence within a presence, and architecture functions to reveal that absence, to reveal the unconscious of a culture, the zeitgeist of a culture, and thus communicate a cultural identity.” That cultural identity shifted dramatically during Hemingway’s developmental years. Externally, during the first six years of Hemingway’s life, “Oak Park was an island on the Illinois prairie, safe from Chicago.

Cows grazed in vacant lots, dogs ran freely” on dirt streets, horses pulled carriages and buggies, and there was no shortage of Civil War veterans to tell children incredible stories (Reynolds, *Young Hemingway* 8). But Oak Park, like the rest of America, changed rapidly. Between Hemingway’s childhood and adolescence the village went from horse-drawn vehicles to cars, dirt roads to paved, and candles and gas lighting to electricity, with all the additional appliances that the new power source inspired. By the time Ernest was in high school, “commuter trains had opened the Village limits to anyone with a nickel fare, and Oak Park was no longer the isolated and idyllic refuge. As Reynolds reminds, with the advent of commuter trains “Oak Park soon became a lucrative poaching ground for petty thieves, con artists, and occasional derelicts” (*Young Hemingway* 8). Even as early as 1905-06, the Oak Park newspapers weekly printed stories about homes that had been burglarized, as well as the occasional assault – this, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that Oak Park was so wealthy a suburb of Chicago and with such large homes that many residents employed servants.

There were rapid and dramatic changes in the Hemingway house that also would have made young Ernest feel perpetually on the cusp of new adventures – and not only because the family famously trekked to the cabin at Walloon Lake every year except one during the boy’s childhood. The move from the old Victorian was also an adventure – aside from Michigan, the most life-changing one of Ernest’s childhood. When Ernest Hall died and Grace inherited his house, she sold it and used the money to build a dream house that she designed at 600 North Kenilworth. It was a major production, as the children were well aware. “Our house on Kenilworth Avenue was unique in many ways,” Hemingway’s sister “Sunny” recalled. “As an amateur architect, Mother was far ahead of her time, and the new house included many interesting innovations” (Miller 9). Among those innovations were a large plate glass window that preceded picture windows, a “severely modern red brick fireplace stretched square to the ceiling,” a cement-lined fruit cellar, a laundry room with built-in tubs and gas hot plate for melting wax for candles or lead for bullets, a separate workroom with bin for loading firewood, skylights, and a gigantic thirty-by-thirty-foot music room that was engineered for perfect acoustics (Sanford 106). Among the decorative features was a thick door leading to the vestibule with leaded glass incorporating two shields that Grace and Clarence designed together. It featured two clasped hands, a calla lily, and a shining sun, signifying friendship, peace, and happiness. It was more

than a house: it was a creative expression of the Hemingways themselves – Grace, mostly.

Yet, Grace Hall Hemingway wasn't *that* far ahead of her time. More accurately, she embraced the times. According to her children, she was an inveterate reader who was a regular at the public library. Architecture was a popular topic of the day, and Grace's children indicate that she spent countless hours reading magazines and books about architectural trends. Mrs. Hemingway's sketches for the house on Kenilworth were made in late 1905 (Frank Lloyd Wright Trust 26), and all through that year the Nineteenth Century Club – to which Mrs. Hemingway belonged and at whose gatherings she often performed – was preoccupied with architecture, perhaps because Oak Park was “passing through the greatest building period of its existence” (“Oak Park” 5)². Architects regularly advertised in the Oak Park newspapers, and in March 1905 members of the Nineteenth Century Club heard a guest lecture from Chicagoan Helen Snyder Dickenson on “Architecture as an Expression of National Character,” which an anonymous reporter summarized as “a masterly exposition of the manner in which national character manifests itself in all art and especially in its buildings” (“Nineteenth Century Club” 5). The topic was clearly of interest to Mrs. Hemingway, who was serious enough to sketch her dream house from all four sides. What she drew was a building that displayed some of the same Prairie Influences that characterized Frank Lloyd Wright's work (FLW Trust 25), and that's understandable. Grace Hall Hemingway and Frank Lloyd Wright's wife, Kitty, were active and prominent members of the club. Both hosted events in their homes and both had a keen interest in architecture, so it's highly likely that the two talked about Mrs. Hemingway's project and designs, and just as likely that the Japanese influence detected in her drawings of 600 N. Kenilworth Avenue came from the Wrights. The house includes what the Frank Lloyd Wright Trust describes as an “arresting feature” of seven “prominent dormer windows placed around the top story of the house above a roofline” with the “most notable feature of each” being a “pitched roof with short nearly horizontal flanges on both sides at the bottom edge of the roof – giving the appearance of a traditional Japanese roof configuration,” a “distinctive Prairie feature, used a number of times by Frank Lloyd Wright in his Japanese-design-influenced architecture”

² All of the Oak Park newspapers are collected in the Newspaper Archive and are available online through the Oak Park Public Library. I would like to thank Leigh A. Tarullo, Curator of Special Collections, for her additional assistance.

