

# Hemingway's redefinition of gender roles



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The Sun Also Rises offers a snapshot into Hemingway's world and allows the reader to see first-hand the societal changes taking place around the time of World War I. In this era, a new class of woman, free from the stifling ties to men, developed, thus causing the relationship between men and women to be completely redefined. The members of this "lost generation" rewrote the values of the Victorian age and reestablished a less rigid set of morals to implement in the modern world.

Many critics associate Ernest Hemingway with the idea of anti-feminism. However, this opinion is not necessarily founded in factual evidence. The Sun Also Rises introduces a new type of woman, the independent female, who is the polar opposite of anti-feminism. In many ways, this first novel is Hemingway's goodbye kiss to the Victorian ethos under which he was raised (O'Sullivan 81). In this novel, Hemingway creates Lady Brett Ashley to portray the liberated, modernist female persona. Brett represents the new, overtly phallic women (Fantina 84). Straying away from the image of inferior, submissive homemaker, the new woman was a freethinking, outspoken peer, and moreover, a friend.

With the creation of Brett Ashley, Hemingway flirts with the notion that the line previously dividing men and women had been blurred, or in some cases, completely absent. In and around the time of the Great War, female behavior began to change. Women were perceived as beginning to "act like men." Instead of grace, many women had taken on an affectation of mannishness, as is shown in their hats, jackets, long strides, and healthful swinging of the arms while walking. More radical behavior included smoking, drinking, living alone, and sexual activity (O'Sullivan 78). Brett Ashley is the embodiment of

this idea of the new female. “ She’s a drunk,” writes Hemingway about Brett (38). “ She wore a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt, and her hair was brushed back like a boy’s,” (Hemingway 30). She drinks to get drunk. She smokes cigars. She has promiscuous, no-strings-attached sex with men other than her fiancée. She does what “ proper” women should not do. However, through this debauchery of tradition, Hemingway achieves new heights for the female character. Brett is neither a wife nor a prostitute (O’Sullivan 83). She shatters the stereotypical molds that society has been conditioned to place women in. However, the genius of Brett Ashley lies not in Hemingway’s ability to create the Great American Bitch, but rather in his ability to create an idea of a woman as a friend (O’Sullivan 81). Especially with regards to Jake, the idea of women as solely love or sexual interests is erased, and replaced by friendship, something previously thought to have been impossible to achieve between members of the opposite gender.

Jake’s war injury prevents him from consummating his love with Brett. With the opportunity for physical love thus rendered impossible, one may question what holds this relationship together. As it appears, Brett and Jake seem to have a legitimate liking for each other; something beyond the realm of the purely physical. In this light, Brett and Jake share a relationship much like that which might exist between two men. The lines have blurred, and Jake is able to see through the sexual cloud surrounding Brett and see her as a person. Jake and Brett are equals. More than that, they are friends.

In many respects, Jake’s friendship with Brett is very similar to that of his friendship with Bill Gorton. Though frequently separated, the two can immediately reestablish ties when they reunite. When Bill visits Paris, he and

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Jake exchange stories about the past. Bill shares tales of his time in Vienna. He admits that it was not that great of a time, and that it seemed better than it was (Hemingway 76). He attributes this fact to his four-day drinking binge. Later in the novel, the two again converse, but this time in more depth. From their conversation in the country, the connection between the two is obvious. The men freely discuss such topics as religion, literature and personal problems, and even talk about Jake's impotency (O'Sullivan 88). Bill even goes so far as to express his love for Jake. " You're a hell of a good guy, and I'm fonder of you than anybody on earth. I couldn't tell you than in New York. It'd mean I was a faggot," (Hemingway 121).

The importance of Jake's friendship with Bill is that it bares striking similarities to his friendship with Brett. The idea that Jake could have comparable – yet nonphysical – relationships with both a male and a female reinforces the blurring of gender lines in *The Sun Also Rises*. Both Jake and Bill and Jake and Brett are able to accept each other's downfalls and jaded pasts and see each other as they truly are. The idea that Brett and Bill can both affect Jake in similar ways reemphasizes that the new female and the new male are not different at all.

