

# Hemingway's depiction of man from the sun also rises



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Hemingway's Depiction of a Man in *The Sun Also Rises* Common among many of Ernest Hemingway's novels is the concept popularly known as the "Hemingway hero", an ideal character readily accepted by American readers as a "man's man". In *The Sun Also Rises*, four different men are contrasted and compared in the world of the 1920s as they engage in some form of relationship with Lady Brett Ashley, a near-nymphomaniac Englishwoman who indulges in her passion for sex and control. Brett plans to marry her fiancée for superficial reasons, completely ruins one man emotionally and spiritually, separates from another to preserve the idea of their short-lived affair and to avoid self-destruction, and denies and disgraces the only man whom she loves dearly. All her relationships occur in a period of months, as Brett either accepts or rejects certain values or traits of each man (she usually rejects him completely, though, after she's through with him). Brett, as a dynamic and self-controlled woman, and her four love interests help demonstrate Hemingway's standard definition of a man and/or masculinity. Each man Brett has a relationship within the novel possesses distinct qualities that enable Hemingway to explore what it is to truly be a man. The Hemingway man thus presented is a man of action, of self-discipline and self-reliance, and of strength and courage to confront all weaknesses, fears, failures, and even death. Jake Barnes, as the narrator and supposed hero of the novel, fell in love with Brett some years ago and is still powerfully and uncontrollably in love with her. However, Jake is unfortunately a casualty of the war, having been emasculated in an accident. Still adjusting to his impotence at the beginning of the novel, Jake has lost all power and desire to have sex. Because of this, Jake and Brett cannot be lovers and all attempts at a relationship that is sexually fulfilling are simply futile. Brett is a

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passionate, lustful woman who is driven by the most intimate and loving act two may share, something that Jake just cannot provide her with. Jake's emasculation only puts the two in an extremely ironic situation. Brett is a very passionate woman but is denied the first man she feels true love and admiration for. Jake has loved Brett for years and cannot "have her" because of his inability to have sex. It is obvious that their love is mutual when Jake tries to kiss Brett in their cab ride home: "' You mustn't. You must know. I can't stand it, that's all. Oh darling, please understand!', ' Don't you love me?', ' Love you? I simply turn all to jelly when you touch me'" (Hemingway 26). This scene is indicative of their relationship as Jake and Brett hopelessly desire each other but realize the hollowness of any further endeavors. Together, they have both tried to defy reality, but failed. Jake is frustrated by Brett's reappearance into his life and her confession that she is miserably unhappy. Jake asks Brett to go off with him to the country for a bit: "' Couldn't we go off in the country for a while?', ' It wouldn't be any good. I'll go if you like. But I couldn't live quietly in the country. Not with my own true love', ' I know', ' Isn't it rotten? There isn't any use my telling you I love you', ' You know I love you', ' Let's not talk2E Talking's all bilge'" (Hemingway 55). Brett declines Jake's pointless attempt at being together. Both Brett and Jake know that any relationship beyond a friendship cannot be pursued. Jake is still adjusting to his impotence while Brett will not sacrifice a sexual relationship for the man she loves. Since Jake can never be Brett's lover, they are forced to create a new relationship for themselves, perhaps one far more dangerous than that of mere lovers - they have become best friends. This presents a great difficulty for Jake, because Brett's presence is both pleasurable and agonizing for him. Brett constantly reminds him of his