(6). The Wrights had just returned from a three-month trip to Japan the end of May that year (*Reporter-Argus* 4). While Mr. Wright did not speak at the Nineteenth Century Club on “The Art of Japan” until February 1906 (“River Forest Woman’s Club” 7) and Mrs. Wright did not offer her formal presentation on Japanese architecture until April 1906 (“Fifteenth Annual 11), Grace Hall Hemingway was working under a deadline. Soon the Hemingways would leave for their home at Walloon Lake and would be gone for the entire summer, isolating Grace from the Oak Park library and further discussions and programs of architectural styles. Since Mrs. Hemingway, a determined and forthright woman by all accounts, was determined to design the new house herself, and since she cast a wide net in gathering information – designing the smaller, space-efficient kitchen after consulting with “the bachelor head of the Music Department in the Oak Park schools” (Sanford 105-06)³ – it’s more than likely she would have engaged her social friend in a discussion of Japanese architectural features as well.

Mr. Wright’s “guiding principles” were not closely guarded trade secrets – Mrs. Wright was happy to share them all at her April 1906 presentation – and one main tenet sounded a lot like Ezra Pound’s later call to modernists to “make it new”: “It is evident,” Wright believed, “that modern life must be served more naturally and conserved by more space and light, by greater freedom of movement. And by more general expression of the individual in practice of the ideal we now call culture in civilization. A new space-concept is needed” (23). In addition to the “severely modern fireplace” and a modern kitchen that eliminated the pantry and was designed to save steps (Sandford 105–106), it was bold of Mrs. Hemingway to create living space that would not only accommodate the husband and wife’s professional activities, but was designed with those activities foremost in mind. Prior to the move to the new house, Dr. Hemingway maintained a separate office on 105 N. Oak Park Ave. at which he was available for an hour in the mornings, one in the afternoons, and one in the evenings (Elder,

³ Marcelline recalled in *At the Hemingways*, “In planning the kitchen Mother had had the advice of a friend, Mr. Thaddeus Philander Giddings, the bachelor head of the Music Department in the Oak Park schools. Mr. Giddings had no use for the old-fashioned kitchen with a pantry attached. ‘You should be able to sit on a revolving piano stool in the middle of any kitchen ... and reach every item in the room’ (105–106). Giddings actually wrote an article on his design for the November issue of the *Ladies Home Journal*, which was summarized in a November 4, 1905 article on “The New Kitchen” by the Oak Park *Reporter-Argus* (“The New Kitchen” 1).

Vetch, Cirino 20). While doctors often worked in rooms of the old Victorian houses, this new house created two rooms specifically for Dr. Hemingway's practice, dramatically elongating the Prairie Foursquare concept. The new house provided dedicated space for him to work at home, just as the addition of that massive music room – 60 square feet larger than the family summer home in Michigan (L. Hemingway 23) – attached on the north side gave an even more expansive Prairie Style look to the overall exterior. That spacious studio enabled Mrs. Hemingway to move her recitals away from Third Congregational Church parlors and host events in her home studio that were equally large. Function, as Wright encouraged, dictated design in the construction of the main floor of the house on Kenilworth, while externally the house, with its grand simplicity, four-sloped hipped roof, and multiple dormers, resembled earlier designs of Wright (FLW Trust 6), who felt that a house should be in harmony with its environment.

