

Relationship between
man and nature in the
sun also rises



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Bright daylight, a river, cool breezes, green and rolling countryside, oxen, cattle, pigeons, valleys, hills stretching off back toward the sea, children playing in the hot sun – when Jake and his company first perceive ‘Nature’ in *The Sun Also Rises* (in chapter ten) it is amazing in its unrestrained, unrelenting beauty, yet it fails to amaze those men who actually perceive it; men who, instead, adopt a blase attitude of nonchalance towards the extraordinary settings into which they venture. In Jake’s own words: “While we were waiting [for Robert Cohn] I saw a cockroach on the parquet floor that must have been at least three inches long. I pointed him out to Bill and then put my shoe on him. We agreed he must have just come in from the garden. It was really an awfully clean hotel.” Such is the relationship between nature and the misguided youth of the ‘Lost Generation’: nature is to be seen, to be appreciated, to be enjoyed, but also to be altered or destroyed or even belittled for the amusement of a generation who find their very identity in having been involved in one of history’s greatest acts of destruction.” “We’re going trout-fishing,” says Bill. “We’re going trout-fishing in the Irati River, and we’re going to get tight now and at lunch on the wine of the country, and then take a swell bus ride.” Nature, in the novel, is depicted as something in possession of astounding beauty, but it is not described as being astoundingly beautiful; that is, its beauty is apparent to the reader, yet the characters in the novel, most especially the narrator, do not respond to – or offer an opinion on – that beauty; and sometimes the very opposite is true. Consider Bill’s adamant claim, above, in which he speaks as though he is somehow entitled to take fish from the river for whatever purpose he pleases, and in which the river and its bountiful contents – “the wine of the country” – excite him only as much as the <https://assignbuster.com/relationship-between-man-and-nature-in-the-sun-also-rises/>

prospect of a simple bus ride. Later, in chapter twelve, similar sentiments arise: " We have to follow this road along the ridge, cross these hills, go through the woods on the far hills, and come down to the Irati valley," I pointed out to Bill." That's a hell of a hike."" It's too far to go and fish and come back the same day, comfortably."" Comfortably. That's a nice word. We'll have to go like hell to get there and back and have any fishing at all." Here, nature is held in stark contrast against the world-weary, pleasure-seeking youth of the narrative. ' Comfort' is essentially the only thing these characters care about; it is the only value they hold. Even when they are in wild, rugged, unfamiliar country, they stay indoors in hotels getting drunk instead of going outside to see the local sights, they kill the local wildlife whether it be a cockroach or a fish, and they do so for purposes of personal fulfillment, for fun, or, again, simply for ' comfort.' Not even the river is held sacred, not even after the effort the party goes to in order to reach it in the first place. Instead of savoring its subtle beauty and isolation, which are made evident to us, Jake appreciates only its chillingly cold temperature, which he uses to cool two bottles of wine. The attitude of the characters towards the nature that surrounds them, here, is one of ambivalence. However, it worsens; it changes from ambivalence to destruction, and finally falls victim to the notion that the destruction these characters inflict upon nature is actually an improvement on the original scenario. Consider the scene in which Jake catches a number of trout on the fishing expedition: " I felt that I had [a trout on the line] and brought him, fighting and bending the rod almost double, out of the boiling water at the foot of the falls, and swung him up and onto the dam." First, he simply catches the fish; then, he utterly destroys it: " He was a good trout, and I banged his head against the timber

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so that he quivered out straight, and then slipped him into my bag." Later, Jake finds himself with six trout to his credit: " I laid them all out, side by side, all their heads pointing the same way, and looked at them." This is the first time on the entire expedition that any of the characters take a step back from their own little self-contained party and look at something outside of themselves; and, as is true of their nature, Jake chooses to look at something completely devoid of life. As he does so, he remarks that " they were beautifully colored" and this is the first time, too, that he uses the word ' beautiful' even though the beauty in his surroundings is always apparent to the reader, while the beauty in the subject he focuses on - the fish - has been tainted by death. Jake continues: " I slit [the fish] and shucked out the insides, gills and all, and tossed them over across the river. I took the trout ashore, washed them in the cold, smoothly heavy water above the dam, and then picked some ferns and packed them all in the bag." Now, not only does he utterly tear the six fish to shreds, and then pollute the river from which they came with their innards and offal, but he also rips away at the foliage around the river in order to preserve his catch, and finally, he marvels at the beauty of his own handiwork: "[The trout] looked nice in the ferns," he says, almost as if they were of no use whatsoever when they were in the river. This is a complete inversion of traditional aesthetic priorities, held by a man typical of his generation who holds no regard for the preservation of a balanced environment in which he is only a visitor. His status as a visitor - and the status of his companions as visitors - is exemplified nowhere more-so than in an example of their joint behavior whilst on the fishing trip, which exposes their naivete and self-centeredness when in an environment that exists outside of the confines of ' comfort': It was a beech wood and the

