

Biofiction, Retrospective Memory, and the Reimagining of Ernest Hemingway in Paula McLain's *The Paris Wife*

Agung Benta Febria Nuryanto¹ & Galuh Febri Putra^{2*}

¹English Literature Department, Universitas Jenderal Soedirman, Purwokerto, Indonesia

²English Study Program, Universitas Udayana, Denpasar, Indonesia

*Correspondence author: galuhfebriputra19900210203211023@unud.ac.id

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Biofiction; Ernest Hemingway; Hadley Richardson; Memory narrative; *The Paris Wife*

Article history:

Received 31 July 2026
Revised 10 August 2026
Accepted 16 August 2026
Available online
30 September 2026



licensed under [CC BY 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)
DOI: <https://doi.org/>

ABSTRACT

This study examines how Paula McLain's *The Paris Wife* reconstructs Ernest Hemingway through Hadley Richardson's retrospective perspective. Rather than treating the novel as a substitute for biography, the article approaches it as biofiction: a form that combines documented persons and events with imaginative access to private thought and emotion. The study uses an interpretive qualitative design integrating close reading, thematic coding, and historical contextualization. Passages were selected when they foreground retrospective narration, wartime memory, literary ambition, marital conflict, or the boundary between documented history and narrative invention. The analysis identifies four related patterns. First, Hadley's focalization repositions Hemingway from public legend to relationally perceived subject. Second, wartime experience appears as emotional residue without supporting a clinical diagnosis. Third, literary ambition is represented as both creative discipline and a source of relational strain. Fourth, the retrospective voice makes memory an organizing principle while exposing the partiality of any reconstructed life. The novel therefore humanizes Hemingway not by claiming complete biographical truth, but by foregrounding the mediated and ethically contested process through which historical lives are narrated.

How to cite:

Nuryanto, A.B.F., & Putra, G.F. (2026). Biofiction, retrospective memory, and the reimagining of Ernest Hemingway in Paula McLain's *The Paris Wife*. *Humanities & Language: International Journal of Linguistics, Humanities, and Education*, 3(3), 318-333.

1. Introduction

Ernest Miller Hemingway occupies a central position in twentieth-century American literature. Born in Oak Park, Illinois, on July 21, 1899, he developed a prose style associated with compression, understatement, and the strategic omission of explanatory detail. His international reputation was consolidated through works including *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). In 1954, he received the Nobel Prize in Literature for his mastery of narrative art, with particular recognition of *The Old Man and the Sea* (Nobel Prize Outreach AB, n.d.). These achievements established Hemingway as a canonical writer, but they also contributed to a public image that often reduces his life to a set of familiar motifs: war, physical danger, expatriate culture, masculine endurance, and artistic self-fashioning. Critical studies of Hemingway's masculinity likewise demonstrate that this public persona was culturally produced, performed, and repeatedly revised (Strychacz, 2012; Armengol, 2020), while Thurston's

(2025) recent biographical overview situates the persona within Hemingway's broader experiences of war, travel, journalism, and literary recognition.

The historical record reveals a more complicated figure. Hemingway worked as a journalist before serving as an American Red Cross ambulance driver on the Italian front during the First World War, where he was seriously wounded in 1918. He later worked as a foreign correspondent, married four times, experienced repeated physical illness and psychological distress, and died in Ketchum, Idaho, on July 2, 1961. Major biographies have shown that the adventurous public persona was inseparable from discipline, insecurity, relational conflict, and recurrent efforts to control how his life would be remembered (Baker, 1969; Dearborn, 2017; Wood, 2020). Biography therefore provides not a single transparent Hemingway, but competing interpretations shaped by archives, testimony, cultural assumptions, and the biographer's own narrative choices (Tyler, 2012). Hemingway's correspondence also reveals sustained attention to audience and self-presentation, complicating any distinction between an unmediated private self and a consciously performed public identity (Spanier, 2012).

Hemingway's first marriage was central to the formation of his early literary career. After marrying Elizabeth Hadley Richardson in 1921, the couple moved to Paris, where Hemingway entered the expatriate network around Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, Sylvia Beach, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. During the marriage, Hadley lost a valise containing most of Hemingway's early manuscripts; their son John was born; Hemingway developed the work that culminated in *The Sun Also Rises*; and Pauline Pfeiffer entered the couple's social circle. The marriage ended in 1927 (Justice, 2025a; Kennedy, 2012; Reynolds, 1989). These events matter here not as an exhaustive timeline but as historical pressure points through which work, parenthood, mobility, status, and marital strain converged.

Biographies and archival timelines establish these events with considerable precision, while Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* later reorganized the Paris years through his own retrospective memory. This double mediation creates the specific gap addressed by the present study. Scholarship has examined Hemingway's biography, masculinity, trauma, and self-fashioning, and studies of biofiction have theorized the ethics of narrating historical lives; however, less attention has been given to how *The Paris Wife* uses Hadley's retrospective focalization to transform verified biographical events into relational and ethical meaning without claiming privileged access to historical consciousness. The novel therefore provides a focused case for examining what changes when a canonical male author's early career is narrated from the imagined memory of the wife who shared it.

