

# Term paper on psychological criticism alcohol abuse and alcoholism as compensatio...

[Health & Medicine](#), [Alcoholism](#)



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## **Ernest emHe**

Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises* represents a drunkenness-infused, dissipated, and tragedy-stricken collection of antiheroic characters, adequately deemed the Lost Generation. Their postwar plight for meaning in a desolate wasteland of existence is a futile one, painfully aware of the fact that no baptism would wash away their sins. The psychological structure of these characters is equally marred by their profuse alcoholism and debauchery, and their ultimate tragedy is that the all but subtle myth of the generation they belong to would keep them in a perpetual state of psychological hell.

The aftermath of the World War I challenged all the notions that were held in high esteem, such as human morality and justice, blurring the line between right and wrong to the point of imperceptibility. Thus, no longer being in possession of these notions that give human life meaning, the male and female expatriates found themselves in a wasteland of aimlessness and lack of meaning. Gertrude Stein's definition of the expatriates as the Lost Generation prefigures their actions in substituting a sterile ritual, where they become lost in a futile round of time and space, for the linear experience of

redemptive activity (cited in Hayes 149). The emptiness and lack of faith in the lives of Jake Barnes, Lady Brett Ashley and the others is ubiquitous. They are all caged in a hollow existence, desperately seeking to escape, yet not being able to. Consequently, this inability to escape their own troubled minds leads them on a harrowing path to self-destruction through excessive drinking and decadence.

In this sense, Jake Barnes is the perfect epitome of this playful coinage of words. His belief in the system that he once upheld is nonexistent now; he sees no humanity, no justice, no morals. He is not the man he used to be. He is only a broken shell, merely one half of a human unity that was once so ecstatically willing to fight for his country and his people. Having lost his most cherished ideals, he no longer has a life purpose. He wanders purposelessly, frequenting bars where he drinks until he reaches the final moment of oblivion, only to start again the next day. His whole life is a forlorn endeavor to numb the pain.

Once Jake is presented to the readers, the experiences that have shaped him into a hollow and apathetic shell of a man have already occurred. He has been hurt, the freshness and joy of life have been knocked out of him and he has learned to accept the prevailing law of frustration, while endlessly awaiting for the answer that will heal him (cited in Hayes 30). The war has rendered him impotent, and despite the fact that this is insinuated several times in the novel, not once does Jake have the courage to state it plainly. He feels more at ease with hinting at important ideas, rather than having them out, visible to everyone. This serves as a method of his psychological sheltering of his own self. He is far from overcoming the disastrous

experiences he underwent, and thus, he logically, does not like talking about them in an open manner. Still, since these things need to be mentioned, he prefers subtle hints and innuendoes to the outright truth that would eventually grant him enough power to set himself free from the tragedies that have befallen him.

Some critics accuse Jake of being Hemingway's own alter ego, an unreliable narrator in an irrational world, where this second identity of Hemingway, the result of a gender confusion stemming from the household pattern of his parents - his mother being the domineering one and his father the subordinate one - gives subtle hints towards his homoeroticism and negative Oedipal tendencies, with Jake's impotence as the final expression of the author's castration anxiety (cited in Hayes 103). Jake's story is one of lies and innuendoes, twisting of the truth and withholding crucial pieces of information, while providing shamefully little, which would reveal the depth of the narrative and its true comprehension.

All the conversations that take place between Jake and his friends are conducted behind a veneer of simulated courtesy, where any sign of true affection and care is utterly indiscernible: " Under the wine I lost the disgusted feeling and was happy. It seemed they were all such nice people" (Hemingway 150). This is the truth of their relationships. They all " seem" like nice people and are deemed as such when one is under the influence of alcohol, but the truth is that Jake does not like these people and does not really consider them friends. Their pseudo-friendship centers around their excessive drinking, and if nothing else, their consolidated past of the war legacy should be reason enough for deeper bonding. Since all of them,

except Robert Cohn have a firsthand experience of the hardships of war, they should be able to understand each other completely. However, they appear to be all too eager not to talk about such matters at all, or if mentioned, they are treated in the tritest fashion. Genuine communication between these lost souls is achieved only in the darkest of moments, when the characters themselves feel utterly depressed and unable to carry within themselves the burdens of their broken selves. They open up, but only to express dissatisfaction with each other, never to reveal the truth about themselves; the truth they wish to sink below an infinite amount of liqueur. They are all alcoholics and as such, cannot really offer one another meaningful conversations. They are unrecognized soul mates, who have the power to ease one another's pain, yet unconsciously refuse to do so, flagellating themselves to death with alcohol. This way, they allow themselves to escape reality, because the more they drink, the easier they forget, and the easier they forget, the longer they remain in the blissful state of not recalling the reality of their nugatory existence.

