

# Lady brett ashley essay sample



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

To establish an overall opinion of someone based entirely off of another person's assessment causes misinformed prejudice and mindless ignorance. In literature, often times readers are led to form biased conclusions in regards to certain characters based upon the favor of the narrator. For this reason, Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* creates a disguised heroine; Lady Brett Ashley. She is often portrayed in a very negative light due to Jake's partiality, however, through analysis of the text and collaboration with Hemingway critics, it is plain that Brett is a very complex and realistic character. Her unique characteristics interconnect and overlap, creating a powerful female figure that breaks all stereotypes of the previous roles of women in both literature and society. When Jake's heartbroken narration is stripped away, Brett Ashley's role as the "Hemingway Hero" is apparent through her masculine attributes, her outward appearance, her alcoholism, and her insatiable appetite for sexual love affairs.

Brett's masculine tendencies have earned her an unfavorable reputation over the years. During her time, a woman drinking in excess, smoking cigars, participating in promiscuous affairs and attending bullfights would have been unspeakably shameful and offensive to those with pre-war, traditional values. However, Brett transcends the boundaries that set men and women as two separate species, "wearing the pants" better than any man in the novel does. A prime display of this is role reversal with Jake is when she stumbles very drunk into his home and upon realizing it was four thirty in the morning says, "Had no idea what hour it was... I say can a chap sit down?" (Hemingway 40) She not only refers to herself as a "chap," which is decisively a man's pronoun, but she also adopts the role of the man in their

relationship by going to his home, causing a scene to see him, and then inviting him to go out with her. She exposes her most manly qualities when in the company of Jake; denying a romantic relationship because of the impossibility of sexual interaction, instigating the kissing scenes, and striking up intimate affairs with many of his friends.

The references to her smoking are also with him, where Jake says, “ She was smoking a cigarette and flicking the ashes on the rug. She saw me notice it” (Hemingway 64). After realizing he noticed her disregard for his things, she says, “ I say, Jake, I don’t want to ruin your rugs. Can’t you give a chap an ash-tray?” (Hemingway 64). It has been established that Brett smokes and drinks as excessively as a man, and now it is made clear that she has also developed the manlike quality of negligence for nice things. If Jake had not seen her soiling his rugs, she most likely would have continued, lacking a respect for what she deems as silly accessories. Although not all of Brett’s masculine qualities make her appear classy and sophisticated, they certainly make her an extraordinary female character. According to Lorie Fulton, “ Brett is one of Hemingway’s richest female characters; her personality gradually emerges as an intriguing mix of femininity and masculinity, strength and vulnerability, morality and dissolution.” These words could not describe Brett’s outward appearance any more accurately. When she is first introduced, Jake describes her as such: “ Brett was damned good-looking.

She wore a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt and her hair was brushed back like a boys...She was built with curves like the hull of a racing yacht and you missed none of it with that wool jersey.” (Hemingway 29-30). This description alone gives the “ mix of femininity and masculinity”

validation, as her hair and clothing are more male inspired, yet her body is the essence of female beauty. Hemingway writes later that she would not wear stockings with her dresses and skirts. Some view this as an act of whorish blasphemy; however it can also be seen as another manifestation of her masculinity. Many girls would wear their stockings rolled down, but Brett did not want to be classified as another modern racy girl, so she asserted her dominance by refusing to conform to the “acceptable” female clothing codes. To further this, Jakes says, “She pulled her man’s felt hat down and started in for the bar” (35). Instead of wearing a lacey, gaudy headpiece or flamboyant hat, she chooses to wear simple, felt hats designed for men so she can more easily blend into her group of male friends drinking at the bar.

Her clothing choices and selection of friends earns her a very negative reputation, especially when combined with her sexual activity records, yet she can’t find it within herself to care about the opinion of the general public. The person Brett allows herself to be is the archetype for the post-war modern set of values, doing away with the stiff traditional morals that stifled humanities desire for adventure and exploration. Adventure and exploration were embodied in Europe for Brett, Jake, and other Americans during the post-war era. This was due largely to Prohibition, as America was no longer a safe place to enjoy alcohol. Europe had everything the rule-breaking, mentally tormented war survivors could have asked for; cheap liquor, women, night life, and a lower cost of living. It was natural for Americans to overindulge in their pursuit of a drunken stupor, however, Charles Nolan believes, “Brett is this way because of the things that have happened to her and because of what she has seen.”

An examination of her past reveals a closet full of skeletons that seem to continually haunt her. Traditionally, Brett has been labeled as a “ bitch” for what her constant torment of Jake, and men in general, yet, “ A few more sympathetic, yet still fundamentally conflicted readings of Brett try to excuse her behavior as a result of her putative pursuit of self-destruction” (Fulton). Today, many now believe Brett was not a drunken, castrating she-demon, but rather, “ As a way of coping and perhaps self medicating, she has turned to alcohol” (Nolan). Her necessity for self destruction and self-medicating seems to stem primarily from two main sources: leaving her child with her mentally unstable and physically abusive husband in order to save herself, and from the atrocities she witnessed during the war. It is not uncommon for spectators and participants of war become dependent on alcohol after everything is over. It seems that Brett is most at peace with herself and the world around her when she is intoxicated.

