THE LITERARY ENCYCLOPEDIA
Exploring literature, history and culture

Ernest Hemingway: The Sun Also Rises

(1926)

- Robert E. Fleming (University of New Mexico)

Genre: Novel. Country: United States.

The Sun Also Rises (1926) was Ernest Hemingway's first full-length novel. Coming after his first American collection of stories, *In Our Time* (1925), and his short novel parodying Sherwood Anderson, *The Torrents of Spring* (1926), *The Sun Also Rises* established Hemingway's reputation not only as a major novelist of the Modernist movement but as a spokesman for the Lost Generation. The latter was a title that the author did not necessarily welcome.

The Sun Also Rises is a story narrated by foreign correspondent Jake Barnes concerning his relationship with Lady Brett Ashley. Because of a war wound suffered in World War I Jake is unable to consummate a physical relationship with Brett, who fell in love with him when she met him in a military hospital. She in turn has affairs with novelist Robert Cohn and Spanish bullfighter Pedro Romero; she is also engaged to be married to Mike Campbell, an upper-class Scot, when her divorce from her current husband becomes final.

The story begins in Paris, where some scenes echo T. S. Eliot's recently published poem *The Waste Land* (1922). In this “unreal city” Jake visits the chief haunts of the expatriate community on the Left Bank. He introduces his acquaintance Robert Cohn, a wealthy graduate of a prestigious US university and an amateur boxer. Unlike Jake, who works daily as a journalist for a news service, Cohn is a dabbler in literature; having produced one barely readable novel, he is having problems getting started on his second book. When Jake introduces Cohn to Brett Ashley in a bistro Cohn falls in love with her. In spite of her apparently sincere love for Jake, Brett accompanies Cohn on a holiday in the Spanish resort town of San Sebastian. After the holiday, however, Brett wishes to have nothing more to do with Cohn, who casts off his mistress and continues to pursue her.

When Jake's friend Bill Gorton arrives from the USA, plans are made for a Spanish fishing trip and a visit to Pamplona for the festival of San Fermin, known for its impressive bullfights. The party is to include Jake, Bill, Brett and her fiancé Mike, and Cohn – an explosive combination. Jake, Bill, and Cohn arrive in Pamplona first, and Jake and Bill enjoy a tranquil period of fishing in the mountain streams north of Pamplona. When they join the others in Pamplona, however, the scene is anything but tranquil. Mike understandably resents Cohn's presence. He tells him that Brett has slept with much better people than he, but none of them ever “hung about” afterwards. As if the situation were not already awkward enough, Brett falls in love with Pedro Romero, a young matador who is enjoying a sensational rise in popularity among “aficionados,” the most passionate followers of the bullfight.

Things come to a climax when Jake, at Brett's instigation, sets up a meeting between Brett and Romero,

jeopardizing his own standing with the hotel owner Montoya and other passionate devotees of the bullring. Cohn accuses Jake of acting as a pimp and knocks him out in a fistfight. He then finds Brett in Romero's room and beats the matador mercilessly but fails to break his fighting spirit. Ironically, it is Cohn who suffers a moral defeat and leaves town the next morning. Romero performs spectacularly in the bullfights in spite of his injuries. Brett departs for Madrid with Romero, and Jake parts with Mike and Bill, intending to spend a quiet solitary holiday at the seaside in San Sebastian.

Soon after his arrival, however, Jake receives a telegram from Brett, a cry for help. She is stranded in Madrid, so Jake catches the next train. When he arrives, Brett tells him her story. Romero has not really understood her. He wanted her to let her hair, always worn in an unconventional mannish style, grow out and to conform to the standards expected of a matador's wife or mistress. Brett, who has always behaved as freely as any man, felt that he was ashamed of her. Perhaps partly for this reason, she has sent him on his way; but now, talking to Jake, she says that she wanted to exit Romero's life for fear that she would ruin him. She has sworn not to be the sort of woman who would ruin “children” (Brett is, after all, nearly old enough to be the mother of the young matador). She tells Jake that such a renunciation is “what we have instead of God.”