However, Jake appears to be the only one who is close to understanding the suffering they are all going through and the futility of his own existence of drowning his sorrows in alcohol, when he says to Cohn: " You can't get away from yourself by moving from one place to another" (Hemingway 19). Cohn expresses discontentment with the Parisian life and naively believes that a mere change of geographical location is all he requires to replenish the barrenness of his soul. A shy outsider of Jewish origin, he upholds the outdated gentlemanly value system of the prewar period and leads a debauched way of life, which is exactly where his dissatisfaction emanates

from. Changing his surroundings accomplishes little, if anything. He, like the other characters, needs to make a change within himself, and no amount of wandering the foreign lands will make them happy. Jake appears to have a profound insight into the reason for his friends' perpetual traveling. He cognizes that by running away from one bar to the next and from one city or country to the next, they are all trying to escape themselves; an attempt pitifully futile within itself, because their disillusion is not really aimed at the world, but at themselves.

The World War I redefined the notions of masculinity by initially glorifying the courageous, fearless, justice-seeking and victory-hungry soldier who would fight for his country, while in fact, this image had very little to do with the reality that was thundering in the trenches. It was not a war of man to man, but machine to man, heavy weaponry of devastating consequence and the utter dehumanization of the whole war experience. It is impossible for an individual to be courageous in the face of a bomb or a tank. All one could do was huddle together and take shelter in the trenches, praying for luck, mercy or both. Courage had little to do with the warfare of World War I, and by neglecting this aspect, it utterly redefined the notion of masculinity and bravery.

In addition to this, many returned from the war adorned with scars, wounds and insufficiency of limbs. While for some, this was the highest medal of bravery a soldier can have, for others like Jake, it was a shameful burden. His injury has not only left him impotent, but has left him feeling less of a man, inadequate in comparison with any other man, especially with the young and robust Romero, who will later in the novel be introduced as " a force of

antithesis, manly, incorruptible, healthy, courageous, of complete integrity and self-possession" (cited in Hayes 31). In comparison with him, any of the male characters suffer devastating blows to their masculinity, since every single one of them are in possession of the postwar depression and feeling of male inadequacy. For instance, Cohn's blind following of Brett and his pathetic and melodramatic refusal to accept that their little fling meant nothing, deems him unmanly in the eyes of Jake and his fellow veterans. They consider him different in the sense that " Mike was a bad drunk. Brett was a good drunk. Bill was a good drunk. Cohn was never drunk" (Hemingway 152). This technique is reminiscent of school bullies who, by picking on children who have apparent physical or psychological problems, desperately undertake to hide their own ineptitude. The novel offers a deep, qualitative study of varying degrees of physical and spiritual manhood, projected against a background of ennui and emotional exhaustion which is everywhere implicitly condemned (cited in Hayes 32). Consequently, all of them resort to heavy drinking not only to try to escape the burdensome reality, but also to regain some shreds of masculinity, and prove to the world, and to themselves, that they are not a waste of skin and bones. Furthermore, this emasculated array of male characters is joined by a feminine, yet equally emotionally and psychologically disarrayed persona of Lady Brett Ashley, with her short hair, male name and sexual, and otherwise, independence. She represents the usurpation of the traditional female gender role, as assigned by the male populace, and as such, is deemed a danger to young Romero and all men around her. Her ability to drink is not put to shame when compared with that of her male friends: " She is the only

lady I have ever known who was as charming when she was drunk as when she was sober" (Hemingway 66). Simultaneously, her sexuality and charisma make her the most desirable woman one has ever seen. Her coquettish ways of mastering men like puppets serve her well in her need to satisfy her nymphomaniac appetites. In this sense, she is portrayed as more masculine than all the other men put together, because in every aspect of life, she behaves like a true man: she drinks heavily, does whatever she wants whenever she wishes to do it, has sex with whomever she finds pleasing to the eye and most importantly, refuses to give up her freedom. She is the pinnacle of male virility and characteristics, while Jake, Cohn, Mike and others are mere shadows of something that used to be masculinity.

Still, she is equally lost as her fellow wanderers. She refuses to be alone, and thus always requires company, moving from one relationship to the next as easily as going from one bar to the next, making her life equally devoid of meaning and purpose. She refuses to let go of her independence, but does not refrain from telling Jake that her independence and an overly active sexual life do not make her truly happy. At best, they offer a momentary satisfaction and one second of blissful meaning, that she otherwise is not in possession of.

Just as it is the case with her fellow wasteland dwellers, Brett is also emotionally damaged by the war; her true love contracted dysentery and died. Accordingly, her aimless existence of sexual escapades of no significance symbolizes her subliminal search for her lost love. Just like Jake was emasculated, and is looking for salvation, or merely a means to forget at the bottom of a glass, Brett is trying to find her love in the arms of numerous



men, hoping that one of them will be the one she is looking for.