Count Mippipopolous remarks to Jake that Brett is just as charming drunk as she is sober. Brett introduces herself as an alcoholic the first time she is integrated into the novel. At the bar, she says, “ Hello, you chaps, I’m going to have a drink” (Hemingway 36). That “ drink” turned into the early morning visit to Jake when, “ Brett came up the stairs. I saw she was quite drunk” (Hemingway 40). Had she come only had a few drinks to take the edge off of her inner demons that would have been fine, but it is quite obvious to everyone and to the reader when Jake says, “ She’s a drunk” (Hemingway 38). This necessity for alcohol is not only helping her cope with the traumas of her past, but it is also serving as a bridge to cross the gap of faithlessness. Brett desires to pray for her lover Romero with Jake, however upon entering

the church she panics and demands they leave (Hemingway 212). She then proceeds to give Jake several excuses and reasons for as to why she's "damned bad for a religious atmosphere" (Hemingway 212).

Her discomfort with religious settings and principals is logical, as most characters in this novel do not have a deep rooted religious affiliation. They each seem to like or not mind this religious deviance, as it would be very difficult to maintain faith in a god after experiencing the slaughter of World War I. Brett, Jake, and the other war familiars seem to wash down the sorrow from this war with as much liquor as they can buy, simply reinforcing the idea that Brett's severe alcoholism is a result of years of heartache and affliction. Brett's perspective of romantic relationships and love has been damaged beyond repair by this heartache and affliction she has experienced her entire life. According to Fulton, the excised first chapter contains necessary information, such as " Before she married Lord Ashley, Brett divorced a husband whom she had married " to get away from home" (" Beginning" 131), but neither this first husband nor the implication that Brett experienced a problematic childhood appear in the published novel" (Fulton). If this had been included in the finished text, perhaps the general opinion of Brett would have been altered.

Furthermore, her relationship with Lord Ashley was traumatic, for " When he returned from the war badly damaged, he made Brett sleep on the floor with him because he could not sleep in a bed. He also kept a loaded pistol with him when he retired for the night and sometimes threatened to kill her with it; in order to be safe, she would unload the gun after he dozed off" (Nolan). These unhealthy and damaging relationships from her youth may have

caused her shift into masculine qualities, as well as her bottomless appetite for meaningless sex. Taking the previous relationships into account, Brett's sexual desires are often seen as a cyclical unhappiness, mostly because her "...nymphomania motivates her self-destructive actions" (Fulton). Brett develops a vicious cycle of coping with her life, she has many affairs, and feels wretched, so she drinks the feelings away and always returns to Jake. After his emotional buffering, it allows her to begin a new affair, and thus the cycle continues. At one point in the novel, Jake sarcastically remarks, "I suppose you like to add them [men] up" (Hemingway 30). To this she can only respond with, "Oh well. What if I do?" (30).

Jake's annoyance and frustration at Brett's romantic cycle is made very clear when he says, "Send a girl off with one man. Introduce her to another to go off with him. Now go and bring her back. And sign the wire with love" (Hemingway 243). At this point, most readers lose their faith in Brett for her repeated injury and unintentional taunting of Jake's love for her. Despite her blatant disregard for Jake's feelings, she cannot truly be blamed because she does not know how to love or how to be loved. Robert's fixation with her led him to tell Jake, "I don't believe she would marry anybody she didn't love." Jake's bitter response is, "Well... she's done it twice" (Hemingway 47). Brett doesn't realize that she could be happy in a safe marriage with Jake, because he loves her, not only her body, and it infuriates him to see her throw her life away to less worthy men. Brett's lack of knowledge on the topic of love is again represented nicely during a conversation with Jake when he states, "It's very funny. And it's a lot of fun, too, to be in love." Her sadly candid reply is, "No," she said. "I think it's hell on earth" (Hemingway 35). If Brett had

not been emotionally damaged earlier in life, she would perhaps have the chance to know that love is the closest thing she could have to heaven on earth.

Jakes agonizing love for Brett makes his depiction of her unreliable. To truly understand and appreciate the incomparable characteristics of this refreshingly strong heroine, one must first understand how and why she came to acquire the traits that mark her. Brett would not have made such a tremendous impact on this novel had she not been inclined toward masculine attitudes and behaviors, had a disregard for her outward appearance, indulged in heavy binge drinking, and endlessly pursued as many love affairs as she could. The character of Lady Brett Ashley may have been harshly criticized over the years and tragically misunderstood, but without her, Hemingway's unforgettable novel would have been nothing more than a small tale of a young man lost in Europe.

#### Works Cited

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