Paula McLain's *The Paris Wife* (2011) returns to this biographical period but changes its narrative center. The novel is told primarily through Hadley's retrospective first-person voice, transforming a woman often positioned at the margins of Hemingway's legend into the consciousness through which that legend is interpreted. Its narrative follows the couple from their courtship in Chicago through their Paris years and the dissolution of the marriage. Historically recognizable people, dates, and locations create documentary proximity, while imagined dialogue, interior reflection, and emotional causation produce a subjectivity the archive cannot directly supply. The result is neither conventional biography nor unrestricted historical romance, but a deliberate negotiation between evidence and invention (Krsteva, 2023).

The concept of biofiction provides an appropriate framework for this negotiation. Lackey (2016) defines biofiction by its use of an actual historical figure as a named

protagonist, while later scholarship emphasizes that the genre's value lies not in reproducing factual biography but in constructing interpretive or symbolic truths through fiction (Lackey, 2021). Krsteva's (2023) analysis of *The Paris Wife* further shows how life-writing genre blending reorganizes biographical material to construct narrative identity. This freedom creates an ethical problem: imaginative narration may recover marginalized perspectives, yet it may also assign motives, emotions, and coherence to people who cannot confirm or contest the representation. Boldrini (2022) consequently treats speaking for and as another person as an ethical act rather than a neutral technique. Novak and Ní Dhúill (2022) add that biofiction's imaginative recovery of marginalized lives must be evaluated in relation to gender, power, evidence, and biographical authenticity. In *The Paris Wife*, this tension is intensified because the narrator's intimacy with Hemingway seems to promise privileged knowledge even though the speaking voice is fictionally constructed.

Memory is equally important to the novel's method. Retrospective narration does not reproduce the past as an unedited record; it selects, orders, and interprets experience from a later position. Eakin (1999) argues that life narratives participate in the construction of identity rather than simply reporting a pre-existing self. Caruth's (1996) work on trauma further clarifies why difficult experience may appear through repetition, absence, belated recognition, and figurative displacement. These concepts are useful for analyzing narrative form, but they do not authorize a clinical diagnosis of either the historical Hemingway or McLain's fictional character. The more defensible question is how the novel uses selective recollection, temporal distance, and emotional framing to make Hemingway legible from Hadley's point of view.

Accordingly, this study asks three questions: (1) How does Hadley's retrospective focalization reshape the public image of Ernest Hemingway into a relationally perceived subject? (2) How does *The Paris Wife* connect documented events - especially war memory, manuscript loss, literary ambition, and marital dissolution - with imagined interiority? (3) What ethical limits arise when biofiction redistributes narrative authority, sympathy, and blame among historical figures? The article argues that McLain humanizes Hemingway not by replacing biography with fictional truth, but by making the mediation between archive, memory, and invention visible. The following sections first explain the interpretive design and evidentiary controls, then analyze biographical grounding, private vulnerability, war memory, literary ambition, and the ethics of retrospective biofiction.

2. Method

2.1 Research design

This research employs an interpretive qualitative design grounded in close reading. The object of analysis is not the psychological condition of the historical Ernest Hemingway, but McLain's textual construction of a named historical figure. Close reading is combined with thematic coding to connect local narrative features - focalization, temporal movement, imagery, characterization, and scene selection - with the broader frameworks of biofiction and memory narrative. Close reading directs attention to how formal details generate interpretation (Duarte et al., 2020), while the coding process adapts Braun and Clarke's (2006) iterative movement from familiarization and initial codes to the review and definition of higher-order themes.

2.2 Corpus and supporting sources

The primary source is Paula McLain's *The Paris Wife*, first published by Ballantine Books in 2011. The historical context is established through Hemingway biographies by Baker (1969), Reynolds (1989), and Dearborn (2017); critical biographical syntheses by Tyler (2012) and Thurston (2025); Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast* (1964); and the archival timeline of Hadley Richardson prepared by the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library (Justice, 2025a). Spanier's (2012) study of the letters and Kennedy's (2012) account of the Paris expatriate milieu provide additional historical context. The conceptual sources are Lackey's account of biofiction (2016, 2021), Krsteva's study of life-writing and *The Paris Wife* (2023), Boldrini's discussion of representational ethics (2022), Novak and Ní Dhúill's gendered approach to biographical fiction (2022), Eakin's theory of narrative identity (1999), and Caruth's account of trauma and belated narration (1996), supplemented by Hemingway-specific studies of trauma (Dodman, 2015; Wood, 2020) and marriage (Moddelmog, 2012). Methodological guidance is drawn from Braun and Clarke (2006) and Duarte et al. (2020). Secondary sources are used to contextualize, not to replace, analysis of the novel.

The historical sources were organized into three evidentiary levels. The first level consists of institutional archival control points, including dated travel, publication, marriage, and divorce records from the JFK Library and material on Hemingway's First World War service published by the National Archives. The second level includes contemporaneous or first-person materials such as correspondence and *A Moveable Feast*. These sources provide proximity to Hemingway's language but remain acts of self-presentation. The third level consists of scholarly biographies and contextual studies that compare documents and interpret their significance. A claim about an event was treated as strongest when a fixed archival date agreed with more than one biographical account. Claims about motive or emotion were treated more cautiously, especially when they appeared only in a memoir, a later interview, or McLain's imagined interior narration.

