

Masculine power,  
insecurities, and  
gender performance  
in the sun also rises



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Ernest Hemingway, the poster child of modernism's lost generation, frequently tackles masculinity and manhood in the subjects of his novels, using characters that reflect parts of himself and the other men of this wasted generation to explore the psychosocial impacts of war and other struggles on men. *The Sun Also Rises* is no exception to the rule, with some scholars arguing that the "question of gender constitutes the basis of the story," putting the importance of the masculine archetype into focus (Elliot 77). There are innumerable references to masculinity which occupy a position in stark contrast to the insecurities that most of the male characters have. Beyond the insights that Hemingway gives the reader into the thoughts and fears of these men, the reader can also glimpse into the author's focus on masculinity in his descriptive style, and his choice of subjects. Hemingway appears fascinated, and perhaps disturbed by the masculinity and masculine insecurities that have so permeated his novel. What's more, he frames masculinity through culture, which helps to establish how society is implicated in masculinity through gender performance.

Early on in the novel, Hemingway uses Jake as a vehicle to introduce the unrealistic and unattainable standards that society has established for masculinity. "Nobody ever lives their life all the way up except bull-fighters" (18). As Robert Cohn attempts to convince Jake to embark on a South American adventure and airs concerns that he feels that his life is passing him by, Jake makes this succinct remark that is rich in its implications regarding masculinity. The topic of bullfighting alone is one steeped in macho masculine metaphor. An event in which a man, dressed and idolized in extravagant uniform, exerts his force over a gargantuan bull in a battle to

the death represents the social expectations for men to be dominant, controlling, violent individuals who are at the top of the food chain, gastronomically, socially, and sexually. This comment demonstrates Jake's negativity towards his own life, lacking in his ability to dominate sexually, and also suggests that if a man is not literally or otherwise grabbing a bull by its horns, he won't live a fulfilled life. Robert's response shows an interesting view to the contrary. "I'm not interested in bull-fighters. That's an abnormal life" (10). Here, Robert is calling out this reflection of masculine expectations as warped, suggesting that the idolization of the bull-fighter and what he culturally and socially represents is not healthy.

The introduction of Robert as a character gives the reader a look at how gender derived inferiority is at play in the novel. First, the discussion of boxing and the way in which Cohn used it to counter the insecurities that he felt is the first coupling of masculinity with violence in the novel. He was made to feel inferior as a Jewish student at Princeton and resorts to violence as a defense. Next, he is shown to be inferior to Frances, his fiancée. "I watched him walk back to the café holding his paper. I rather liked him and evidently she led him quite a life" (7). This comment, from Jake's point of view, suggests that Robert is incapable of leading Frances in life, that she is in control of the relationship. Robert appears to be aware of this inferiority as his realization that "he had not been everything to his first wife" is described in Chapter 2 (8). The inability to lead in romantic relationships is an issue that is repeatedly addressed throughout the novel, for many male characters. Jake cannot get Brett to commit to him because of his impotence and Mike cannot keep Brett from exploring other sexual relationships. While

this takes an implied anti-feminist stance towards the submissive role of women in relationships, it does help highlight how each of these men feel inadequate in their masculinity.

Jake, our story's narrator, is a dysfunctional product of socially-defined gender expectations. His self awareness and homophobia are highlighted early on in the novel. " Somehow they always made me angry. I know they are supposed to be amusing, and you should be tolerant, but I wanted to swing on one, any one, anything to shatter that superior, simpering composure" (20). In this statement, the reader is exposed to Jake's homophobia and tendency to resort to violence while revealing society's attitude towards homosexuality. This idea that homosexuals should be seen as funny and put up with is disgusting and intolerant, but Jake cannot even bring himself to think that kindly of them. The fact that he perceives them to be composing themselves in an affected, superior fashion seems to indicate a self awareness and inferiority that Jake may feel, due to his impotence.

Scholar Ira Elliott illuminates this instance, " Jake's attitude toward the homosexuals—the way he degrades them and casts them as his rivals," reveals, " the extent to which sexual categories and gender roles are cultural constructions" (78). He continues to explain that gender - not to be confused with biological sex - expressions of any kind are effectively performance art installments, with an individual mirroring the constructed views of what is masculine and what is feminine in their behavior. There is neither a cranial implant nor a gland sending messages that define the male or female, society sets those parameters. Elliott argues that we conform to expressions of socialized gender and perform and behave around those gender

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structures. He supports this contention by examining the ways in which Jake gathers his information in the encounter with the homosexuals. Jake deduces their sexual orientation based on the gestures and styles of the men. These behaviors and traits, such as clothing or hairstyle, are set against societal definitions of gender and sexuality. Mr. Barnes assumes their sexual preference based strictly on their behavior and appearance, which does seem to indicate that gender is a highly socialized cultural construct (Elliott 78). Operating within these understandings, Jake's disgust likely stems from the idea that within this binary social structure of gender, there is no acceptable feminized male. Therefore, he perceives these men to be performing as female, which would cause some cognitive dissonance on Jake's part and results in his negative feelings towards them.

James A. Puckett echoes the idea of gender performance being a social and cultural one and specifically references *The Sun Also Rises*. "Masculinity for Hemingway's characters is under continuous negotiation and necessarily relies upon the judgment of others, holding no significance outside of a social context" (126). He supports this claim by analyzing the character Francis Macaomber, who struggles with cowardliness and fear and the way he is judged by his public audience - namely his wife - through societal lenses of appropriate and acceptable masculinity.