Porch parties were common in the summer months, and the Victorian houses in Oak Park typically featured a large and prominent porch or piazza, as it was sometimes called, some with wraparounds that encircled half or even the entire house. In keeping with Prairie Style architecture and Wright's concepts, Mrs. Hemingway envisioned a large front porch that was partially enclosed so that it looked and felt like a room, but with no glass in the large "window" openings. Unlike the wide-open porches of the Victorian homes, it blurred the line between interior and exterior space. Ernest would write about that porch in "Soldier's Home," with Krebs enjoying the sheltered-yet-open vantage point: "He liked to look at [the many good-looking young girls] from the front porch as they walked on the other side of the street" under the big elm trees while he read the local newspaper and a book about the war (*In Our Time* 72). Inside the Kenilworth house, larger-than-Victorian windows also celebrated outdoor space with views that made a person feel physically "inside" but emotionally "outside."

Since Mrs. Hemingway was an amateur, she had to enlist a professional architect to produce plans suitable for builders, and Henry G. Fiddelke faithfully incorporated her sketches into the final design. It's unclear how many of the interior architectural features were designed by Mrs. Hemingway, but we do know that she designed the music room, the kitchen, the oversized "statement" modern fireplace, the great picture window, the multi-window bays, and the dormers, with their implied third-floor bedroom space. We can also assume that since newspapers report her

recitals spilled out into the family living area – where refreshments were often served in the dining room and an overflow crowd had to listen to the performances from the living room – that a woman so precise in designing the music room also requested, if not designed, large enough spaces to accommodate the crowds of students, parents, and socialites.

Grace Hall Hemingway wasn't the typical Victorian-era music teacher who hosted a few children in her home for weekly lessons. She was a professional who studied in New York City under Madam Louisa Cappiani, a native of Vienna, Austria "known all over the country, as well as in Europe, as the great voice builder and teacher of perfect singing" (Cappiani 501). Grace debuted as a professional singer at Madison Square Garden and would have continued performing on the grand stage had her eyes not been traumatized by the stage footlights. In Oak Park society she was regarded as one of the best singers, with a newspaper article as early as March 1904 reporting that her "talents are too well and favorably known in Oak Park to require comment" ("A Galaxy of Talent" 6). As Michael Reynolds notes, Grace had so many pupils that she made more money every year than Dr. Hemingway (106), and he was not exaggerating when he adds, "Wherever Oak Parkers gathered in the name of progress or culture, Grace was there to perform her music: Woman's Christian Temperance Union meetings, the Fine Arts Society, P.T.A., Congregational Church, suffrage meetings, or the Nineteenth Century Club. In a town filled with trained voices, Grace Hall Hemingway's contralto was in demand" (107). Her recitals and those of her pupils were usually accompanied by two violinists, a cellist, and a pianist, and most often the newspapers reported a full house – as *Oak Leaves* did of her pupils' recital at the Third Congregational Church on Thursday, August 17, 1906, when Grace employed an "invisible choir (a double quartet behind the scenes)" for one adult student while another of teen age sang in German, with Mrs. Hemingway's "choir of eighty voices" closing the program ("Mrs. Hemingway's Pupils' Recital 10-11). Similar articles from this period affirm the grand scale at which Mrs. Hemingway operated, teaching her students to sing in multiple languages and mounting recitals that required additional rehearsal time to master the creative elements and sometimes elaborate staging that Grace had designed.

With the construction of the music room and the shifting of those large-scale monthly recitals to the Kenilworth house, the Hemingway children would have been asked to help in some capacity, whether it was setting up the 100+ folding chairs that were stored in the balcony,

assisting with refreshments in the dining room, decorating – for a March '07 recital that drew 130 guests, for example, the studio was decked with “hyacinths and palms” (“Hemingway Song Recital” 33) – or, after one “buxom lady guest fell,” standing at the entrance to the music room to warn visitors about the steps (Sandford 11). But those were chores, really. There were greater influences, and not just Grace’s insistence upon giving all the children music lessons or famously forcing Ernest to take up the cello because it was “what the family musicales needed” (L. Hemingway 27) – something Leicester says his famous brother was happy to milk for its mythic value by later claiming, tongue-in-cheek, “Part of my success I owe to the hours when I was alone in the music room and supposed to be practicing. I’d be doing my thinking while playing ‘Pop Goes the Weasel’ over and over again” (L. Hemingway 27). But he did practice. Even if Ernest had sequestered himself in his upstairs bedroom, the music, large galas, and excitement below would have been inescapable, and might help to explain why he felt so comfortable as a young man in the Paris “flat over the Bal Musette [dance hall with accordion band] at the top of the rue Cardinal Lemoine” (Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* 193). As John Raeburn summarizes, Hemingway was “the most public of American writers” (2) whose Papa persona would become as well known as any of his characters, and it’s worth noting that Hemingway’s first observations of the public self versus the private self would have been of his mother in that Kenilworth house.