2.3 Data selection

Passages were selected purposively rather than statistically. A passage entered the analytic corpus when it met at least one of four criteria: it (a) foregrounded Hadley's retrospective act of remembering; (b) represented a documented event from the 1921-1927 marriage; (c) connected Hemingway's war history or literary ambition to emotional and relational conflict; or (d) made the boundary between historical fact and imagined interiority especially visible. Particular attention was given to the return to sites associated with the Italian front, the loss of Hemingway's manuscripts, the development of his writing career, and the relationship with Pauline Pfeiffer. The final coded corpus was organized into six episode units, corresponding to the six units summarized in Table 1: Paris arrival and the expatriate network; the 1918 wounding as a historical control point; the later return to the Italian front as a memory scene; the manuscript-valise loss; writing career and public recognition; and Pauline Pfeiffer/marital dissolution. The two war-related units were kept analytically distinct because one concerns a documented event and the other the novel's retrospective representation of that event. Multiple passages were coded within each unit; the scene or episode, rather than a fixed page count, served as the practical unit of comparison because pagination varies across editions.

2.4 Analytic procedure

- Read the novel repeatedly to map its chronology, narrative voice, and shifts between present action and retrospective commentary.
- Mark passages meeting the selection criteria and record the scene, speaker, temporal position, and relevant narrative technique.
- Assign initial codes for retrospective selection, emotional distance, war memory, artistic ambition, validation, betrayal, and historical anchoring.
- Group related codes into higher-order patterns and compare those patterns with documented biographical chronology.
- Interpret each pattern through biofiction and memory theory, then test the interpretation against counterexamples and the limits of the available evidence.
- For each major episode, the analysis prepared a brief historical control record that separated verifiable occurrence from disputed meaning. The record listed the documented date, available institutional source, later autobiographical account, McLain's narrative treatment, and the interpretation advanced in this article. This procedure does not make the archive complete, but it prevents a fictional scene from silently becoming proof of Hemingway's private intentions.

For example, the stolen-valise control record separated four levels of evidence: (1) documented occurrence - the valise containing Hemingway's manuscripts was stolen at the Gare de Lyon in December 1922 while Hadley was travelling to join him (Justice, 2025a); (2) retrospective self-narration - *A Moveable Feast* later gives the loss a decisive place in Hemingway's account of his early career; (3) McLain's narrative treatment - the event becomes a shared but unequal experience of loss, guilt, silence, and resentment; and (4) interpretive claim - the archive verifies the theft, whereas the precise emotional causation belongs to biofictional reconstruction. The same four-part distinction was applied to the other episode units.

2.5 Credibility and limitations

Analytic credibility was strengthened through source triangulation and an explicit audit trail linking scenes, codes, historical context, and interpretation. The analysis distinguishes among the historical Hemingway, Hemingway's own retrospective self-representation, and McLain's fictional Hemingway. It also avoids treating a fictionalized scene as documentary evidence or inferring a clinical diagnosis from literary behavior. Because pagination varies across editions, scene-level paraphrase remains the default, while short direct quotations used for close reading are cited by chapter or section rather than by unverified page number. The study remains limited to one novel and one primary focalizing consciousness; its claims therefore concern McLain's representational strategy rather than the final truth of Hemingway's life.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 Biographical grounding and fictional interiority

The Paris Wife (McLain, 2011) derives much of its persuasive force from a recognizable biographical sequence. The marriage in 1921, the move to Paris, the stolen manuscripts, the birth of the couple's son, Hemingway's emergence as a novelist, the relationship with Pauline Pfeiffer, and the 1927 divorce correspond broadly to the archival record (Hemingway, 1964; Justice, 2025a; Kennedy, 2012; Reynolds, 1989;

Thurston, 2025). This chronology gives the novel historical density and enables readers to connect private scenes with major developments in Hemingway's career.

The archival chronology offers more than confirmation that the principal events occurred. It reveals the pace at which the couple's domestic life and Hemingway's career changed. The move into a modest apartment at 74 rue du Cardinal-Lemoine in January 1922 preceded the stolen valise by less than a year. The birth of Bumby in October 1923 was followed by the family's return to Paris in January 1924, where the noise of a sawmill beneath their apartment and the demands of childcare encouraged Hemingway to work elsewhere. *In Our Time* appeared in New York on October 5, 1925. *The Sun Also Rises* was written from July 1925 to April 1926 and published by Scribner's on October 22, 1926 (Justice, 2025a, 2025b). McLain compresses and arranges these details, but the sequence supports her broader representation of a marriage forced to absorb rapid changes in money, status, work, and social attention.

Historical evidence also clarifies that Paris functioned as a working environment rather than a decorative modernist backdrop. Hemingway's employment with the Toronto Star required travel and reporting, including his assignment in Lausanne when Hadley carried the lost manuscripts. At the same time, the couple's access to Stein, Pound, Beach, and other expatriates depended on introductions, addresses, bookshops, salons, and repeated acts of sociability. Kennedy (2012) describes this milieu as a transatlantic literary field in which reputation circulated through personal contact as well as print. McLain turns that field into a marital geography. Cafes and apartments become places where Hadley observes Hemingway moving toward a professional community that she can enter socially but does not control institutionally. The distinction helps explain why the same Paris can signify liberation for the aspiring author and instability for his wife. It also prevents a nostalgic reading of the city from obscuring work, money, childcare, and uneven access to cultural authority.