When Jake recounts his recovery in the Italian hospital in the war, he is reminded of the colonel who visited him. "I was all bandaged up. But they had told him about it. Then he made that wonderful speech: 'You, a foreigner, an Englishman' (any foreigner was an Englishman) 'have given more than your life'" (31). In claiming that Jake's erectile dysfunction is <https://assignbuster.com/masculine-power-insecurities-and-gender-performance-in-the-sun-also-rises/>

worse than death, the colonel speaks on behalf of a gendered community in which the ability to perform sexually has more social value than life or service. This is further demonstrative of the twisted priorities of the gendered social expectations for men. It's important to note that the characters responsible for perpetuating these expectations are not just the men, but the women as well. Brett reinforces these warped values by refusing a commitment to Jake on account of his impotence.

Jake's very impotence is a crucial facet in interpreting gender in *The Sun Also Rises*. It seems that if Hemingway truly adopted the hyper-masculinized expectations of society, that he would not have made his protagonist, Jake, impotent. That quality would not be one that he would want his readers to positively associate with the novel or himself, by extension. It begs readers to question that deliberate choice and its significance to the plot. New Jersey City University English professor David Blackmore offers this suggestion, "I would posit that Jake's emasculation functions as a metaphor for the whole complex of his anxieties about masculinity and sexuality" (53). This argument seems perfectly reasonable and likely, given the frequency with which phallic imagery is met with anxiety from Jake. Blackmore focuses more closely on the nature of Jake's impotence, pointing out that Hemingway cited Jake's condition in a 1951 letter, "' Jake has lost his penis but not his testicles or spermatic cord – and therefore not his sexual desire" (66). Had Hemingway opted for the reversal of that, it would significantly change the interpretation of Jake and his situation. Blackmore explains, "if desire rather than behavior defines sexual identity, Jake need not perform heterosexually in order to be a heterosexual" (54). This idea of desire trumping performance

in some way conflicts with the idea that Hemingway is playing with gender as performance. However, desire's importance in modernist literature makes Blackmore's case an interesting and important perspective that it would be unwise to dismiss.

Perhaps what first appears to be conflict between the ideas of sexual desire and gender identity that is observed in Jake's character is actually another way in which Hemingway is fighting the confines of gender performance brought on by culture's binary gender definitions. By choosing to juxtapose Jake's disability with his heterosexual desire, the author discredits and dissolves the power of gender performance and the norms surrounding it.

Modernist scholar Greg Forter has his own view on male social power and male sexuality. Hemingway's decision to divorce Jake and his physical manhood show how difficult it was for men in modernism to identify as men. Forter continues, "the wound cuts them off from the source of their own undoubted virility - a source that, in our cultural imaginary, is the root of male social power as well" (26). Once again, there is a suggestion that culture has dictated meaningless criteria for what constitutes masculinity and masculine power. However, Forter poses a fairly novel claim, stating that there is a duality to the impact of Jake's affliction. Not only does the veteran lose the phallic, dominating power of the masculine male, but he also loses the "genteel, sentimental, and implicitly feminine masculinity," which leaves him in a psycho-sexual limbo (26). When gender is forced into a male-female system in which there is a binary within each category - male masculinity and female masculinity - there is an empty space lying on a spectrum not represented by the binary system. Jake lies, if readers are to accept Forter's <https://assignbuster.com/masculine-power-insecurities-and-gender-performance-in-the-sun-also-rises/>

argument, in that zone, which Hemingway seems to be aware of. Even Jake is arguably aware enough of his habitation in this no-man's land, and his feeling out of place reveals itself in the implicit anxieties regarding masculinity that he displays throughout the novel.

In Paris, Jake walks past the statue of Marshal Ney, who appears to be a painful reminder of Jake's impotence and associated lack of power. " He looked very fine, Marshal Ney in his top-boots, gesturing with his sword among the green new horse-chestnut leaves" (29) The pointing and directing actions and the sword itself speak to the phallic nature of the statue. The new green growth of the leaves suggests propagation, a reproductive act for which Jake is ill-equipped. It is important to note that this is an important figure of sexual masculinity, combined with a weapon. Hemingway more than once associates male sex imagery with control and violence or weaponry.

At the novel's close, the reader sees the final interaction between Brett and Jake in the taxi in what is, again, filled with phallic imagery. " Ahead was a mounted policeman in khaki directing traffic. He raised his baton. The car slowed suddenly pressing Brett against me" (247). The policeman is " mounted," likely an intentional choice of words which has sexual connotations. Mounting an animal suggests a sexual dominance and power, which Jake lacks. The policeman and his baton, respectively representative of power and violence and male genitalia, is in further contrast to Jake's impotence. They are pressed together, but only as the result of the control and power exerted by this policeman, not in reaction to Jake's actions. The officer's role, one of - at the time - masculine power and physical control, <https://assignbuster.com/masculine-power-insecurities-and-gender-performance-in-the-sun-also-rises/>



could be interpreted as another example of how gender performance manifests itself within a culture. Just as culture has assigned characteristics to gender which we mirror within society, those gender assignments and associated performances have historically extended themselves to the workplace, with different gendered performances being expected of certain professions, such as police work or military service, the latter being a role consistently presented in Hemingway's works.

Hemingway's own macho-presenting performance and his written fixation on violence and power could suggest that he may have looked unfavorably on men who didn't fit the traditional masculine gender mold. However, with an impotent protagonist, it's clear that he is more sympathetic to masculine insecurities that arise from the expectations that shape and fail the men in his stories. Furthermore, research suggests that Hemingway may have also viewed gender more complicatedly than one might assume, as he utilizes the social and cultural manifestations of gender to display and normalize male insecurities. In utilizing gender constructions and gender performance within this work, Hemingway is in a way putting the culture that designs these systems on trial, in a critique that does not align itself with the way Hemingway's masculine persona and legacy have been continuously interpreted.

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