Many people viewed this new platonic relationship as disastrous and as being directly attributed to the death of romantic love. However, instead of reading *The Sun Also Rises* as a story about the death of love, we can read it as a story about the cautious belief in the survival of the two most basic components of any human relationship: love and friendship. It can be looked at as the unification of two separate sexual spheres of the nineteenth century and a break away from the moral imperatives of the Victorian Age, <https://assignbuster.com/hemingways-redefinition-of-gender-roles/>

while also demonstrating the possibility of love's survival in the more realistic but nihilistic twentieth century (O'Sullivan 76).

While there is no doubt that there is substantial love between Jake and Brett, it is not what defines their entire relationship. Unlike Brett's liaisons with other men, her relationship with Jake is not based on lust and animalistic sexual desire. Brett is able to rely on Jake for love, help, and support. When Brett comes to the realization that she has fallen in love with Romero, she experiences some form of emotional shock. She repeatedly exclaims to Jake that " I'm [She's] a goner," (Hemingway 187). However, despite her over-dramatized display, Jake stays with her and listens. When Brett finally asks, " Oh darling, please stay by me and help me through this," Jake offers the unhesitant reply of " Sure" (Hemingway 188). Jake again comes to Brett's rescue after she decides that her relationship with Romero is not in either's best interest. Broke and stranded in Madrid, she turns to the only person who she can undoubtedly count on, Jake Barnes. After receiving a message from Brett, Jake drops his plans to go and be at her side. Upon his arrival, Brett opens up to him about her ordeal with the child bullfighter. Throughout everything, Jake is there, listening and being a friend. " I saw she was crying. I could feel her crying as I held her close. Shaking and crying. I put my arms around her" (Hemingway 247). There is not a hint of sexual desire between the two in any of these aforementioned scenes. Brett and Jake offer each other a glimpse into their soul. They are honest about their personal failures and shortcomings. Though imperfect, their friendship is imbued with the survival mechanisms of honesty, a shared history, and serious love (O'Sullivan 87). Jake knows that, despite his love for her, nothing will change

their relationship. However, he accepts her as she is, and for this, the relationship between the two is rendered durable and lasting.

The change in the male-female relationship during this era was not simply brought about by the birth of the new woman. The role of men also began to change, furthering the demise of romantic love and the establishment of the new idea of the possibility of friendship between the sexes. Hemingway uses characters such as Jake Barnes and Robert Cohn to represent these changes, and also to show why romantic love and the chivalric man have no place in a post-World War I environment.

Jake's war wound is representative of the loss of traditional manhood. Without the use of the penis, a major portion of the male identity is gone; it represents the authority men have over women. After the war, with the onset of the injury, Jake becomes a representative of the decline in male power. He can no longer represent the traditional male, because he is impotent (O'Sullivan 87). The war divided the old world from the new; the old Jake from the new Jake. With women becoming manlier, it was hard for men to be men; the wound had cut them off from the anatomical source of their undoubted virility (Forster 26). The penis had previously differentiated hierarchically between men and women. It was a symbol of male power over the female (Forster 26). Jake's injury robs him of his manhood and the root of male social power.

Jake's interaction with society shows that his new role as a man is not necessarily negative. Due to his impotence, Jake cannot continue to define himself based upon his sexual abilities. He can not prove himself to Brett by

what he can do for her sexually. Instead, he is forced to develop other facets of his personality. Though he cannot be with her in a physical, romantic sense, something still draws the two together. This furthers the concept of friendship over sexual love.

Metaphorically, Jake's injury is necessary. For the new woman to acquire power, the new man must give some up. This change is accentuated by the lack of transformation in the other men. Men like Cohn and Romero do not accept Brett and the evolving female. Because Jake accepts Brett and the idea of the new woman, he is able to maintain a relationship. Brett says, "It was rather a knock his being ashamed of me. He was ashamed of me for a while, you know...They ragged [Romero] about me in the café, I guess. He wanted me to grow out my hair. Me, with long hair, I'd look like hell" (Hemingway 246). In this situation, Romero cannot give up his outdated views as to how a woman should look. Although it is ultimately Brett's realization that her corruption of the young Romero will ruin him that causes the relationship to go sour, it is definitely plausible that his, as well as Cohn's, inability to relinquish old-fashioned ideals also play a part in the dissolution of the relationship.