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trees were very old. Their roots bulked above the ground and the branches were twisted. We walked on the road between the thick trunks of the old beeches and the sunlight came through the leaves in light patches on the grass. The trees were big, and the foliage was thick but it was not gloomy. There was no undergrowth, only the smooth grass, very green and fresh, and the big gray trees well spaced as though it were a park." This is country," Bill said. But Bill is wrong - it cannot completely be country, or as distant from civilization as he implies it is; after all, Jake notes that it is not unlike a park, which is in itself nothing more than nature tamed by man; and, moreover, forever following the scent of 'comfort' even in the wilderness, the party of young men always follows the beaten path of the road, taking special care not to veer away from the visible track. Indeed, the first time they even see the mountains that provide a backdrop to the scenery in which their expedition takes place, they are sitting in a car on a road: "As the bus ground slowly up the road we could see other mountains coming up in the south." And when they are as comfortable as can be in the wilds of nature - that is, eating roast chicken for lunch and getting drunk on the wine they chilled in the river - Bill once again pokes fun at nature: "Let no man be ashamed to kneel here in the great out-of-doors. Remember the woods were God's first temples." Their attitudes towards nature, then, expose the inner conflict of these lost young men: they are willing to poke fun, to provoke and belittle, but not insofar as it would take them away from the luxuries that might otherwise constitute their everyday lives. Nature, for Jake and for Mike and for Bill, is something to be undervalued, chided, trivialized, provoked like a wild animal until violence erupts - if the bull is a symbol of nature's fury unleashed, then their fascination with bullfighting is evidence enough of this.

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Further, this attitude towards nature and towards things 'beneath them' in general manifests itself in the overall character of these men by way of Mike's intense dislike of Robert Cohn, the only member of the group who has enough strength and skill (via his training as a boxer) to actually provoke violence that he could overcome, and also the only member of the group who chooses not to do so. The novel is prefaced with a quote from Ecclesiastes: "The sun also riseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to the place where he arose. ... The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits. ... All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again." This quote serves a number of purposes. Chief amongst these is the assurance that, even after this misguided generation of lost souls has passed on, there will come subsequent generations of people who are just as lost and just as misguided. However, the Biblical passage also reminds us of the eternality of nature, of the rising and setting and rising of the sun and the flowing of waters from the rivers into the sea and back again. Therefore, it underscores just how desperately the youth of the lost generation wander and meander through life. If it is in their attitude to provoke that which is 'beneath' them, as outlined above, and if nature is considered to be 'beneath' them, as they see it, with the bull being the epitome of all that is wild and untamed in nature, then the quote from Ecclesiastes is the proverbial carrot dangling from a wire in front of the donkey's eyes. No matter how assuredly or conscientiously these men search for something to belittle or provoke, and no matter how often they attempt to spoil the natural surroundings in which they find themselves - whether that attempt

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springs from the belief that they are making an improvement on those surroundings, or from a knee-jerk reaction to provoke a fight – those surroundings, nature, its cockroaches and its bulls and its cattle, its oxen, its hillsides and rivers and pigeons, will always be greater, bigger and more elusive than the men who seek to change it. This is how nature fits into Hemingway's story: not merely as a picturesque backdrop to the events of the narrative, but also as the gentle backdrop against which the alternately violent and self-centered nature of the characters is revealed to us, so as to show by way of comparison and contrast just how 'lost' they are. It is also as a reminder that the world is an enormously mystifying and diverse place; and we realize that these characters have simplified that diversity to fit within the confines of a pre-planned idealized sense of 'comfort'; and therefore, whenever they do seek to alter or belittle nature in some way, whether it be passively or violently, then they, being from a smaller world, are inevitably fighting a losing battle. They are not simply the 'Lost Generation' because they wander on aimlessly, pointlessly; but rather, they are the 'Lost Generation' because, when they do identify a goal to be achieved – usually a negative or ego-centric ambition, at that – it is not only a similarly pointless aspiration, but it is also too big to be grasped by any man: they frequently set their sights on the violent alteration of something that could easily destroy them; and, in those instances where they are too timid to do so, they simply step aside and watch others partake in that reciprocal destruction; that is, bullfighting. The sun also rises, and sets, and rises again; theirs is a world of violence born from restlessness, and that restlessness, in turn, is born from the violence – the war – that gave them such a life in the first place. Nature, more than that, is what they pursue to

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abate their restlessness, yet at the same time it is the target of their frustration and their destructive impulses, as instigators and spectators alike.