By designing the house and sharing her enthusiasm with her children – Ernest was schooled enough to mention the Greek Style architecture in a school report on a later class visit to Chicago’s Field Museum (Elder, Vetch, and Cirano 89) – Grace Hall Hemingway reinforced the idea of architecture as art. Her own creative accomplishment in designing the house was celebrated with all the fanfare of a new public library. The actual construction had been fairly rapid. *Oak Leaves* reported on March 3, 1906 that the Hemingway residence was among three on Kenilworth “to be erected,” but by April 21, 1906 the newspaper reported that the house was “ready for the plasterers” and that Dr. and Mrs. Clarence E. Hemingway invited a few friends to witness the hanging of the fireplace chimney crane – a hook that swings out so pots can be hung on it—and to lay the hearthstone. Rev. A.H. Armstrong gave an address, Dr. Hemingway led the group in prayer, and Mrs. Hemingway sang “Home-keeping Hearts are Happiest,” the newspaper reported, “to her own accompaniment” –

presumably on the well-battered old upright piano that was among the few salvaged pieces from the old house (“Hanging of the Crane” 3). After the stone was laid and the crane was hung, Marcelline reports “the real fun began,” as “Uncle Tyley and Daddy, with Ernest helping them, piled curly wood shavings and a few larger pieces of wood on the new brick floor of the fireplace” to boil coffee to serve with refreshments (104). It was a full ceremony, and the newspaper reported, “Dr. and Mrs. Hemingway received the congratulations of their friends on the spaciousness, elegance and completeness of the house” (3). A meaningful part of the ceremony was the placement of a tin box of family documents and mementos to which all contributed, sealed in the cornerstone (Sanford 104). “Our family by this time was a large one, and we needed all eight bedrooms in the new house,” Marcelline recalled. “There were Ernest and myself, Ursula, three years younger than Ernest, and the baby Madelaine, called Sunny, born the fall before Grandfather Hall died. Granduncle Tyley continued to live with us when he was in town between trips. The cook and nursemaid also lived in, making a household of nine” (104-05), Marcelline writes. “The new house was built to fit all our family needs” (106).

In her study on *Architectural Identities: Domesticity, Literature and the Victorian Middle Class*, Andrea Kaston Tange begins with a basic premise: “Tellingly,” she writes, “the *Oxford English Dictionary* parses ‘home’ as an emotional as well as physical space: home is ‘the place of one’s dwelling or nurturing, with the conditions, circumstances, and feeling which naturally and properly attach to it, and are associated with it’” (28-29).

That sentiment is further explicated in an essay on “The Psychology of Home: Why Where You Live Means So Much,” by Julie Beck, who writes that “for many people, their home is part of their self-definition, which is why we do things like decorate our houses and take care of our lawns. These large patches of vegetation serve little real purpose, but they are part of a public face people put on, displaying their home as an extension of themselves.” That was no truer than for Grace and Clarence Hemingway.

It was Grace’s money that built her dream house, just as it was her money that paid for Clarence to go medical school to become certified in obstetrics, so it is not surprising that Grace dominated most of the spaces in the new house. Clarence’s personality was reflected mostly in two small rooms: the doctor’s office, where he saw patients, and the library just across from it, which served as a waiting room. Marcelline reports that the doctor’s office was filled with “glass-fronted cases of instruments,” bookcases, a

