

Homosexuality within
masculinity in the sun
also rises



Often put off as a writer of supremely masculine literature, Ernest Hemingway has earned a top position in the literary canon of the modernist era. As a master of provocative understatement, Hemingway developed his reputation for addressing issues of gender and sexuality with prevailing themes of masculinity. Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* is a prime example of these typical masculine undertones. The analytic examiner has no trouble locating readings that describe *The Sun Also Rises*, or any other Hemingway work, in this much acknowledged, male-dominated variety. What is an uncommon investigation is the homosexual themes borne into the novel. Specific characterizations and Hemingway's subtle language, when interpreted properly, reveal the irony of homosexuality suppressed in masculinity. The novel's protagonist and narrator, Jake Barnes, embodies the simplest, most obvious homosexual characterization. As a soldier in World War I, Jake was involved in an "accident" as Hemingway describes it, that leaves him impotent. Jake's physical impotence renders him unable to perform any sexual act. This becomes a metaphor for Jake's mental impotence; homosexuality that would forbid him from engaging in sexual acts with any woman. We see Jake expressing a certain frustration over his impotence in the way individuals, especially during the 1920's, would find themselves outcast, or at least separated from the social norm. His impotence and metaphoric homosexuality are qualities that he keeps in the dark. These are qualities that he is ashamed of. Jake and Brett discuss war wounds with Count Mippipopolous who proudly displays the arrow wounds he received in Abyssinia: "And I have got arrow wounds. Have you ever seen arrow wounds?" (Hemingway, 61) Jake's war wounds, although more brutal and impressive, remain an undiscovered, shameful part of Jake. Thus, the <https://assignbuster.com/homosexuality-within-masculinity-in-the-sun-also-rises/>

battle wounds that are often considered a very masculine aspect of the novel become a representation of Jake's metaphoric, understated homosexuality. Considering a subject such as homosexuality makes the character Brett a fascinating one to contemplate. Both Jake and Robert Cohn find themselves directing great amounts of effort toward winning the love of this odd character. The most heterosexual action of both of these men becomes the clearest example of their symbolic homosexuality. It is arguable that Cohn and Jake have fallen in love with the most masculine character in the novel. To state the most glaring detail, Brett has a typically male name. During one of their earliest encounters that we see, Jake describes Brett as "damned good looking", but goes on to describe her as having hair that is done "like a boy's" and being "built with curves like the hull of a racing yacht."

(Hemingway, 22) Aside from Jake's manly description of Brett's handsome qualities, we find that Brett conducts herself in a very male way. She refers to herself and her male friends as "chaps". Greeting them with a hearty "Hello, you chaps", and presumptuously declaring, "Never going to get tight anymore. I say, give a chap a brandy and soda." (Hemingway, 21-22) So aside from looking like a man, and talking like a man, Brett also drinks like a man. Of Brett, literary critic Leslie Fielder writes, "...she is presented not as an animal or as a nightmare but quite audaciously as a goddess, the bitch-goddess with boyish bob (Hemingway is rather fond of women who seem as much as boy as girl), the Lilith of the 20's." (Fielder, 89) Fielder describes Brett's male personality further, quoting a line from her: "He wanted me to grow my hair out. Me, with long hair. I'd look so like Hell.... He said it would make me look more womanly. I'd look a fright." (Fielder, 89) Along with being boyish, Fielder introduces a new term to the character of Brett. This <https://assignbuster.com/homosexuality-within-masculinity-in-the-sun-also-rises/>

idea of the “ bitch-goddess” is certainly one that would have appeal to the homosexual inclination being expressed in Cohn and Jake. The notion of a goddess of beauty, power, and masculinity is exactly the type of deity that would be most appealing according to Hemingway’s homosexuals. Near the beginning of the novel, Jake finds himself at a dance where Brett arrives with a group of gay men. As they enter Jake notes “ The policeman standing by the door looked at me and smiled.” (Hemingway, 20) Here, Hemingway identifies the common sarcastic attitude toward the gay populace and the discriminatory manner with which they are viewed. Jake’s reaction to their dancing provokes a number of possible interpretations. Jake reflects: “ Somehow they always made me angry. I know they are supposed to be amusing, and you should be tolerant, but I wanted to swing on one, any one, anything to shatter that superior, simpering composure.” (Hemingway, 20) It could, obviously, be simple jealousy bringing about these feelings of anger. Jake feels threatened by their “ superior, simpering composure” and is motivated by the primal instinct to do harm to the cause of his frustration. It is not unreasonable to think that Jake would feel threatened by these men who still possess their potency. However, it is not reasonable for us to imagine that Jake should feel jealous toward a group of gay men concerning the woman he is in love with. What is more likely is the recurrence of Jake’s frustration toward his own sexual impotence. Jake is all too familiar with the situation that these men have found themselves in. Like the men, Jake has all the qualities of personality that Brett seeks in a lover. However, with Jake, as with the group of men, Brett has no intention of ever consummating that love. As she puts it later, “ Yes. Aren’t I? [sober] And when one’s with the crowd I’m with, one can drink in such safety, too.” (Hemingway, 22) Jake’s