The publication record also guards against the myth of effortless genius. The Hemingway Collection preserves almost a dozen drafts of *The Sun Also Rises*, including four different openings, while the archive for *A Farewell to Arms* contains numerous alternative endings (Putnam, 2006). Such material demonstrates persistent revision and lends historical substance to McLain's portrait of artistic discipline. At the same time, draft counts cannot prove the domestic emotions that the novel attaches to the writing process. They establish labor, duration, and revision, but not Hadley's precise feelings in a particular room or Hemingway's unspoken motive during an argument. Biofiction crosses that gap imaginatively, and the critical task is to keep the crossing visible.

The same distinction applies to the valise. The theft at the Gare de Lyon on December 2, 1922 is institutionally documented, and Hemingway later made it a defining episode in *A Moveable Feast*. Yet the event's emotional afterlife is not contained in the date itself. McLain interprets it as a shared catastrophe distributed unequally between the writer who lost his work and the wife who carried the bag. The archive verifies the loss, while the novel constructs guilt, silence, and resentment as relational consequences. This division between occurrence and meaning is precisely where biofiction performs its strongest and riskiest work.

Historical correspondence, however, does not make the novel biographical evidence in itself. McLain converts public events into a sequence of emotional causes and consequences. The loss of the manuscripts, for example, is both a documented

event and a narrative hinge through which professional loss, marital responsibility, and future resentment can be interpreted. Similarly, the affair with Pauline is not presented only as a date in a marital chronology; it becomes the culmination of Hadley's growing awareness that Hemingway's artistic and emotional worlds increasingly exclude her. Biofiction thus operates by keeping the historical outline visible while supplying an interior logic that the archive cannot verify (Krsteva, 2023; Lackey, 2016, 2021).

3.2 From public legend to private vulnerability

Hemingway's public reputation depends heavily on images of mastery: disciplined prose, physical courage, travel, sport, war, and emotional control. McLain does not discard these elements. Instead, Hadley's focalization redescribes them as qualities experienced within a marriage. Energy can become restlessness; discipline can become emotional exclusion; confidence can coexist with a need for recognition; and adventure can impose costs on the person expected to sustain domestic continuity. This revision accords with scholarship that treats Hemingway's masculinity as a historically contingent performance rather than a stable essence (Strychacz, 2012; Armengol, 2020).

The public legend did not arise only from later celebrity culture. It drew on real experiences that Hemingway repeatedly converted into narrative authority. Before turning twenty, he had worked as a Kansas City Star reporter, served with the American Red Cross in Italy, survived serious wounds, and returned to Europe as a Toronto Star correspondent. In Paris he cultivated relationships with writers, editors, artists, and publishers while reporting on international events and pursuing boxing, skiing, fishing, and bullfighting. These activities supply factual foundations for the energetic figure McLain represents. Historical grounding, however, does not require accepting the persona as an unfiltered self. Letters, journalism, photographs, memoir, and interviews all placed Hemingway before an audience, and Spanier (2012) shows that correspondence itself participated in deliberate self-presentation.

Hadley's viewpoint alters the scale of those achievements. Public history records travel, publication, and association with celebrated modernists. Domestic focalization asks who packed, waited, financed, cared for a child, absorbed uncertainty, or adjusted plans while those achievements were being made. The shift does not disprove the record of Hemingway's courage or labor. Instead, it exposes the social infrastructure beneath the heroic outline. The archived drafts reinforce his discipline, while the marriage chronology reveals that discipline operating inside a household. McLain's private Hemingway is therefore credible not because every conversation can be verified, but because her relational interpretation remains answerable to material conditions documented by biography and archive (Dearborn, 2017; Justice, 2025a; Reynolds, 1989).

This perspectival shift is the novel's principal revision of the Hemingway myth. The reader encounters him not from the authoritative distance of a literary history, but through the perceptions of a partner who is attracted to his intensity and injured by his withdrawal. Because Hadley narrates retrospectively, admiration and disappointment are present at the same time. Early scenes of courtship are shadowed by the narrator's knowledge of the marriage's end, while later scenes preserve traces of the earlier affection. The resulting Hemingway is neither heroic icon nor simple antagonist. He is a relationally constructed character whose contradictions emerge from the difference

between how he is seen publicly and how Hadley remembers living with him, a contrast consistent with the plurality of archival and biographical representations (Baker, 1969; Dearborn, 2017; Spanier, 2012; Tyler, 2012).

The retrospective position becomes explicit in the epilogue when Hadley calls herself "the early wife, the Paris wife" (McLain, 2011, Epilogue). The compressed label reduces a six-year marriage to a later public category, yet the phrase also becomes the position from which Hadley reclaims narrative authority. The diction therefore turns memory into a struggle over naming: she recognizes that literary history can subordinate her to Hemingway's legend even as the novel makes that subordinate label the basis of its counter-narrative.

3.3 War memory without diagnostic overreach

The novel repeatedly connects Hemingway's adult identity to his service and wounding in Italy. When the couple revisits places associated with the front, the setting does not transparently restore the past. Instead, the difference between remembered danger and the ordinary present emphasizes the instability of recollection. The return scene stages memory as an encounter between a past that retains emotional force and a landscape that no longer confirms the rememberer's internal image.

McLain's prose also marks the distance between remembered testimony and clinical certainty. In the Prologue, Hadley recalls that Ernest said he had "died in the war, just for a moment" (McLain, 2011, Prologue). The temporal qualification "just for a moment" gives the statement emotional intensity without making it an objective diagnosis, while the reporting frame - Hadley recalls something Ernest said - keeps the experience mediated through memory and narration.

