

Circe, circa 1925



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In *The Sun Also Rises*, Ernest Hemingway depicts the independent Lady Brett Ashley, the main female character in the novel, as a selfish, careless, and superficial woman. She was perhaps once a compassionate woman: she was a nurse during the Great War, and was by Jake Barnes' side during his recovery from his wound. However, the loss of her "true love" to dysentery during the war and Jake's inability to physically love her are two factors that have left her disillusioned. She is just as unhappy and aimless as every other character in the novel; she drinks constantly, and sleeps with nearly every man she meets. Furthermore, like the sorceress Circe in Homer's *Odyssey*, she "turns men into swine" (148). Often her mere presence is disruptive: on many occasions, she only has to appear, and the men will begin to fight among themselves about her. As she confides to Jake Barnes, "Oh, darling, I've been so miserable" (32), Brett is just as unhappy as the other characters in the novel, and her depression leads her to engage in self-destructive behavior. Just as the men in the novel aimlessly wander from bar to bar, trying to imbibe enough alcohol to forget their problems, Brett wanders from man to man, vainly using sex as a method of lifting her spirits. She often accompanies the men in their bar-hopping, drinking just as much as they do. Her engagement in these two destructive behaviors demonstrates her misery; Brett is arguably the most depressed character in the novel, second only to Jake. Her emotional agony has similar origins as that of the men in the novel: the Great War. Brett has not only been affected by the loss of her "true love" to dysentery, and an abusive marriage to Lord Ashley, but has also been mentally scarred by her experiences as a nurse. Although she did not fight in the filth-ridden trenches, Brett cared for the men who did. One can imagine that she had to soothe screaming men who were past any hope

of survival, constantly telling them that they *would* live. It was during her time as a nurse that Brett met Jake, and therefore always knew about his wound. Despite this, they still fall in love. However, by the time the reader is acquainted with both Brett and Jake, he is aware that there is great tension between them because of their inability to physically love each other. During their time together in Paris, unable to do anything else, Brett and Jake drive aimlessly around in taxis; their wanderings serve as a metaphor for their directionless relationship and lives. Furthermore, Brett's sexual promiscuity is her method of trying to convince herself that she is not deeply upset by her inability to physically love Jake. Although Brett is extraordinarily unhappy and disillusioned, she is also inexcusably careless, selfish and disruptive. As her fiancé Mike observes, Brett, like Circe, "turns men into swine" (148). An extremely beautiful woman who knows how to show off her figure, Brett constantly attracts both positive and negative attention to herself. Men are instantly attracted to her, and she further reins them in with her charisma. Unfortunately, men are on their worst behavior when they are around her, constantly fighting over her. For example, whenever Brett appears at a restaurant or bar, quarrels ensue between men such as her alcoholic fiancé Mike, and Robert Cohn, who is smitten with her. Brett never attempts to stop them, instead she sits and listens, passively absorbing all that is going on around her. Brett further "turns men into swine" by selfishly seducing and then abandoning them. She engages in a relationship with Pedro Romero, a promising young Spanish bullfighter, fifteen years her junior. Unlike Jake and his expatriate friends, Romero is completely honest and moral, drinking comparatively little, and spending most of his time concentrating on his bullfighting. However, Brett's relationship with him is corruptive, and she

drags him into her world of debauchery. A fight breaks out between Romero and Robert Cohn when Cohn finds the two lovers together. It is only after Romero has been beaten that Brett realizes that their relationship is unhealthy, and she breaks it off, citing later on that she is, “not going to be one of those bitches that ruins children” (247.) After Brett breaks off her relationship with Romero, one can sense that he has been irreversibly changed. Brett is as careless in everyday life as she is in her relationships with men. When Romero kills a special bull, its ears are cropped, and given to her as a gift. She takes this prize and throws it in the back of a drawer with her garbage, and this action is reflective of her thoughtless, selfish attitude, demonstrating that she feels no value for anything. As Brett confesses, she has “had a hell of a time” (245.) Despite her selfishness and immoral behavior, it is easy to pity Brett. She has survived an abusive marriage, the loss of her true love, nursing during the Great War, and the inability to physically love Jake. All this has left her depressed, and with a feeling of worthlessness.