mounted deer's head, a "cluttered roll-top desk," a locked cabinet filled with prescription drugs, a typewriter, and a closet containing a human skeleton. In a smaller lavatory adjacent to the office, "a Bunsen burner stood on a glass shelf over the washbowl, and other shelves held bottles and jars filled with various colored liquids and – what always fascinated us – a preserved appendix and the tiny fetus of a baby, looking more like a miniature monkey than a human" (108). The library, which doubled as a waiting room for patients, contained all of Dr. Hemingway's medical books but also reflected his interests in hunting and naturalism. "To entertain the patients while they waited," Marcelline writes, "Dr. Hemingway arranged his collection of stuffed owls, squirrels, chipmunks and a small raccoon on top of the built-in oak bookcases that lined two sides of the library. Volumes of natural history filled with colored plates of birds, animals and flowers were arranged beside the current novels and sets of classics in the bookcases" (Sanford 107-08), while Ed's collection of Native American artifacts on display would later be reflected in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, as Robert Jordan thinks, "Do you remember the cabinet in your father's office with the arrowheads spread out on a shelf, and the eagle feathers of the war bonnets that hung on the wall, their plumes slanting, the smoked buckskin smell of the leggings and the shirts and the feel of the beaded moccasins?" (336). Sunny adds that her father was an amateur taxidermist and his office also contained an operating table (12) – not that those two things are connected. When there were no patients, all the Hemingway children confess to having explored both rooms (Sanford 107-08). Grace had no interest in housekeeping, so in a sense the basement workroom and laundry room were also the domain of Dr. Hemingway, who there taught the children how to make candles and bullets. But the rest of the house was Grace's, especially that high-ceilinged music room.

As Sunny recalled,

The thirty-by-thirty-foot music room on the north side of the main house was two then three steps down from the living room. Mother had insisted that this room be engineered to have perfect acoustics, and it had; we always heard about her plan to add a big pipe organ, but that wish never materialized. The [Steinway] grand piano, numerous musical instruments, later my full-size harp, together with oversized furniture, and a six-by-six-foot raised platform for singers or performers filled this room with elegance. It was especially beautiful at Christmastime, when

Daddy would arrange to have a very tall tree from the Third Congregational Church festivities delivered to this room in time for us to trim. (11)

Sunny added, “Above the steps was a balcony the length of the room, reached only from a landing near the second-floor level. The many folding chairs Mother needed for her recitals or musicals were stored on this balcony – which was also a lovely private place to hide or to be alone” (11). Inside the music room, the formula for perfect acoustics for which Mrs. Hemingway found through her library research (28), was “a lifesize portrait of our great-great-grandfather William Edward Miller” and a carved black ebony music case “that had belonged to my Grandmother Hall (107), Marcelline recalled.

For the dining room, Marcelline wrote that her mother “had a frieze of Grandmother Hall’s oil landscapes built around three sides of the dining room, scenes our Grandmother had sketched along the Des Plaines River or at lakes in Wisconsin or Colorado where Mother and her parents had spent the summers” (105) – places that held meaning for Grace and the Hall family. Sunny added that the twelve-by-eighteen-inch sketches by Caroline Hancock Hall were separated by four-inch boards of walnut and that, being at eye level, the paintings “became immediate conversation pieces for anyone entering the dining room,” where there were five large windows facing the backyard and enough room for an upright practice piano as well as a round oak dining table, “with its many leaves stored away that were extended for big family gatherings” (9-10). Though it was traditional for there to be one-armed chair and the rest without, Grace surrounded the table with a dozen cane-seated chairs, each one with arms. “Mother said she saw no reason why the head of the house should be the only one to have a comfortable dining chair with arms,” Marcelline recalled (105).

Grace was detail-oriented and emphatic about what she wanted for the house. She filled her space with art and artistic reminders of family and gravitated toward elegant features, like the stained-glass double doors “with a red tulip pattern” on them that opened into the dining room (Sanford 105). But because she was rendered temporarily blind as a child – the result of scarlet fever – and because her eyes “lost some of their normal ability to adjust to light,” she wore sunglasses outdoors and sometimes inside, Sunny recalled. “Because light hurt Mother’s eyes so much, she tended

to apply her feelings about it to her children, and consequently,” Sunny said, “we rarely had enough light in our house. Often when we children were reading we had to strain to see,” and so much of the space designed by Grace was dimmed. Clarence, meanwhile, had his own personality trait that interfered with the children’s reading. As Marcelline recalled, “Daddy had little patience with anyone who merely sat down in a room... Many times if he came into the living room from his office in the front of the house and saw any of his children leaning back in a chair looking at a magazine, or just stretched out on a davenport reading or thinking, he would stop abruptly in the doorway saying, ‘Haven’t you children got anything to do?’” (Sanford 26). That insistence on constant activity would not have been conducive to introspective or imaginative thought, which would have appeared to Dr. Hemingway as idle daydreaming.

