

# Lady brett ashley: the real code hero



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The Hemingway code hero is almost always a man, but in *The Sun Also Rises*, the real code hero is lead female Brett Ashley. From her cropped hair to her penchant for partying, Lady Brett Ashley is more code hero-like than any of her fellow expatriates, including male leads Jake Barnes and Robert Cohn. Aside from her boyish mannerisms — from her “man’s hat” to her habit of referring to herself as a “chap” — Ashley is, as a woman, ironically one of the manliest characters. Who is Hemingway’s ideal man? He has a Brit’s stiff upper lip, and can handle women, alcohol, and life’s misfortunes equally well. He lives his life to the fullest. Brett is all of these and more. Contrary to her carefree and fun-loving personality, she has not had an easy life. Her first (and perhaps true) love died in the war, and her second husband (Lord Ashley) was an intimidating, paranoid man who slept with a loaded gun under his pillow and forced Brett to sleep on the floor. Yet Brett does not parade these events; instead, when confronted by others, she uses her catchphrase: “Don’t let’s talk about it.” Another common trait of the code hero — proving his “manliness” — is his many romantic affairs. Lady Ashley certainly behaves like a man in this regard. She goes through men quickly and emotionlessly, often having two or even three loose relationships at a time. (At one point, she is engaged to Mike Campbell, travels with Count Mippipopolous as well as Cohn, and teases Barnes. Later, she pursues Pedro Romero while still engaged and fends off a heartbroken and desperate Cohn.) Most importantly, the code hero likes but does not need women, and Lady Ashley can definitely stand on her own. If Brett Ashley were a man, she would be the playboy who leaves a string of love-struck women in his wake. Like Hemingway, a code hero should have an affinity for and ability to handle his alcohol well. Brett is one of the best drunks, if not the best, in the novel.

She, like her friends, is constantly drinking, but there is never a scene in which the spirits loosen her lips or cause her to lose her temper, the way a drunk Cohn often does. In fact, Hemingway writes a drunk Lady Ashley the same way he writes a (rarely) sober Lady Ashley. In keeping with the code hero archetype, Brett is always somewhat reticent, even under the influence of brandy. Perhaps the one unifying thread in all of the code hero's characteristics is the desire for an exciting life. Lady Brett Ashley is what we might call today a "jet-setter." She parties hard, is always drinking, and travels often — usually surrounded by a gaggle of men ("swine," as Cohn calls them). Brett has the glamorous life of a 1920s expat, but instead of living it as a woman, she lives it as a man. Compare Lady Ashley with two of the novel's other prominent males. Robert Cohn often whines to Jake Barnes about his boredom with Paris. He complains about his fiancée Frances's tyranny and Brett's disinterest. Robert is easily provoked (acquaintance Harvey Stone half-jokingly calls him a "moron" and Robert throws a fit) and has almost girlish mood swings. Cohn is the one character who wears his heart on his sleeve — he is a "romantic." In this category, Jake Barnes does better. He seems to be a quiet, pensive man. He is a stoic. However, Barnes fails in the romance category. He shows no hint of desire for a woman other than Brett, besides his short (and indifferent) date with the prostitute Georgina, and we never hear of his past relationships. Even Cohn, seen as the most pathetic member of their Lost Generation, has had a wife and a current fiancée. And Robert Cohn has his own problems. He hangs onto Brett even though their tryst is long over. Neither man can behave like a code hero and let Brett go. Additionally, both are dominated by women — Cohn is afraid of Frances, and Barnes is basically Brett's concierge (arranging tickets,

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dates, and bailouts). Jake Barnes is not a bad example of a Hemingway man, however. He can hold his alcohol well; we never read a scene in which he loses his cool thanks to his drink. In contrast, Cohn is a lightweight. He doesn't seem to enjoy alcohol as much as the rest, and drunk, he punches Jake and Mike Campbell, and then goes after Pedro Romero. Neither Jake nor Robert are any match for Brett when it comes to women (or men) and alcohol, or to being Hemingway's ideal man. Most of Hemingway's works have a code hero. In this story, it is Ashley. (A description of the Hemingway man can also be found in Rudyard Kipling's poem "If.") Yes, there are other men — Jake Barnes, Bill Gorton, the Count — who show code-hero traits. But in *The Sun Also Rises*, none so fully embody the Hemingway ideal man as Lady Brett Ashley.