

Grace under
pressure: what
constitutes a hero in
the sun also rises



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In the despairing modernist world in which Ernest Hemingway's characters exist, Romantic conventions are incompatible with the demoralized state of the world. Therefore, traditional ideals such as the "true hero" must be radically redefined in order to apply to his characters. The criteria for a hero in a modernist society consists of particular characteristics, as explained by Harry E. Hand in his essay, *Transducers and Hemingway's Heroes*: "The Hemingway code, lived and acted but never verbalized by the hero, suggests the following concepts: love for a woman, honor...determination ... resignation but not personal defeat...individual freedom from the demands of society". In Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, a hero is one who is able to recognize and accept the cynical state of the world without letting that realization affect one's dignity or strength of spirit. By these measures, it is worth contending that the matador Pedro Romero is the closest the novel comes to depicting a hero.

The concept of possessing "grace under pressure" truly defines the Hemingway hero (Hand 871). A person who can be considered heroic is one who does not fight against the hopelessness and mundanity of the world, but instead allows his circumstances to further his resolve. This is a person who remains undefeated due to their ability to adapt to a modernist world, while maintaining a strength of spirit. This is exemplified by Romero when he chooses to follow through on his scheduled bullfight, despite the fact that he had been brutalized by Robert Cohn the night before. "During Romero's first bull his hurt face had been very noticeable. Everything he did showed it. All the concentration of the awkwardly delicate working with the bull that could not see well brought it out. The fight with Cohn had not touched his spirit but

his face had been smashed and his body hurt. He was wiping all that out now” (SAR 222). Even though Romero had just been through a physical and emotional ordeal, that did not hamper his resolve, and he was still able to step into the ring with pride and dignity. He boasts a vitality and determination that none of the other characters in the novel possess.

While the main characters quit often and without shame when something becomes too difficult to deal with (physically or emotionally), Romero remains persistent and determined. This is proven by Romero’s response to Cohn’s vicious and unprovoked attack. When Cohn fought Jake and Mike earlier in the novel, not only were the two quickly incapacitated, but they hardly made an effort to get back up after they were knocked down. Romero however, refuses to admit defeat and continues to get back up each time Cohn knocks him down. He does not stop fighting until he is able to finally land a punch on Cohn, when the man offers him a handshake. Romero, however, is not blind to the world he lives in. In fact, he possesses a remarkable ability to stride both worlds (the old world and the new modernist world).

Romero is one of the few characters in the novel who embodies many traditional values like chivalry, courage, and persistence, while also displaying a cunning and sophistry typical of a modernist character. Jake and Bret are undoubtedly partially responsible for this, and have a bad influence on him, the effect of which is seen when Romero reveals that he lies about being unable to speak English and later on when he takes a cheap shot at Cohn. However, though he begins displaying these less-than-noble characteristics after spending time with the two expatriates, he is never

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completely corrupted by their influence, and his soul remains pure. In addition, Romero is the only man in the novel who exudes a natural masculinity, or machismo. Machismo is considered the epitome of manhood and power; in a modernist society, this quality is that much more important and prized.

Therefore, in this novel, those who are idolized as heroes are people who are able to maintain power—over oneself and over others—in a world that seeks to make them powerless. Romero embodies these qualities. He has power over Brett, because he has a significant hold on her emotions, so much so that she actually admits to Jake that she is “ a goner” and “ mad about the Romero boy” (SAR 187). However, he provides a stark contrast to her other lovers, Mike and Cohn, in that he is able to maintain control over himself; even though he is in love with Brett and becomes her lover, his life does not revolve around her validation. This is illustrated by Romero’s actions while he is bullfighting. “ Never once did he look up [at Brett]. He made it stronger that way, and did it for himself, too, as well as for her. Because he did not look up to ask if it pleased he did it all for himself inside, and it strengthened him, and yet he did it for her, too. But he did not do it for her at any loss to himself. He gained by it all through the afternoon” (SAR 218). Romero is able to exert his influence over Brett while still remaining true to himself. Unlike the other men Brett becomes romantically involved with, he doesn’t lose himself in her. His sense of self, his confidence, does not diminish. Romero’s confidence and his individuality are also heroic aspects that cause him to stand out from the others. Though he never fails to fulfill people’s expectations, and has a good understanding of his role in society, he does

not conform to peer pressure nor cede to the demands of society. It is made very apparent in the novel that Romero is a symbol—for his people, and for his culture—and he embraces this duty wholeheartedly. However, he is not afraid to brush off social stigmas. Even though many Spaniards do not like the idea of him being romantically involved with an Englishwoman, especially a woman like Brett, he does not hesitate to give her public displays of affection. This is another of Hand's criteria that Romero embodies. In the context of *The Sun Also Rises*, a hero is defined by their ability to accept and resign himself to the modernist world that he lives in, without letting the environment around him hamper his spirit. This fact speaks to the level of desperation that pervaded post-WWI culture. One is considered hero, who is able to truly function in this type of society, while simultaneously maintaining old world values, a rare quality in the bleak and hopeless world of Hemingway's novels.

Works Cited

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