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handicap and thus Jake is challenged as a man in the deepest, most personal sense possible. After the departure of their first meeting, Jake feels miserable: " This was Brett, that I had felt like crying about. Then I thought of her walking up the street and of course in a little while I felt like hell again" (Hemingway 34). Lady Brett Ashley serves as a challenge to a weakness that Jake must confront. Since his war experience, Jake has attempted to reshape the man he is and the first step in doing this is to accept his impotence. Despite Brett's undeniable love for Jake, she is engaged to marry another. Mike Campbell is Brett's fiancée, her next planned marriage after two already failed ones. Mike is ridiculously in love with Brett and though she knows this she still decides to marry him. In fact, Brett is only to marry Mike because she is tired of drifting and simply needs an anchor. Mike loves Brett but is not dependent on her affection. Moreover, he knows about and accepts Brett's brief affairs with other men: "' Mark you. Brett's had affairs with men before. She tells me all about everything'" (Hemingway 143). Mike appreciates Brett's beauty, as do all the other males in the novel, but perhaps this is as deep as his love for her goes. In his first scene in the novel, Mike cannot stop commenting on Brett's beauty: "' I say Brett, you are a lovely piece. Don't you think she's beautiful?'" (Hemingway 79). He repeatedly proposes similar questions but does not make any observant or profound comments on his wife-to-be. In fact, throughout the entire novel, Mike continues this pattern, once referring to Brett as " just a lovely, healthy wench," his most observant remark. Furthermore, Mike exhibits no self-control when he becomes drunk, making insensitive statements that show his true lack of regard for Brett and others. After Brett shows interest in Pedro Romero, the bullfighter, Mike rudely yells: " Tell him bulls have no

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balls! Tell him Brett wants to see him put on those green pants. Tell him Brett is dying to know how he can get into those pants!" (Hemingway 176). In addition, Mike cannot contemplate the complexities of Brett and her relationships: "' Brett's got a bull-fighter. She had a Jew named Cohn, but he turned out badly. Brett's got a bull-fighter. A beautiful, bloody bull-fighter'" (Hemingway 206). Despite Brett's brief affair with the bullfighter, she will eventually return to Mike who will no doubt openly welcome her again. Brett is a strong woman, who can control most men, and Mike is no exception. She vaguely simplifies their relationship when she explains to Jake that she plans to return to him: "' He's so damned nice and he's so awful. He's my sort of thing'" (Hemingway 243). Mike is not complex enough to challenge Brett, but she does go on and decide to accept his simplicity anyway. Furthermore, despite his engagement with Brett, Mike betrays Hemingway's ideal man. Although he is self-reliant, Mike possesses little self-control or dignity. Engaged to one man and in love with another, Brett demonstrates her disregard for the 1920's double standards. Very early in the beginning of the novel, she reveals to Jake that she had invited Robert Cohn to go with her on a trip to San Sebastian. Cohn, a Jewish, middle-aged writer disillusioned with his life in Paris, wants to escape to South America where he envisions meeting the ebony princesses he has fantasized about. However, he cannot persuade Jake to accompany him and then completely forgets about this idea upon meeting Brett. Cohn is immediately enamored with her beauty and falls in love with her: "' There's a certain quality about her, a certain fineness. She seems to be absolutely fine and straight'" (Hemingway 38). Cohn is immature in his idealization of Brett's beauty, as he falls in " love at first sight". Furthermore, like an adolescent, he attempts to satisfy his

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curiosity about Brett by asking Jake numerous questions about her. After Cohn and Brett's short-lived affair in San Sebastian, Cohn is nervous around Jake: "Cohn had been rather nervous ever since we had met at Bayone. He did not know whether we knew Brett had been with him at San Sebastian, and it made him rather awkward" (Hemingway 94). Moreover, Cohn is scared that when Brett appears she will embarrass him and so he does not have the maturity to behave appropriately in front of Jake and his friend, Bill Gorton. Nonetheless, Cohn is proud of his affair with Brett and believes that this conquest makes him a hero. When Brett appears with her fiancée Mike, Cohn still believes that they are destined for an ideal love despite her blatant coldness to him. However, it is apparent that Brett simply used Cohn to satisfy her sexual cravings: "' He behaved rather well'" (Hemingway 83). Cohn does not understand the triviality of their trip to San Sebastian in Brett's mind and has become dependent on her attention and affection. In his rampant drunkenness, Mike blasts Cohn: "' What if Brett did sleep with you? She's slept with lots of better people than you. Tell me Robert, Why do you follow Brett around like a poor bloody steer? Don't you know you're not wanted?'" (Hemingway 143). Cohn is like an adolescent, as he vainly ignores the truth and continues to love Brett: " He could not stop looking at Brett. It seemed to make him happy. It must have been pleasant for him to see her looking so lovely, and know he had been away with her and that every one knew it. They couldn't take that away from him" (Hemingway 146). Cohn over-exaggerates the significance of his affair with Brett. He does not understand that Brett simply used him and that their brief relationship has no meaning to her. Moreover, Cohn cannot conduct himself with dignity and he intrudes upon people and places where he is obviously not wanted. Cohn

