

Strife at san fermin:  
bullfighting  
symbolism in the sun  
also rises



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“ Everything centers around the bull and the bullfighter. The bull can represent anything we choose: the unknown, the “ other”, fear, money, sex, work, romantic relationships, etc. It is something that you have to see to understand. The most important thing isn’t in just killing the bull, but in how one kills it. And it’s the same with human experience. The most profound thing is how we live out our conflicts and problems.”

-Paco Pereda

The portrayal of the ever-present conflicts for the characters in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* comes in an unexpected form: bullfighting. The group of American expatriates in Paris is forced to face their demons during a pivotal trip to Spain during the San Fermin festival with a strong bullfighting culture. The facets of bullfighting serve as symbols of the struggles the characters faced in post-World War I society. Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* uses bullfighting as a symbol of sex, masculinity, and violence to illustrate the way sexuality and gender contribute to the tumultuous nature of the characters’ relationships.

Bullfighting, an historic symbol of sexuality, masculinity, and violence, is examined in detail during chapters XIII-XVIII when Hemingway and his group of friends take a trip to Pamplona for the festival of San Fermin, during which bullfighting is a tradition. Much like the characters in Hemingway’s novel, bullfighting has lead a troubled history. Viewed by some as a sport and others as a sadistic performance, it has been fought by governments and banned in many cities. In an article written for the Telegraph, the author states “ I came to know the tension, fear, and the injuries suffered by these

artists...One can see there is much in common with the troubled life of toreros" (Fiske-Harrison). This troubled life he describes for the bullfighters is not far off from the experiences of Jake and his group of friends in the novel. Defined by their common struggles, the bullfighters described by Fiske-Harrison and the group of expatriates in Hemingway's novel share a common need to congregate based on like troubles.

During this trip, bullfighting is portrayed as a symbol of sex. Paco Pereda, a professor at the University of the Basque Country, interprets bullfighting as a symbol of sexuality in the following way: " In terms of sexuality, the effeminate costume the bullfighter wears represents the feminine; the penetration by spears and the subsequent wounding of the bull represent the moment when the bull and bullfighter reverse roles of male and female sexuality, with the bull " bleeding" and the bullfighter becoming the aggressor" (Pereda, Baker). Not only is bullfighting in general described in a sexual manner, and depicted as " beautiful", but the bullfighter that the group encounters, Romero, is also highly sexualized. Brett, the main symbol of sexuality in the novel thus far, is riveted by bullfighting, and by Romero. Her physical attraction to Romero gives a tangible form to the sexuality of bullfighting. Furthermore, the San Fermin festival can also be seen as a time of great debauchery and indulgence. The frequent drinking and promiscuity that takes place show the inclination towards certain stimuli oftentimes considered unhealthy and indulgent. The emphasis on sex creates tension and discomfort among the male characters, who struggle with their masculinity.

Bullfighting is similarly depicted as an inherently masculine sport. It originates from an ancient rite of passage for boys, symbolizing their evolution into young men. The strong and powerful bull specifically is a symbol of masculinity, and its converse, the passive steer, is a symbol of de-masculinization. Throughout the book, the male characters struggle with their perception of masculinity and feel the need to compete with others in regards to how masculine they are. This can be seen near the very beginning of the novel, when the narrator, as Jake, immediately points out Cohn's lack of masculinity. When seeing Cohn, Jake remarks, " I watched him walk back to the café holding his paper. I rather liked him and evidently she led him quite a life" (15). He indicates that Cohn's is not very masculine due to the way his wife controls him. Jake can be seen as the castrated steers, since he is impotent. In regards to his implicit castration from a war injury, the liaison colonel tells him that he had given more than [his] life." His insecurities in regards to masculinity are manifested in this chapter. Additionally, Cohn's masculinity is also attacked by Mike, who compares him to a steer for his ineffectiveness and his habit of following Brett. It is clear through this passage that the characteristic of being masculine is something taken very seriously by the group.

The violence in bullfighting presents a metaphor for the volatile nature of the group. It ties together the themes of masculinity and sex, as the two are used to attack and hurt the others in the group. The complicated relationship between Brett and the men in the group and her penchant for promiscuity causes tension. The men lash out at each other due to their insecurities with Brett. Mike, in response to his own fear of losing Brett to Romero, yells to

Cohn, ““ Why don’t you see when you’re not wanted?” (140). Mike’s insecurity about his relationship with Brett causes him to attack Cohn in order to project the same feeling onto him. The violence in bullfighting represents yet another large source of conflict amongst the group members? World War I, where terrible violence was rampant. The war provides the deep tensions between those in the group, and these tensions manifest in attacks on the masculinity of certain characters. For example, Robert Cohn, the only non war veteran, is repeatedly attacked by others for his lack of masculinity. Mike accuses him of “ follow[ing] Brett around like a steer all the time” (146). Additionally, Jake is castrated in a violent war injury, showing the very literal toll the violent war took on masculinity. The violence depicted in bullfighting provides a symbolic depiction of both the internal and external chaos that the characters faced due to insecurity and resentment.

The imagery of bullfighting in the novel provides a tangible description of the issues faced by the characters. The facets of sexuality, masculinity, and violence in bullfighting depicted in this section of the novel provide an important window into the characters respond to their own personal trauma and insecurities. Among members of the group, insecurities regarding sex and masculinity were rampant, and tensions were high. The use of the bullfighting metaphor in the context of this novel proves the large role that sexual and gender insecurity and resentment played into the chaotic nature of the group.