Although Brett announces her intention of going back to marry Mike, whose questionable morals are no better than her own, at the end of the novel she invites Jake to resume their old strange relationship. Brett wants to believe that, had Jake not been sexually incapacitated by his wartime injury, they could have shared a happy life together. Jake's answer, the last line of the novel, indicates his own reservations: “Isn't it pretty to think so?”

When *The Sun Also Rises* was first published it created a scandal in Paris because all of the principal characters had recognizable prototypes in the expatriate community. Robert Cohn was based on Hemingway's acquaintance Harold Loeb, Brett on Duff Twysden, Mike on her fiance Pat Guthrie, Romero on Cayetano Ordonez, who fought under the name “Nino de la Palma”, and Jake rather loosely on Hemingway himself. Years later, Loeb would write his own autobiographical account of that Summer, *The Way It Was* (1959), revealing how deeply Hemingway's fictional portrait had hurt him. In spite of the fact that it is a *roman à clef*, however, the real importance of *The Sun Also Rises* is the fictional picture it creates.

Hemingway prefaced his novel with two epigraphs. The first, taken from a conversation with Gertrude Stein, coined the term “lost generation”, while the second, from the Book of Ecclesiastes, refers to the cyclical nature of all life: generations come and go, but the earth abides forever. The second epigraph cancels out the first, and Hemingway thereby casts doubt on the lost generation label attached to those who had been harmed by the Great War. In spite of that obvious clue many readers of the 1920s thought of the book as merely a realistic document which held up a mirror to the expatriate life.

Modern readers may discern greater depths in the novel. For example, Brett Ashley is treated as an archetypal pagan goddess: Cohn calls her Circe because she turns men into swine. The Spanish peasants who have come to Pamplona for the feast interpret her on that mystical level as well: when she wants to dance with them, they insist that she remain in the middle of the circle as an image around which they can dance. Brett is also, significantly, repelled by Christianity. On one occasion she is prohibited entry to the cathedral and on another she enters but has to leave because she is so badly affected by the atmosphere.

Brett is also interesting from the point of view of modern gender studies. On one hand she is the feminine sexual object pursued by most of the principal men in the book: Jake, Cohn, Mike, and Romero. On the other hand she refers to herself as a “chap”, wears a man's felt hat on her cropped mannish haircut, and assumes all of the male prerogatives such as drinking, smoking, and aggressive sexual behavior. Yet her flouting of the double standard seems to be accompanied by guilt. She constantly refers to her need to bathe, recalling Lady Macbeth's compulsive handwashing.

Jake's odyssey is more than the pursuit of a lady who is impossible to win. As a representative member of the postwar generation, Jake is a man searching for meaning in a meaningless universe. Although he is a nominal Roman Catholic, he spends much of his time seeking an alternative code to live by. His work furnishes some meaning in his life, and he follows the bullfights religiously. The highly formal *corrida* offers an arbitrary structure that can take the place of religion; so, for a time, can his idyllic relationship with nature on the mountain fishing trip or during his solitary swimming at San Sebastian. For a time he even follows the philosophy of Count Mippipopolous, one of Brett's conquests in Paris, who teaches him that happiness is achieved by “learning to get your money's worth and knowing when you had it.”

First reactions to the novel were surprisingly mixed in view of the respect accorded it by later critics. Although reviewers for the *New York Times Book Review*, *New York Herald Tribune Books*, the *Boston Evening Transcript*, *Atlantic Monthly*, and *Saturday Review of Literature* praised the work, other newspapers and magazines found it wanting. *Dial*, which Hemingway had just ridiculed in a short story, found the characters shallow and the writing monotonous. *Time* and the *Chicago Tribune* published negative reviews, and even Hemingway's former newspaper, the *Kansas City Star*, offered only a mixed review. Several readers suggested that *The Sun Also Rises* was indebted to Michael Arlen's *The Green Hat* (1924), a charge that was based on little more than the fact that an Englishwoman in each novel invariably wore a hat. The passage of time has left no doubt that Hemingway's first full-length novel was a major achievement. Critics since the 1930s have considered it one of the author's most memorable novels, some going so far as to consider it his finest work.

- Robert E. Fleming (University of New Mexico)

First published 17 July 2001, last revised 0000-00-00

ISSN 1747-678X