The underlying event is unusually well documented. Hemingway volunteered for the American Red Cross and went to Italy in 1918. While operating a mobile canteen near the front, he was struck by Austrian mortar fire shortly before his nineteenth birthday. National Archives material records that he helped carry a wounded Italian soldier, was exposed to further gunfire, received the Italian Silver Medal of Valor, and spent months recuperating in a Milan hospital. There he formed a relationship with the Red Cross nurse Agnes von Kurowsky. The surviving photograph of Hemingway on crutches, correspondence, the retained piece of shrapnel in the Hemingway Collection, and the institutional account establish bodily injury as history rather than legend (Putnam, 2006).

What the record cannot settle so easily is the later meaning of that injury. Hemingway revisited the experience in letters, fiction, anthologies, and public statements, each produced for a different audience and at a different distance from 1918. Putnam (2006) notes that his war writing often turns toward aftermath and the difficulty of telling what happened. This pattern is visible in works such as *Big Two-Hearted River*, where war remains largely unstated, and *A Farewell to Arms*, where remembered combat is transformed through fictional structure. The historical wound and the literary wound overlap, but they are not identical. One belongs to documented biography. The other is repeatedly revised through genre, style, and self-understanding.

McLain's return-to-Italy scenes inherit this layered history. Hadley's perception offers evidence about the novel's narrative design, not direct testimony about Hemingway's mental state. The ordinary appearance of a former battlefield can intensify the distance between public commemoration, personal recollection, and a spouse's limited access to another person's pain. Historically, the injury gives the scene a firm

referent. Formally, silence and uneven disclosure make the referent inaccessible. The novel thereby humanizes Hemingway through vulnerability while refusing, at its best, to make wartime injury a single explanation for infidelity, anger, or emotional withdrawal.

A trauma framework helps identify formal features such as avoidance, repetition, belated recognition, and gaps between speech and feeling (Caruth, 1996; Dodman, 2015; Wood, 2020). Yet the novel does not provide clinical evidence, and a literary critic should not convert characterization into a retrospective medical diagnosis. It is more precise to say that McLain represents the emotional residue of war as one factor in Hemingway's guardedness and self-fashioning. The effect is interpretive: the novel invites readers to connect past violence with present relational difficulty while leaving the causal chain incomplete.

3.4 Literary ambition and relational cost

McLain presents literary ambition as both vocation and pressure. Hemingway's commitment to craft is not reduced to vanity; it requires sustained work, risk, and responsiveness to a competitive literary field. At the same time, Hadley's perspective reveals how artistic formation depends on material and emotional support. Travel, childcare, money, social networks, editorial approval, and domestic stability all enter the conditions under which the writing is produced. The novel therefore makes visible labor and sacrifice that a success-centered biography can leave in the background.

A short passage makes this relational cost visible at the level of diction. Hadley recognizes that Ernest could "disappear into his work, away from me" (McLain, 2011, ch. 8). The verb "disappear" turns writing from a neutral occupation into a spatial metaphor for absence, while "away from me" locates artistic concentration inside the experience of marriage. McLain thus reframes discipline as both creative necessity and relational withdrawal without reducing the writing itself to selfishness.

The economic record supports this relational emphasis. During the earliest Paris years, the household relied on Hadley's income and Hemingway's journalism while he tried to establish a literary career (Baker, 1969; Reynolds, 1989). His *Toronto Star* assignments paid for reporting trips that also enlarged his European experience. Sherwood Anderson's introductions opened literary doors, Ezra Pound offered practical editorial assistance, and Sylvia Beach's bookshop provided access to an expatriate network. None of this diminishes Hemingway's talent. It locates talent within money, mobility, friendship, patronage, and time protected for writing. McLain's attention to Hadley's support consequently restores an enabling condition that a career-centered narrative can treat as background.

The documented publication sequence clarifies how rapidly the balance changed. *In Our Time* reached an American publisher in October 1925. Hemingway wrote *The Torrents of Spring* partly to end his relationship with Boni and Liveright, then moved to Scribner's. *The Sun Also Rises* appeared in October 1926 after extensive drafting and revision (Justice, 2025a, 2025b). Professional success therefore arrived not as one triumphant moment but through strategic decisions, editorial relationships, and repeated rewriting. McLain turns this process into marital pressure because each professional gain expands the difference between Hemingway's growing public field and Hadley's increasingly domestic role.

The loss of the valise condenses this tension. For Hemingway, it signifies the destruction of work and a rupture in artistic continuity; for Hadley, it becomes a source of guilt that alters the emotional balance of the marriage. Later, the success surrounding

The Sun Also Rises intensifies rather than resolves relational strain. Professional recognition expands Hemingway's opportunities and public identity, while Hadley's position as wife, supporter, and mother becomes increasingly precarious. The novel's achievement is to show ambition as a structure of relationships rather than an isolated personality trait.

Historical evidence makes the valise episode even more revealing. The theft occurred while Hemingway was away in Lausanne covering the Greco-Turkish peace conference, which means that journalistic work, geographical separation, and the transport of creative manuscripts converged in the same event (Justice, 2025a). Hemingway's later memoir gives the loss a dramatic position in his origin story, but its late composition means the account also belongs to the mythology of how a writer survived destruction and began again. McLain redirects that mythology toward the person burdened with responsibility for the loss. The result is not an alternative fact. It is an alternative distribution of narrative consequence.