According to Marcelline, “For us children our bedrooms were a haven. It wasn’t possible to read or concentrate in the living room. Mother had her music room, where she could lock the door and do her composing or writing, Daddy often did analyses in the small lavatory built behind his home office” (27) and also had his office and library as a retreat. While the youngest child slept in the nursery on the second floor, the rest of the children retreated to bedrooms on the third floor – a space shared with the two servants and Uncle Tyley, a traveling salesman of brass beds who delighted the children with stories of his travels and was “one of Ernest’s two early idols” (L. Hemingway 33), enough of a favorite that Ernest made a point of giving him a special gift after *In Our Time* was published (Baker 121). As a result of “billetting” with such an eclectic mix – which included the sharing of a single third-floor bathroom with servants and Uncle Tyley – coupled with the notion of refuge and private writing and reading space, one could say that that third-floor bedroom became Hemingway’s first “garret apartment.” A writing desk was positioned in a well-lit dormer in front of a window that featured an impressive view of the neighborhood – a space so important to young Hemingway that it would inspire him to prefer similar places later in his writing life. At the Ambos Mundos hotel in Havana he wrote from a corner room on the fifth and highest floor that allowed him to look out on the rooftops of the old section of the city and into the harbor. In Key West he wrote on the second floor of a room built over the pool house on Whitehead Street. In Cuba he wrote a good part of the time in the tower at the Finca Vigia with its dramatic view, and in Idaho his friend Forrest McMullen reports that Hemingway liked to write

while looking out a massive picture window at a pair of kingfishers that flew and fed along the river below the house. “He enjoyed looking out the window, looking at the surroundings. You wouldn’t be going out into space daydreaming if you didn’t have something to look at” (Plath and Simons 131).

The importance of a room with a view is reinforced in the fiction. Jake Barnes gauges a hotel’s worth by how friendly the desk people are and whether he has “a good small room” with “open wide windows” (Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* 89, 30). In *Green Hills of Africa*, Hemingway remembers choosing an upstairs Paris apartment with a view of “the chestnut tree over the roof” rather than a downstairs flat on the Boulevard du Temple (55-56), and as Hemingway’s dying hero in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” recalls,

There were only two rooms in the apartments where they lived and he had a room on the top floor of that hotel that cost him sixty francs a month where he did his writing, and from it he could see the roofs and chimney pots and all the hills of Paris. From the apartment you could only see the wood and coal man’s place (*Complete Short Stories* 51).

Hemingway wrote in *A Moveable Feast* that when finances forced him to give up his separate writing space and work in the same apartment he shared with Hadley, he still relied on the window and its view into the world: “in the spring mornings I would work early while my wife still slept. The windows were open wide and the cobbles of the street were drying after the rain (41). A long description follows because for Hemingway open windows are a conduit to the larger world, the start of adventures ... or at least inspiration. Two of Hemingway’s most lauded novels begin with such descriptions. In *A Farewell to Arms*, it’s a memory of a house with a view: “In the late summer of that year we lived in a house in a village that looked across the river and the plain to the mountains. In the bed of the river there were pebbles and boulders, dry and white in the sun, and the water was clear and swiftly moving and blue in the channels” (3). *For Whom the Bell Tolls* also begins with a view, though the vantage point of interior architectural space has been replaced by the enclosed, protective physical space of Robert Jordan’s hiding place and his emotional interior space:

He lay flat on the brown, pine-needled floor of the forest, his chin on his folded arms, and high overhead the wind blew in the tops

of the pine trees. The mountainside sloped gently where he lay; but below it was steep and he could see the dark of the oiled road winding through the pass. There was a stream alongside the road and far down the pass he saw a mill beside the stream and the falling water of the dam (1)

In “Three-Day Blow,” a story even closer to Hemingway’s experience, Nick Adams spends time at an orchard cottage with a view of the lake below: “Upstairs was open under the roof and was where Bill and his father and he, Nick, sometimes slept” (*In Our Time* 39-40), just as biographers report Hemingway often slept with his window open at the Kenilworth house. Frederic Henry also sleeps with open windows in *A Farewell to Arms*: “That night a bat flew into the room through the open door that led onto the balcony and through which we watched the night over the roofs of the town” (101) and later, “That night there was a storm and I woke to hear the rain lashing the window-panes. It was coming in the open window” (264). That such portals are tied to inspiration is all but explained in *A Moveable Feast*, in which Hemingway shares that when he had writer’s block he would do one of two things: “I would sit in front of the fire and squeeze the peel of the little oranges into the edge of the flame and watch the sputter of blue that they made,” similar, one suspects, to what he might have done as a child with that enormous fireplace on Kenilworth Avenue, and “I would stand and look out over the roofs of Paris and think, ‘Do not worry. You have always written before and you will write now. All you have to do is write one true sentence’” (22). For Hemingway, that one true sentence often began with a detailed description, often from a room with a view out onto the larger world – a succession of windows and views that began in Oak Park.