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thereby has the "unfortunate burden of being the 'horrible example' of the novel" (Rovit 63). Naively, Cohn dwells on the fact that he has slept with Brett and becomes obsessed with her. When Brett begins to show signs of interest in Pedro Romero, Cohn irrationally approaches Jake demanding to know Brett's whereabouts, punches him in the jaw, and then calls him a pimp (Hemingway 190-91). Later that night he encounters Pedro and Brett together in their hotel room. His actions of knocking Pedro down repeatedly until he eventually tires demonstrate a divergence from his character. Cohn for the first time takes some action in what he feels, rather than merely thinking about it or complaining about it. Perhaps for the first time in his life he really "has something" that he would actually fight for. However, despite his persistence, Pedro does not remain down, according to Mike: "'The bull-fighter fellow was rather good. He didn't say much, but he kept getting up and getting knocked down again. Cohn couldn't knock him out'" (Hemingway 202). Eventually, Cohn gives up on this pursuit, is knocked twice by Pedro, and loses his battle for Brett. These events show that Cohn's boxing skills, a defense mechanism that he once used in college, will no longer pull him out of rough situations. Cohn fails to show the strength and courage needed to face the circumstances like a man. This incident effectively shows how weak a man he has become. Pedro Romero, on the other hand, comes closest to the embodiment of Hemingway's hero. It is perhaps because of his profession. Allen Josephs affirms that the bullfight is meant to convey an emblem of moral behavior. For conduct to be moral...it must be rooted in courage, honor, passion, and it must exhibit grace under pressure...

Measured by these rigorous standards, the behavior of every important character except perhaps Romero is found wanting (Josephs 157) Brett is  
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almost immediately enchanted by this handsome, nineteen-year-old, a promising matador. Pedro, a fearless figure who frequently confronts death in his occupation, is not afraid in the bullring and controls the bulls like a master. Pedro is the first man since Jake who causes Brett to lose her self-control: ““ I can't help it. I'm a goner now, anyway. Don't you see the difference? I've got to do something. I've got to do something I really want to do. I've lost my self-respect” (Hemingway 183). In contrast, Pedro maintains his self-control in his first encounter with Brett: “ He felt there was something between them. He must have felt it when Brett gave him her hand. He was being very careful” (Hemingway 185). Brett falls in love with Pedro, a hero who promises new excitement. In the scene between Pedro and Cohn described previously, Pedro demonstrates his confidence and strong will. Knocked down time and time again, Pedro rises each time refusing to be beaten. His controlled and dignified demeanor in an unusual situation contrast sharply with Cohn's fear and weakness. Soon Pedro and Brett run off together but when he demands too much from her, Brett asks him to leave. ““ He was ashamed of me for a while, you know. He wanted me to grow my hair out. He said it would make me more womanly.” In addition, Pedro “ really wanted to marry” Brett because ““ he wanted to make it sure [Brett] could never go away from him'” (Hemingway 242). Pedro will not compromise his expectations for a woman and will not accommodate Brett's character even though he loves her. In his affair with Brett, he has performed according to his rules and when he discovers that his ideals are impossible for Brett to accept, he leaves willingly. Pedro has been left untainted by Brett, sustaining his strong-willed, correct behavior. More importantly, and more true to Hemingway's man, Pedro leaves without sulking like Cohn or <https://assignbuster.com/hemingways-depiction-of-man-from-the-sun-also-rises/>



whining like Mike. The novel is a grand narrative for the "real world."