The relationship with Pauline Pfeiffer further exposes the asymmetry between artistic freedom and relational responsibility. Hadley's retrospective narration interprets betrayal through accumulating scenes of exclusion rather than through a single explanatory judgment. This method complicates Hemingway without absolving him: readers can recognize insecurity, wartime history, and artistic pressure while still attending to the consequences of deception. The emphasis on intimacy, partnership, and competing expectations also benefits from Modellmog's (2012) contextual account of sex, sexuality, and companionate marriage in Hemingway's cultural and literary world. Humanization, in this sense, does not mean exoneration; it means representing agency within a network of motives, choices, and effects.

The chronology of the affair provides an especially strong test of the novel's historical architecture. The Hemingways met Pauline and Virginia Pfeiffer around March 1925. By January 1926, Ernest and Pauline were involved in an affair, and by late April Hadley knew about it. The family nevertheless continued traveling in overlapping social arrangements through the summer. In September, Hadley required a one-hundred-day separation without communication before she would consent to divorce. The archival timeline records that Ernest and Pauline continued exchanging letters. Hadley released them from the condition on November 16, the Hemingways filed for divorce on December 8, and the divorce became final on April 14, 1927. Ernest married Pauline in Paris on May 10 (Justice, 2025a).

A further historical link appears in *A Canary for One*. The JFK Library dates the Hemingways' last train journey as a family to August 12, 1926 and identifies that journey as an inspiration for the story. Its composition is dated to August and September 1926, after friends had begun hearing that the marriage was ending, while its first publication occurred in April 1927, the same month the divorce became final (Justice, 2025a, 2025b). The proximity between family rupture and literary production does not turn the story into a transparent transcript. It does show how quickly lived material could be reshaped into fiction. For this study, the sequence supplies a concrete example of the process that *The Paris Wife* later reverses. Hemingway converted marital experience into compressed fiction and displaced private history into invented characters. McLain returns to the biographical circumstances and imagines the perspective of the wife whose experience had been transformed. The two acts of fictionalization are not equivalent, but their relation makes authorship itself part of the ethical problem.

This sequence matters analytically because it resists a melodramatic model in which betrayal is revealed and the marriage ends immediately. The documentary record instead shows months of suspicion, shared travel, negotiation, attempted separation, correspondence, and legal process. McLain uses retrospective narration to turn that duration into accumulating recognition. Hadley's later voice can identify warning signs that the earlier self did not yet organize into a final explanation. Historical chronology thus supports the novel's gradual structure even though it cannot certify every conversation. It also preserves moral agency. Wartime pain, professional pressure, and insecurity may contextualize Hemingway's conduct, but the continued letters during the agreed separation and the compressed interval between divorce and remarriage anchor the representation in choices with observable consequences.

3.5 Retrospective voice and the ethics of biofiction

The novel's memory structure is retrospective and selective rather than radically nonlinear. Hadley speaks from a position of later knowledge, and that knowledge determines which episodes acquire emphasis. Moments that anticipate loss become more visible because the narrator already knows the outcome. Retrospection therefore produces coherence, but it also signals partiality: the past is arranged according to the needs and injuries of the remembering voice.

The novel makes the instability of retrospection explicit when Hadley observes that "Memory couldn't be counted on" (McLain, 2011, ch. 15). The short declarative sentence interrupts any assumption that first-person intimacy equals historical certainty. By naming memory's unreliability within the narrative itself, McLain simultaneously authorizes Hadley's remembered perspective and marks its limits as evidence.

The historical record contains its own retrospective layer. Hemingway began *A Moveable Feast* in the late 1950s, roughly three decades after the end of his first marriage, and the book appeared in 1964 after his death. The distance between event, composition, and publication matters because the memoir's affectionate recovery of Hadley was written by a famous author who already knew the shape of his career and later marriages. It is therefore both testimony and self-interpretation. When McLain publishes Hadley's fictional account in 2011, she writes back to a memory already organized by Hemingway and by posthumous editorial decisions (Hemingway, 1964; Justice, 2025b). *The Paris Wife* is best understood as a second retrospection that redistributes authority within an existing memorial narrative.

The evidence also complicates the novel's apparent opposition between public Hemingway and private Hadley because Hemingway eventually participated in recovering Hadley himself. In *A Moveable Feast* he cast the early marriage as a lost period of poverty, companionship, and artistic promise. That late tenderness is historically important, but it arrived after three further marriages, international fame, the Nobel Prize, and decades of autobiographical self-construction. It cannot be read as the untouched voice of the young husband. Nor does it cancel the documented affair and divorce. Instead, the memoir demonstrates that Hemingway's image of Hadley changed as his own life became retrospective. McLain inherits this already revised Hadley and gives her sustained narrative authority. The result is a contest between memories produced under unequal conditions. Hemingway's account carries the prestige of authorship and personal witness, while McLain's Hadley receives fictional interior fullness that the surviving public record cannot independently verify. Historical

evidence keeps both forms of authority under pressure. It confirms that Hadley was present at the foundational events of the Paris career, while reminding readers that neither a famous man's memoir nor a later novelist's sympathetic reconstruction can exhaust her experience. The gap between documentary presence and subjective knowledge remains biofiction's central condition and the source of its enduring ethical uncertainty.

