

# Jake barnes' quest for control



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I have been one acquainted with the night. I have walked out in rain — and back in rain. I have outwalked the further city light. I have looked down the saddest city lane. I have passed by the watchman on his beat. And dropped my eyes, unwilling to explain.—Robert Frost

Gertrude Stein summarized the psychological complexities of the post-World War II expatriate generation by calling them “lost.” While the 1920s seemed to be a time for decadence and reckless celebration, Stein’s statement reveals the sad truth of the era. The war was a distinct turning point for all corners of society, from lifestyle to fashion to intellect. Unfortunately, however, the war veteran’s mental and physical composure remained the most lasting casualty. Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* is an excellent showcase of the war’s widespread destruction. His young, American wanderers represent Gertrude Stein’s “lost” ones, their moral maturity stunted by the horrors of world war. Jake Barnes, in particular, suffers in a body rendered impotent and a mind void of emotion or vitality. As peacetime life greets Jake with a flow of people, parties, and travel, he struggles to retrieve his humanity from the clutches of war. Jake does not become Hemingway’s “code hero” until he re-identifies with his manhood and his moral stability. Once he finds control, the essence of human nature, then he is not lost anymore. Although Jake Barnes considers himself a “rotten Catholic,” his quest to take control over his life is actually quite spiritual in that it concerns his moral growth. Particularly through his nighttime introspection, his evident moral impotence outshines the literal impotence of his wound. At the outset he cannot even keep straight in his mind the concept of morality and immorality: “That was morality; things that made you disgusted afterward. No, that must be immorality. What a lot of bilge I could think up at night.”(149) Jake’s struggle for a set of morals is

key in his desire for control; pondering life itself, Jake thinks, “ I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it. Maybe if you found out how to live in it you learned from that what it was all about.”(148)

In a sense, Jake's yearning for a plan to live life is a way for him to detour the world's complexities. Jake saw the world during the war; now a controlled path will keep him safe from harm and out of moral danger. Jake's sexual impotence is the ultimate symbol of the war's destruction of his character. As a human male, Jake had possessed the height of control — the ability to produce life. After the war, Jake is left hardly human in spirit and hardly male in body. Having lost the physical essence of his manhood, he develops a serious inferiority complex with respect to his manhood and his admiration of Lady Brett Ashley. This is blatantly obvious in his hostility towards homosexuals, particularly those acquainted with his charming, yet preoccupied love interest Brett: “ I was very angry. 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.”(20) The fact that Jake feels threatened by men who could never be sexually involved with Brett and senses from them an air of superiority simply because they are fertile exemplifies the height of his discontent. Jake turns the psychological bend toward spiritual clarity at the same moment he begins to taste control in his life. On the trip with Bill to Burguete, Jake enjoys a relaxing conversation based around the controlled, ritualistic process of fishing. Bill sees Jake's situation as it is and puts him in his place, saying, “ Fake European standards have ruined you ... You're an expatriate, see?”(115) This trip is the time where Jake begins to come to terms with aspects of himself. He speaks openly about his impotence with

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Bill and symbolically reenacts his own castration through the gutting of the fish, in a destruction of fertility. He also begins to separate himself from his reckless lifestyle with Brett through connecting the enjoyment of his day with the fact that "there was no word from Robert Cohn nor from Brett and Mike." (125) The bull fighting chapters also represent Jake's struggle with the issue of his impotence, particularly concerning his lack of control in his relationship with Brett. The image of the steer being gored by the bull precisely depicts Jake's unconfident, inferior status under the shadow of Brett's overbearing control and manipulation. The reader can clearly identify the time when Jake is no longer the steer in the relationship and no longer morally impotent. In one of Jake's final thoughts at the end of the bull-fighting trip, he says, "The Norte station in Madrid is the end of the line." (240) From there, it seems doubtful that he and Brett can "go on anywhere." Hemingway's symbolism in the last passage suggests heavily that control is what manifests itself in Jake's character, and thereby Jake Barnes' ultimate task is recovering himself from the depths of the war and its damage. To do this, he must find the control to recreate his moral character. During World War II, it is safe to say that Jake and his fellow veterans "looked down the saddest city lane," as Robert Frost would put it. At a ripe young age, and just ready to explore life's possibilities, Jake found himself head-on facing the epitome of the world's despair. This early disillusionment, of course, made his return to "reality" confusing and disheartening. Jake came out of the fighting and "dropped his eyes, unwilling to explain." In his mind, his wound had stripped him of his manhood. In the reader's eye, the war had stripped him of his humanity. Post-war, Jake was stuck suspended between life and death, refusing to meet either one eye to eye. When Jake

gains control over his moral mentality, his relationship with Brett, his physical condition, he is finally able to reach the new spiritual clarity foreshadowed by Hemingway's title: *The Sun Also Rises*.