Like his mother, Hemingway would assert himself when it came to the decorative and design elements of his future homes, while leaving the details of renovation or construction to someone else. And he would be drawn to spaces that either duplicated the garret feel of his childhood bedroom or the mansion in which he grew up, decorating each space with art and reminders of his travel adventures, the way his parents personalized common living spaces. The first house he owned, if jointly with second wife Pauline, was an aging and neglected mansion on a corner lot at 907 Whitehead, “built in 1851 by a shipping tycoon” and featuring “white stone, heart of pine shipped from Georgia, delicate wrought-iron railings,”

and long and graceful windows that could be shuttered during hurricanes (Kert 232). Just as his mother and father's bedroom was separated from the children in the Kenilworth house, the second-floor master suite was a good distance from the bedrooms reserved for the children on the other end of the house. While Ernest was content to let Pauline supervise the restoration and hiring of servants, when it came time to decorate he filled the house with safari trophies mounted by a New York taxidermist, including "leopard and lion rugs, mounted heads of sable and roan antelope, impala and oryx, with kudu and rhinoceros to follow," Bernice Kert wrote in *The Hemingway Women* (265). In Cuba, though Martha Gellhorn purchased the Finca Vigia – a farmhouse estate that was built on the site of an old watchtower, with a grand view of Havana and a swimming pool and tennis court – and though she supervised the reconstruction efforts, the house was decorated according to Ernest's personality and tastes, with those mounted game heads and works of art obtained during the Paris years again adorning the walls. Gellhorn had some possessions, like her family crystal, but she hid them at times for fear that Ernest would throw them in a fit of rage (Rollyson 170). When Mary Welsh moved into the house years later, Hemingway's fourth wife recalled, "I thought of Jane Austen and Louisa May Alcott and country vicars' manses and fell instantly in love" but couldn't help but notice there were not many mementos of its previous inhabitant, Martha Gellhorn (M. Hemingway 154-55). "To my room at the Finca I brought back a few family photos, my parents in twin gold frames, and Homer and Beatrice Guck, and set them up on a corner of Martha's enormous desk. Inexplicably to me, they irritated Ernest who muttered something about my trying to 'clip' him" – language, by the way, that Ernest used in several letters to refer to his mother's dominance over his father. "Clip you? With four photographs?" I stared. "In that room which has nothing at all that belongs to me?" (M. Hemingway 177). Hemingway had indeed taken over the space.

Visitors to the Finca were struck that inside wasn't just a decorated interior, but a display of items and artwork that were an extension of Ernest's personality – just as the music room at the Kenilworth house bespoke the presence of Grace, or the library and doctor's office exuded the personality of Dr. Hemingway. Though it may seem eccentric, especially to those who are not collectors, decorating a house in such a manner is a part of human nature. Researchers have found that people who were asked to sort 160 items as "self" or "not self" most often associated body parts with the self,

followed by such psychological processes as conscience and values. Next came possessions, which were frequently displayed in the house:

As a person's self-image changes, he or she is able to put away or dispose of objects that no longer reflect who they are, and acquire or make others. Thus, where we live becomes a kind of stage set onto which our self-image is projected via moveable (i.e. controllable) objects. The house interior for most people—unlike the structure itself—is rarely wholly fixed or finished. Like the exploration of the self, the arrangement in the domestic interior is often in the process of becoming. (Marcus 57)

Journalists who were fortunate enough to visit the house in Cuba could not help but notice and try to contextualize that distinctive decor. In 1954 Robert Harling described his first impression of the Hemingway home in Cuba for readers of the *London Sunday Times*: “The living-room is high and large and comfortable, with white walls and bookshelves, and books, books, books (4,623 volumes, another journalist would report). On one wall is a Spanish bull-fighting poster; in one corner a small, long-playing gramophone precariously balanced on bookshelves; in yet another corner a curved magazine rack, as [large and] crowded as a railway bookstall.” He added, “The room is restful, colorful, and plainly one man's well-loved home” (Bruccoli 82). Another journalist was struck by the big game heads that lined the walls of the main room (Bruccoli 91). Journalist Robert Manning was impressed by Hemingway's “small but choice collection of paintings (including a Miro, two Juan Gris, a Klee, a Braque—since stolen from the villa—and five Andre Massons)” and in another room “near the entrance to a large tile-floored dining room” he admired an oil portrait of Hemingway in his thirties, wearing a flowing, open-collar white shirt. “It's an old-days picture of me as Kid Balzac by Waldo Pierce,” Hemingway told him. “Mary has it around because she likes it (Bruccoli 174-5).