Eakin's (1999) account of narrative identity, together with Krsteva's (2023) analysis of identity construction in *The Paris Wife*, helps explain why the remembered Hemingway cannot be separated from the remembered Hadley. In narrating him, the speaker also constructs an account of herself as lover, wife, mother, supporter, and eventual survivor of the marriage. Hemingway's characterization is relational because every judgment about his intensity, ambition, silence, or betrayal also defines the narrator's changing place beside him.

This relational construction creates the novel's central ethical tension. Biofiction can restore visibility to a person marginalized by a famous partner's public legacy, but it achieves that restoration through an invented voice. Warnings about ventriloquism, gendered power, and biographical authenticity are therefore directly relevant (Boldrini, 2022; Novak & Ní Dhúill, 2022). McLain's novel is most persuasive when read as a self-conscious interpretation rather than privileged access to historical consciousness. Its truth claim is not that events happened exactly as narrated, but that changing the focalizing subject can reveal the assumptions and exclusions built into the dominant Hemingway story.

The same redistribution of authority can, however, produce a counter-bias. Because the narrative remains close to Hadley's remembered injury, it can encourage an idealized Hadley and a correspondingly villainized Hemingway-Pauline triangle. Pauline is especially vulnerable to simplification because her motives and interiority are filtered largely through the wife who experiences her as a threat, while Hemingway's contradictions are frequently organized according to their consequences for Hadley. The ethical issue is not whether Hadley's pain is legitimate, but whether the focalized distribution of knowledge allows one perspective to appear morally exhaustive. Biofiction therefore faces a double responsibility: it can correct an archive that marginalizes a less publicly documented life while simultaneously creating a new hierarchy of sympathy. McLain's Hadley is most critically useful when treated as a situated fictional consciousness rather than the final adjudicator of blame (Boldrini, 2022; Novak & Ní Dhúill, 2022).

The most responsible reading therefore uses historical evidence in two directions. Dates and documents can confirm where McLain follows the record, as with the stolen valise, the publication of *The Sun Also Rises*, the one-hundred-day condition, and the divorce. The same evidence can mark where the novel moves beyond verification, especially in private dialogue, remembered sensation, and causal claims about desire. This double use of history strengthens rather than weakens literary interpretation. It allows the novel to be valued for restoring relational visibility without converting imaginative plausibility into biographical certainty.

Hadley's historical position makes that redistribution significant. The JFK Library notes that she was the only one of Hemingway's wives who did not maintain a career outside the home, a circumstance consistent with gendered expectations surrounding marriage and family in her period (Justice, 2025a). That fact helps explain why the traditional archive can appear asymmetrical. Hemingway left a vast body of

manuscripts, correspondence, journalism, and public statements tied to professional authorship. Hadley's labor and perception were more often recorded through marriage, photographs, family chronology, and other people's accounts. Biofiction can respond to this imbalance by constructing interior continuity, yet the scarcity of first-person evidence also increases the risk of ventriloquism.

Table 1. Narrative patterns in McLain's reconstruction of Hemingway.

Narrative episode	Analytical pattern	Interpretive significance
Return to the Italian front	Past and present fail to align; wartime recollection is emotionally charged but incomplete.	Memory explains narrative tension without functioning as clinical diagnosis.
Loss of the manuscript valise	A documented event becomes a shared but asymmetrical experience of loss, guilt, and resentment.	Biofiction converts chronology into relational meaning.
Writing career and public recognition	Discipline and ambition coexist with dependence on domestic, editorial, and social support.	The public legend is reframed through hidden relational costs.
Pauline Pfeiffer and marital dissolution	Hadley's later knowledge organizes earlier scenes as signs of exclusion and betrayal.	Retrospective coherence reveals both the power and partiality of focalization.
Paris arrival and expatriate network (1921-1922)	Archival dates place journalism, literary introductions, travel, and marriage in the same formative period.	The writer's rise is interpreted as socially and materially supported rather than solitary.
First World War wounding (1918) and later return	The bodily injury is documented, while its private emotional meaning remains mediated by memory and fiction.	Historical certainty about the event does not justify retrospective clinical diagnosis.

4. Conclusion

Paula McLain's *The Paris Wife* reimagines Ernest Hemingway by relocating narrative authority to Hadley Richardson. The novel retains a documented biographical framework but uses retrospective focalization, imagined interiority, and emotional causation to transform public chronology into relational history. Within this structure, Hemingway appears as a gifted and disciplined writer whose public confidence coexists with guardedness, insecurity, and choices that damage those closest to him.

The analysis demonstrates that memory in the novel is best understood as a selective organizing practice rather than a transparent recovery of the past. Wartime experience, the loss of manuscripts, professional recognition, and marital betrayal acquire meaning because a later Hadley narratively connects them. This perspective

humanizes Hemingway, but it does not establish an authoritative psychological diagnosis or a complete biographical truth.

The added historical evidence sharpens this conclusion. Institutional records confirm the 1918 wounding, the December 1922 manuscript theft, the October 1923 birth of Bumby, the 1925-1926 publication sequence, the prolonged dissolution of the marriage, and the final divorce in April 1927. Drafts and publication records also demonstrate the sustained labor behind Hemingway's early reputation. These control points support McLain's broad chronology while setting limits around her invented access to motive and feeling. History makes the interpretation more accountable, but it does not eliminate mediation.