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aggression toward the homosexuals is merely reflected upon his own state of dissatisfaction with himself. So again, the masculine aggression that is typical of Hemingway becomes another vestige of veiled homosexuality. The concept of the " bitch-goddess" becomes an idea revisited with Cohn's ex-fiance, Frances. When Cohn decides that he cannot marry Frances (a woman with a slightly less masculine name than Brett), she releases onto him a torrent of sarcastic insults including his emotional nature, significant of his metaphoric homosexuality: " Don't have scenes with your young ladies. Try not to. Because you can't have scenes without crying, and then you pity yourself so much you can't remember what the other person's said."

(Hemingway, 50) All throughout her torment Cohn remains fairly silent, letting the insults sink in, interrupting only once to tell her to " shut up". Cohn's emotional, submissive nature combined with his violent past as a champion boxer further supports the idea of the manly homosexual.

Hemingway does go beyond the idea of the homosexual within masculinity, and presents the plausibility of a paradise free of women. This idea will become more significant further on. The Spanish bullfighter Pedro Romero becomes a tool of Hemingway's description of sex. The final moments of his bullfight are to be considered the climactic moments of intercourse.

Backman writes:...as their swords go all the way in, the men leaning after—the men become one with the bull, united for a single instant by death. This is the " moment of truth." It is an intense, almost an ecstatic, moment of communion, involving an abnegation of self before the final merging. The only other experience analogous to this in Hemingway's work is sexual union. (Backman, 249)Backman writes in reference to the passage

concerning Romero's slaughter of the bull: "...his left shoulder went forward
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between the horns as the sword went in, and for just an instant, he and the bull were one..." (Hemingway, 218) This passage, indeed, describes a very sexual insinuation: the sword being a very phallic device penetrating the bull causing them to be "one". This is an accurate representation of Hemingway's take on the purpose of women, and the etiquette of sex. The bullfight was simple. The bullfight was begun as simply as it ended and without the trials associated with relationships. It is perhaps a cynical comment on behalf of Hemingway to suggest that a successful sexual relationship is attainable, but only with a bull, rather than with a woman. Romero had had his face beaten by Cohn the day before the bullfight, and it is not unreasonable to suggest that it is because of the meddlesome nature of women that he endured the fight. We notice Romero cleansing himself of his female-inflicted wounds during his bullfight: "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. Each thing that he did with this bull, wiped that out a little cleaner." (Hemingway, 219) The simplicity of man and beast in a world free of women cleanses the mind of Romero. Again, the union of a great man and a great male beast brought together in a sexually cleansing experience negates the masculinity of the whole situation, and instead creates homoerotic innuendo. The fishing trip to Burguette with Bill and Jake provides further evidence of the whimsical paradise of men without women. Fielder puts the fishing trip quite eloquently: "What Hemingway's emphasis on the ritual murder of fish conceals is that it is not so much the sport as the occasion for immersion which is essential to the holy marriage of males. Water is the symbol of the barrier between the Great Good Place and the busy world of women." (Fielder, 92) It is here, in a place free of women, <https://assignbuster.com/homosexuality-within-masculinity-in-the-sun-also-rises/>

amidst the natural, simplistic state of things that Bill and Jake are allowed to be perfectly honest. Bill tells Jake, " Listen. You're a hell of a good guy, and I'm fonder of you than anybody on Earth. I couldn't tell you that in New York. It'd mean I was a faggot." (Hemingway, 116) The manly pursuit that is fishing becomes a time for Bill to admit his tender, manly, love for his friend Jake. The understated themes of Hemingway's literature are highly self-interpretable. It stands to reason, though, in the spirit of irony that a brilliant author like Earnest Hemingway would use themes like fishing, bullfighting, and beautiful, promiscuous women to promote the values of homosexuality.

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