Robert Cohn represents past Victorian values: "He believes in romance-the romance of faraway and exotic places, romantically described in turgidly romantic prose-as well as the romance of a mutually fulfilling loves" (Forster 27). He is the one sensitive character in a completely desensitized world. Because of this, Cohn does not fit in. He is repeatedly shown crying, and is incapable of drinking with the big boys (Forster 27). Hemingway creates these

circumstances to show that just as Cohn does not fit in with his peers, Cohn's outmoded views do not fit in with the new morals of society.

After his short-lived romance with Brett, Cohn immediately falls in lust with her, and constantly pines for her love. He is incapable of understanding that Brett does not need him. He has not come to accept the new woman, who is not dependent on men, yet values their friendship (O'Sullivan 79). Cohn has not experienced a life-changing injury as Jake has, so he has been able to cling to the notion that something exists between him and Brett. He is so immersed in romantic love that he does not see that Brett has simply used him for sexual relations, and has no other use or desire for him.

Jake is the most compatible male for the new woman. Cohn is still steadfastly holding onto old-fashioned beliefs about romantic love. The two men represent completely opposite ends of the spectrum. One may say that Jake is perfect for the evolving society, while Cohn is exactly the type of man that will clash with a woman like Brett, and is not what society needs. However, there is yet another type of male persona present in *The Sun Also Rises*: Romero, who plays neither the friend nor the chivalrous mate. Hemingway has included him to represent an exemplary heroic-like code of masculinity. Romero is symbolic of a higher standard of existence: "He turned meaningless violence of modern life into meaningful aesthetic spectacle, and does so through a "maximum of exposure" to the dangers of violence" (Forster 28). An aficionado such as Romero is someone who is passionate about bull-fights (Hemingway 136): "The photographs of bull-fighters Montoya has really believed in were framed. Photographs of bull-fighters without aficion Montoya kept in a drawer of his desk. They often had the

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most flattering inscriptions. But they did not mean anything” (Hemingway 136). Along with being aficionado comes a certain prestige and degree of responsibility.

Romero serves a number of purposes in the novel. Perhaps most importantly, he is a preservation of the sense of male superiority that was lost to the gains of the new woman. He has not suffered the loss of manhood that, metaphorically, Jake has as a consequence of his injury; he is still a sexual icon for women. “ My God he’s a lovely boy...And how I would love to see him get in those clothes. He must use a shoe horn” (Hemingway 181). Brett hardly has any interest in the way Romero handles the bull; she is more interested in him as a lust interest. Men, like Jake, look up to Romero. They see him as exceptional. “ After Romero had killed his first bull Montoya caught my [Jake] eye and nodded his head. This was a real one. There had not been a real one in a long time” (Hemingway 168). From the male perspective, Jake can marvel over Romero’s technical skill. In a sense, Romero is a “ guy’s guy,” representing brute strength in a man-versus-beast setting. Conversely, women can gawk over his appearance. Romero’s allure is that he can appeal to both males and females. For females, he is an idyllic icon to lust after. For men, he is illustrative of the specific manly values that most men wish for, but have been taken away by the developing woman.

“ Hemingway broke with convention by creating a brilliant example of the New Woman and dismantling nineteenth century gender lines by uniting love and friendship” (O’Sullivan 96). He also creates a tragic hero in Jake Barnes, his flaw obviously being his impotence. However, Hemingway’s juxtaposition of these two complementary characters provides hope for society amidst the

shadows of the lost generation. Despite the inevitable demise of such characters as Robert Cohn and Mike, Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley offer the reader at least some optimism that the sun will break through the clouds surrounding society and a new era of love and friendship will arise between males and females. If this happens, society will again flourish, and the lost generation will find its way.