Hemingway brilliantly uses each character's attributes as a relation to the era in which it takes place. Mark Spilka asserts that his[Hemingway's] protagonists are deliberately shaped as allegorical figures: Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley are two lovers desexed by the war; Robert Cohn is the false knight who challenges their despair; while Romero, the stalwart bullfighter, personifies the good life which will survive their failure.... the implications are there, the parable is at work in every scene, and its presence lends unity and depth to the whole novel. Therefore, Hemingway wrote *The Sun Also Rises* not only as a depiction of his idea of a man, but also places that man (or men, as the case may be) in the real world and shows his relation to it. Brett's acceptance or rejection of particular qualities in each of the four men she becomes involved with help define Hemingway's idea of a male hero. Mike is not dependent on Brett but does not maintain his dignity and self-discipline in his drunken sloppiness. Cohn is a complaining, weak, accommodating adolescent who has little understanding of others or himself. Pedro is the near perfect embodiment of strength, courage, and confidence. Jake is the lesser version of this perfection as the hero of the novel. Hence, Hemingway's ideal hero is self-controlled, self-reliant, and fearless. He is a man of action and he does not, under any circumstances, compromise his beliefs or standards. Jake is challenged by his emasculation in the deepest sense possible, because the traditional ways in which masculinity is defined (at least by Hemingway) is insufficient and impossible for him. His "impotency deprives him of a typical Hemingway love-relationship, and because of the milieu in which the novel is placed, it forces him to be a spectator rather than a participator"(Rovit 60). Jake needs the strength and <https://assignbuster.com/hemingways-depiction-of-man-from-the-sun-also-rises/>

courage to confront his impotence because he has not yet adjusted to this weakness and that is what much of the novel revolves around. It is strange that Cohn, the character least like the Hemingway man, has slept with Brett while Jake will never be able to accomplish this feat. However, because Cohn so inadequately fulfills the roles of a true man, Hemingway implies that the sexual conquest of a woman does not alone satisfy the definition of masculinity. Nevertheless, Jake fails to fulfill other requisites of the Hemingway man as he deviates from his own ethical standards. Still, Jake Barnes represents the best of the lost generation, the best that is lost. Barnes is the maimed knight of the lost. As Mark Spilka suggests, in his "The Death of Love in *The Sun Also Rises*," Barnes is uncomfortably similar to Cohn, the romantic knight in full flower; and he is sadly incapable of the self-sufficient manhood of Romero, the bullfighter, who has drawn the sportsman's independent contest to a point of steel beauty in spite of the wasted world. Jake is powerless between the two, in spite of a decent stoicism in a lost world, with a decent community of lost spirit and a measure of existential courage for getting on with a bad job (Baker 45). It seems that Jake is an example of the best of the lost-generation, although he is flawed. For example, Jake sees that Brett is mesmerized by Pedro's skillful control and extraordinary handsomeness and recognizes the possibility of furnishing her carnal desires with the most perfect specimen of manhood that he can offer in place of himself. Jake thus betrays the aficionados of Pamplona and the trust of a long-time friend, Montoya, who fears that this rising star may be ruined by women. Thus, regardless of his physical impotence, Jake's true weakness is the impotence of his will and the supposed hero of the novel is flawed due to his failure to adhere to what he believes is right and wrong.

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Hemingway thus refrains from presenting a true hero in his novel. “

Hemingway's initial intention was to describe the corruption of a promising bullfighter. The novel he wrote is the corruption of Jake Barnes”(Reynolds 132) With the absence of a leading male ideal, Hemingway merely presents the complete man in four different one's by creating each with distinct characteristics of Hemingway's “ true man.”