However, Brett is offered a chance at true love, and perhaps even happiness, when Jake asks her: " Couldn't we live together, Brett? Couldn't we just live together?" (Hemingway 62). In this almost pathetic plea, where Jake endeavors to take one step towards something meaningful in the universe of emptiness he shares with them all, he shows how little it would be enough for him to feel happy again. But, Brett remains heartless: " I don't think so. I'd just tromper you with everybody" (Hemingway 62). Despite the fact that she loves him, she is utterly reluctant to give up sex, because that is what it would mean living with Jake. As it is the case with other Hemingway's works, where one question and one answer give a whole pregnant universe of meaning, this conversation represents the emotional backdrop of the novel. The reader is left to wonder whether Jake would be a happy man, who would stop drinking if he had Brett by his side, as his wife; also, would Brett be happy in a relationship devoid of sexual contact and how she would deal with it. Perhaps, the two of them together would be even unhappier because neither would be able to provide the other with the desperately sought meaning to life. Since her answer is an obdurate no, the answer is nothing but mere speculation.

Jake's wound creates a tragic specificity, whereby the pathos of his wound is redeemed because it provokes the dramatic performance of manliness in this never-consumated love affair, and Jake redeems his castration by making it the source of his mastery over Brett, evoking in her a desire he will never fulfill (cited in Hayes 148). In this sense, Jake's impotence has created an unattainable object for Brett's sexual hunger, leaving her always in desire

of it. However, by mastering her desire, he has left his own in want. He will never have Brett, nor will she ever have him. This is yet another reason he plunges into the murky waters of the alcohol pond, in dire need of soothing the pain of awareness.

Despite the fact that Jake drinks to forget, Brett's presence in his life is ubiquitous. He is always the first one she calls and he always the first one to rush and meet her wherever she wishes. She is present, even at the very end of the novel, offering tantalizing thoughts of a fairy-tale world in a parallel universe: "'Oh, Jake,' Brett said, ' we could have had such a damned good time together'. Ahead was a mounted policeman in khaki directing traffic. He raised his baton. The car slowed suddenly pressing Brett against me. ' Yes,' I said. ' Isn't it pretty to think so?'" (Hemingway 251). This is the star-crossed lovers' final conversation and one last look on things that might have taken place, and the people they might have become now. Their lamentation is more than obvious, and it seems Hemingway taunts them by making the police officer signal a halt just when Brett speaks her wishful utterance. Despite the fact that the stopping of the car makes her lean closer towards Jake, it is painfully obvious that the gap between them has never been greater. In this mist of things that could have been, Jake and Brett are finally letting go of everything that could have happened between them. His rhetoric " pretty" responds to her " damned," in an effort to make the whole utterance less relevant, while in fact, it is one of the deepest conversations they have ever had. It is all too clear that after this ordeal of being attacked by Cohn and helping Brett seduce Romero, Jake will be swift in his grasp for the bottle, while Brett will continue to seek her long lost love in casual

affairs.

Matts Djos referred to the novel as a remarkable portrait of the pathology of the disease of alcoholism (cited in Hayes 224). All the characters exhibit the traits of alcoholics, from Jake and Brett to Cohn, Bill and Mike. Bill Gorton, who shares a strong emotional bond with Jake, is likewise a veteran, who spends his days in the haze of alcohol, trying to soften the postwar effects through humor. Mike Campbell, a bad-tempered Scottish veteran, who is, like everyone else, in love with Brett and madly jealous, leading him to fits of drunken rage and self-pity. The list continues with Harvey Stone, who is a gambler as well as an alcoholic, in constant need of money. The list is endless. All these characters are obsessive manipulators who are full of fear: “fear of self-understanding, fear of emotional and physical inadequacy, and – very important – fear of each other” (cited in Hayes 224). The pain has rendered them weak and thus, like any other addicts, they believe that what is happening to them is out of their hands, that they cannot change the course of events, forever caging themselves in a masochistic world of self-pity and desperation.

### **Their world is the world of the fiesta:**

“[The fiesta] kept up day and night for seven days. The dancing kept up, the drinking kept up, the noise went on. The things that happened could only have happened during a fiesta. Everything became quite unreal finally and it seemed as though nothing could have any consequences. It seemed out of place to think of consequences during the fiesta” (Hemingway 158).

It is a time where the nebulous state of drunkenness is not only volitional, but mandatory. For Jake and his friends, every day is like this, where they hear the perpetual noise of the busy bars, followed by music danced to by women of loose morals; a wonderland of no consequences and no preconditions. For the peasants, the fiesta is a leisurely time of well-deserved rest and relaxation, celebrating sexuality not in an empty way, driven by the goddess of sexuality herself, Brett, but as a meaningful merging of two physical bodies. It is a celebration worthy of Bacchus himself, a world that urges without asking too many questions. For the Lost Generation, the answers to these questions are unreachable. The dilemma of the Lost Generation is the one that will continue to plague its victims everlastingly. Unable to recover their fragmented bodies and minds from the shattering experiences of the World War I, Jake, Brett and the rest continue to be trapped in their own personal hell of alcoholism and decadence.

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