That, of course, could not be farther from the truth. This was Ernest's space, claimed as his mother took that music room and much of the first floor of the Kenilworth house for herself. George Plimpton got it right when he described Hemingway's bedroom and office, with a leopard skin draped across the top of an armoire in a room that otherwise was an

ordered clutter of papers and mementos... The room, however, for all the disorder sensed at first sight, indicates on inspection

an owner who is basically neat but cannot bear to throw anything away—especially if sentimental value is attached. One bookcase top has an odd assortment of mementos: a giraffe made of wood beads, a little cast-iron turtle, tiny models of a locomotive, two jeeps and a Venetian gondola, a toy bear with a key in its back, a monkey carrying a pair of cymbals, a miniature guitar, and a little tin model of a U.S. Navy biplane (one wheel missing) resting awry on a circular straw placemat—the quality of the collection that of the odds-and-ends which turn up in a shoebox at the back of a small boy’s closet (Brucoli 111).

The tray of mementos seems less odd when one considers what psychologists have learned about the house as an extension of self: that “repetition and re-creation of the ambience of childhood is a frequently recurrent theme,” especially in people in late middle age and older (Marcus 33-34). Noticing Plimpton’s fascination, Hemingway explains, “It cheers me up to look at them,” (Brucoli 111). That sentiment is echoed in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* when Anselmo tells Robert Jordan that when he had a house “there were the tusks of boar I had shot in the lower forest. There were the hides of wolves” hunted and killed in the snow spread out now on the floors, the horns of an ibex “killed in the high Sierra,” and a stuffed eagle. “It was a very beautiful thing and all of those things gave me great pleasure to contemplate,” he says, and Robert Jordan replies, knowingly, “Yes.” There is a spiritual quality to such “home decorations” that evoke in Anselmo the same feeling as when he nailed the paw of a bear he had killed on the door of his village church. “And every time I saw that paw ... I received a pleasure ... of pride and remembrance” (39-40). English writer-artist John Ruskin proposed that people seek “two things of our buildings: We want them to shelter us. And we want them to *speak* to us—to speak to us of whatever we find important and need to be reminded of” (qtd. in De Botton 62) – or, as De Botton concludes, “We need our rooms to align us to desirable versions of ourselves and to keep alive the important, evanescent sides of us” (107).

Much has been written about the influence of Michigan’s Upper Peninsula, but that influence was primarily outdoors – where, as his sister Marcelline recalled, even when the family cabin was expanded beyond the initial two bedrooms, Ernest “usually preferred to sleep in a tent pitched in the back yard some distance from both the cottage and the annex” (83).

Hemingway may not have written about Oak Park, but it was there, not Michigan, that he developed his sense of interior space. Growing up in a Victorian home and that more spacious yet parentally defined home on Kenilworth gave Hemingway a sense of the importance of individual space, of a room of one's own, and provided Hemingway with two models of architectural space that would fuel his adult urges to live in large houses or garrets when he wasn't roughing it in tents. A house really is both a reflection and an extension of personality, and that was something that escaped no visitor to a Hemingway house. In "Snows of Kilimanjaro," the dying hero admits to himself that he "had never written about Paris. Not the Paris that he cared about" (*Complete Short Stories* 52). Perhaps for the same ill-defined reason, Hemingway also did not write about the Oak Park that he cared about. Or perhaps that reason is explained by Hemingway's narrator in one of the last manuscripts the author worked on during his lifetime,

There are always mystical countries that are a part of one's childhood. Those we remember and visit sometimes when we are asleep and dreaming. They are as lovely at night as they were when we were children. If you ever go back to see them they are not there. But they are as fine in the night as they ever were if you have the luck to dream of them. (*Under Kilimanjaro* 23).

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Received: 12 June 2022

Accepted for publication: 13 November 2022