The novel's broader contribution lies in making the ethics of life narration visible. Biofiction can challenge a dominant cultural myth and recover a marginalized perspective, yet it remains an act of speaking for historical others. *The Paris Wife* should therefore be read neither as documentary biography nor as unconstrained invention, but as a mediated interpretation that invites readers to reconsider who has the authority to narrate a famous life and what is gained - and risked - when fiction enters the archive.

These conclusions are necessarily bounded by the study's design. The analysis examines a single novel and depends primarily on one focalizing consciousness; it therefore cannot establish Hadley Richardson's historical interiority, generalize McLain's strategy to biofiction as a whole, or resolve competing versions of Hemingway's private life. Comparative research across other Hemingway biofictions, biographies, memoirs, or narratives centered on different partners could test whether similar patterns of redistributed sympathy, evidentiary uncertainty, and ethical risk persist.

Read in this way, McLain's reconstruction neither destroys Hemingway's achievement nor repeats his legend untouched. It places the documented writer inside the relationships that enabled, witnessed, and suffered the making of that legend. The historical Hemingway remains recoverable in fragments, including dates, drafts, letters, photographs, legal events, and publications. The private Hemingway remains contested. *The Paris Wife* gains critical force by staging the distance between those two forms of knowledge and by giving that distance a voice associated with Hadley.

References

- Armengol, J. M. (2020). Performing manhood through animal killings? Revisions of hunting as a performance of masculinity in Ernest Hemingway's late writings. *Men and Masculinities*, 23(5), 833-851. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X20965454>
- Baker, C. (1969). *Ernest Hemingway: A life story*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Boldrini, L. (2022). Biofiction, heterobiography and the ethics of speaking of, for and as another. *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature*, 6(1), 18-37. <http://www.isljournal.com/Archives/798.html>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Caruth, C. (1996). *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative, and history*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Dearborn, M. V. (2017). *Ernest Hemingway: A biography*. Alfred A. Knopf.

- Dodman, T. (2015). No separate peace: *A Farewell to Arms* as trauma narrative. In *Shell shock, memory, and the novel in the wake of World War I* (pp. 83-110). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316287040.004>
- Duarte, A. M., Martins, C. B., Marques, M. C., & Mesquita, F. C. (2020). Deepening the analysis of literary texts among university students using close reading and writing: A pilot study. *Anglo Saxonica*, 17(1), Article 7, 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.5334/as.25>
- Eakin, P. J. (1999). *How our lives become stories: Making selves*. Cornell University Press.
- Hemingway, E. (1964). *A moveable feast*. Charles Scribner's Sons.
- Justice, H. (2025a). Hadley Richardson Hemingway (Mowrer). *John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum*. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/hemingway/hadley-richardson-hemingway-mowrer>
- Justice, H. (2025b). Hemingway's works (by first publication). John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum. <https://www.jfklibrary.org/hemingway/works/by-first-publication>
- Kennedy, J. G. (2012). Modernist Paris and the expatriate literary milieu. In D. A. Modellmog & S. del Gizzo (Eds.), *Ernest Hemingway in context* (pp. 153-162). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511862458.020>
- Krsteva, M. (2023). Narrative identity and image building in *The Paris Wife*. In *Towards a theory of life-writing: Genre blending* (pp. 70-96). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003327790-6>
- Lackey, M. (2016). Locating and defining the bio in biofiction. *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies*, 31(1), 3-10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2016.1095583>
- Lackey, M. (2021). The autonomy of art and the legitimization of biofiction: An aesthetic turning point in twentieth-century literature. *Modern Language Quarterly*, 82(3), 345-369. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-9090306>
- McLain, P. (2011). *The Paris wife*. Ballantine Books.
- Modellmog, D. A. (2012). Sex, sexuality, and marriage. In D. A. Modellmog & S. del Gizzo (Eds.), *Ernest Hemingway in context* (pp. 357-366). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511862458.042>
- Nobel Prize Outreach AB. (n.d.). Ernest Hemingway - Facts. *NobelPrize.org*. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1954/hemingway/facts/>
- Novak, J., & Ní Dhúill, C. (2022). Imagining gender in biographical fiction: Introduction. In J. Novak & C. Ní Dhúill (Eds.), *Imagining gender in biographical fiction* (pp. 1-46). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-09019-6_1
- Putnam, T. (2006). Hemingway on war and its aftermath. Prologue, 38(1). National Archives. <https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/spring/hemingway.html>
- Reynolds, M. S. (1989). *Hemingway: The Paris years*. Blackwell.
- Spanier, S. (2012). Letters. In D. A. Modellmog & S. del Gizzo (Eds.), *Ernest Hemingway in context* (pp. 33-42). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511862458.006>
- Strychacz, T. (2012). Masculinity. In D. A. Modellmog & S. del Gizzo (Eds.), *Ernest Hemingway in context* (pp. 277-286). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511862458.033>
- Thurston, M. (2025). Life. In *The Cambridge introduction to Ernest Hemingway* (pp. 3-20). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009422673.002>

- Tyler, L. (2012). Critical overview of the biographies. In D. A. Modellmog & S. del Gizzo (Eds.), *Ernest Hemingway in context* (pp. 22-32). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511862458.005>
- Wood, S. A. (2020). Trauma studies: Hemingway's neurological and corporeal injuries. In S. del Gizzo & K. Curnutt (Eds.), *The new Hemingway studies* (pp. 130-145). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108860062.009>