

Sex as destruction in
the sun also rises



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The destruction of sex, a noteworthy theme in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, is specifically displayed in the relationship between the characters of Jake Barnes and Lady Brett Ashley. Because of Jake's impotence and Brett's promiscuity, they can never be together despite their deep connection and assumed love. An analysis of the attraction between them, Brett's past relationships and behaviors, and the parallels between sex and bullfighting reveals that Jake and Brett could never be together even if they were capable of consummating their relationship. To the contrary, it is the introduction of a sexual element that would ultimately destroy their relationship. Since Brett is a member of the Lost Generation, growing up during the first World War, she is constantly seeking a sense of innocence to remind her of her pre-war existence. Brett finds this purity in the impotent Jake, and they both develop the belief that they are destined for one another. Jake's innocence is founded in Brett's unspoiled perception of him, an image that would be ruined were he and Brett capable of consummating their love. Jake and Brett remain friends and hide their feelings for each other as Brett philanders from one man to the next, all the while hurting Jake with her comparisons: "You're a rotten dancer, Jake. Michael's the best dancer I know" (69). Jake endures this pain and remains smitten with Brett. While Brett sees in Jake the innocence that she herself lacks, Jake finds in Brett the masculinity that he has lost. A strong, independent woman, Brett refers to herself as a "chap," wears men's hats over her short hair, and refuses to comport herself in a socially acceptable manner. Jake, who lost his own masculinity as a result of a war wound, is attracted to Brett's independence, an image that would be ruined should he and Brett ever enter into a romantic relationship. Since the attraction between Brett and Jake is

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based on a purely platonic relationship, it is highly unlikely that the two would be able to maintain their love for each other if a sexual element were to be introduced. With sex comes attachment and commitment, both of which cause Brett to quickly abandon her male partners. Twice divorced and thrice engaged, Brett is not one to be tied down. She is aware of her promiscuity, even admitting to Jake that she could never live with him because she'd just "tromper [him] with everybody" (62). She has entered countless relationships with men, and has abandoned all of them because of their attempts to control her once they become physically involved with her. The love that the initially express once they sleep with Brett quickly manifests as continual attempts to control her and keep her for themselves. Brett simply can not and will not be controlled, and she elects to destroy each relationship before this becomes a possibility. Cohn, for example, simply cannot grasp that the time he spent with Brett in San Sebastian "didn't mean anything," expecting far more from his relationship with her than what he got (185). As a result of Cohn's disappointment and the jealousy that both Mike and Jake feel towards Cohn because of his actions, tensions rise so high that the men erupt into verbal and physical conflict. This is Cohn's downfall; he breaks his code of morals in order to defend himself. Shortly thereafter, Cohn is removed from the novel altogether, just as other men such as Mike and the Count are removed from Brett's life. Pedro Romero, specifically, is dismissed when he asks Brett to grow out her hair: "Me, with long hair. I'd look so like hell...He said it would make me more womanly" (246). Brett can't stand the idea of settling down and refuses to do so for anybody, even for a man whom she claims she is "mad about" and "in love with" (187). However, Brett also refers to Jake as her

love while admitting that she “ couldn’t live quietly in the country. Not [even] with [her] own true love” (62). Despite this blatant confession of love, chances are that the relationship between Brett and Jake would not fare any better than her other conquests, and she would leave him just as she left Pedro and all the others. Since Brett lives a promiscuous lifestyle and refuses to settle for any one man, an actual relationship with Jake would be impossible. Ultimately, Brett will remain alone, continuing her self-destructive cycle. The bullfighting scenes in *The Sun Also Rises* parallel the theme of sex and destruction. Like sex, bullfighting involves a connection between two separate entities. Like a matador, Brett draws the bulls close to her and then quickly backs away at the last minute. The bullfight ends when the matador stabs the bull through the heart, slaying it. Brett’s treatment of men and bullfighting both end in destruction. Even Jake himself notes the “ sensation of coming tragedy” associated with the bullfights as he discusses the greatness of the matador Belmonte (218). Brett is also an excellent “ matador” of sorts, able to continually fool men into falling in love with her before sending them away. The relationship between sex and bullfighting and the destruction which results from both exemplifies the destructive nature of sex in *The Sun Also Rises*. Were Jake not impotent, he would have become just another one of Brett’s toys. The only thing that sustains the relationship between Jake and Brett is their inability to consummate their relationship and introduce the destructive force of sex. To begin with, Jake’s attraction to Brett’s independence and Brett’s attraction to Jake’s innocence would both be shattered if they consummated their love. It is also unlikely that Brett would ever settle down, even for Jake. The parallels between intimacy and bullfighting exemplify the destructive nature of sex in *The Sun*

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Also Rises. It is the absence of sex, and the consequent longing for it, that keep Jake and Brett bound together in an emotional relationship.