

# The death of love



Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* is a meticulously constructed story situated in the age of disillusionment that followed World War I. It frames a loose alliance of the "Lost Generation" and displays a vicarious insight into the forces that drive them. After the "Great War" love was among the many emotions left blunted. Ideals of love subsisting from the Romantic era through the Victorian age were in steady decline by the Age of Industry. The dilution and redefining of love in *The Sun Also Rises* is revealed from different perspectives through its damaged characters in both the romantic and the platonic sense. Hemingway effectively uses the characters of Brett Ashley and Robert Cohn to represent differing perspectives on love brought about by war and postwar sentiment. Although the two have contrasting attitudes towards love and life, they share a very similar perception of themselves. Of all the characters in the story, Brett Ashley is arguably the most damaged. Having lost her first husband and "true love" to dysentery, she married Lord Ashley soon after in the midst of war. During the war she had served as a member of a Voluntary Aid Detachment. Brett would have been witness to every atrocity of the war and party to few, if any of its triumphs. On top of her experiences her shell-shocked sailor husband, Lord Ashley, had become emotionally abusive and threatening. Undoubtedly scarred by this, she betroths herself to the bankrupt Mike Cambell and begins to exhibit an emotionally detached promiscuity while in the process of divorcing her wartime husband. Swooned by many but swayed only by temptation, she uses her appearance as a resource and remorsefully obeys her disillusioned heart. The self-image of Brett's character is best displayed when confiding in her most faithful and rare platonic friend, Jake: "I'm a goner. I'm mad about the Romero boy. I'm in love with him, I think"

(Hemingway 187). Having just recently encountered Pedro Romero, it becomes clear that Brett is unable to differentiate between interest, attraction and love. Jake inquires further into the motives that persuade her and Brett reveals an irrational vulnerability: “ I’ve got to do something. I’ve got to do something I really want to do. I’ve lost my self-respect” (187). This loss of self-respect is a driving force behind Brett’s lustful behavior. Jake does not doubt or deny her lack of dignity; having met Brett while she was a V. A. D., Jake is sympathetic to her fragile and distorted emotional state. Although he could not fully comprehend her decisions, he is surely aware of the trauma that she carries. To Brett Ashley romantic love is dictated by emotions void of reason and is altogether distinct from, but included in, intercourse. It seems as though Brett used sex on a platonic level as a means to comfort or sympathize, as must have been the case with Robert Cohn in San Sebastian. One of the major disparities that differentiate Cohn from the other depictions in the novel is the fact that Robert Cohn, “...would rather have been in America” (13). Unlike the unaffiliated entities that he surrounds himself with, Cohn reveres his country of origin. His time in Europe was less an opportunity for change and more of an extended vacation. Cohn had had no involvement in the war and was thereby little affected from it. He had lived a repressed and self-involved life as a Jewish man in an age of anti-Semitism. When in attendance at Princeton, to escape the negative feelings of inferiority and self-consciousness, Cohn took to reading, “ too much” (11). He adopted many of his opinions from the books that he read and his romantic ideas of love were likely adapted from prewar stories. Unbeknownst to Cohn his formerly assumed positions on love had become antiquated by the end of the war. Cohn had never experienced any “ true” love outside his

books but rather had compromised and conceded his way into the subordinate role in a hopeless relationship. It was only upon his trip to New York and the moderate success of his first publication that Cohn began to build his self-respect. Both at home and abroad he would have noticed the different mood brought about by postwar sentiment. People everywhere were living life for themselves with a greater respect for freedom and mortality disregarding the traditional, prewar societal values. Perhaps compelled by this, the introverted Cohn began to assert himself and pursue his heart's desires. Away he went to San Sebastian to fall in love with a woman who could not reciprocate. Foolhardy, Cohn believed "true" love would prevail. Opting out of his much-anticipated fishing trip with Jake and Bill to meet Brett and her fiancée, it was only at the fiesta of San Fermin that the little dignity that Cohn had acquired was obliterated. After days of shadowing Brett with blatant disregard for her formal relationship, Mike, with the aid of alcohol, feels obligated to confront him: "Do you think you amount to something, Cohn? Do you think you belong here among us? People who are out to have a good time?" (181). Mike goes on to ostracize Cohn further, "Why don't you see when you're not wanted, Cohn? Go away. Go away, for God's sake" (181). After appearing to leave, Cohn is found waiting outside under the arcade. At which point both Jake and Brett express their hatred for him and any residual respect for Cohn is expunged. Everyone's lack of sympathy towards Cohn may have been warranted but had Cohn been involved in the war it is likely the others would have had more patience. Realizing his situation, Cohn frees himself from repression, but is still subjugated by his self-interest. In relentless pursuit of Brett, Cohn goes on a relatively unprovoked rampage in the name of love. Brett Ashley and Robert

Cohn have justifiable cause for their deficit of self-respect. Be it from past torments or present discontentedness, both are obliged to follow their respective hearts. They differ in the fact that Brett Ashley is driven to a life of excess by an involuntary loss of self-respect where Cohn, never actually grasping self-respect, is compelled only by true love and the prospect of what could be. Unfortunately his dated ideals of love seem an anachronism among the war-ravaged souls with whom he associates himself. Both Brett Ashley and Robert Cohn are examples of two very different lives with common motives brought about by wartime and postwar attitudes. Both are in pursuit of something they cannot attain. Harvey Stone described it best when assessing Robert Cohn, calling him, "...a case of arrested development" (51). That is a fitting description of all those damaged souls belonging to the "Lost Generation".