

Hemingway and the Impossibility of Love

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Any work of fiction is a catalogue of information about its author. No matter how much an author tries to make an objective story, a work of fiction will naturally reflect an author's perception of their environment and life experience. Hemingway doesn't try very hard to make an objective story; many parts of his work reflect his life almost exactly. Hemingway's works are also a massive catalogue of information about his personal philosophy. One of the main beliefs that Hemingway plays around with in *The Sun Also Rises* is the belief that it is impossible to be romantically satisfied. From the novel it is clear that Hemingway has complicated beliefs about how gender roles, sexual drive, and the romantic impulse intertwine. Furthermore, Hemingway seems to believe that it is impossible for these three forces to exist in harmony. This belief is most likely a reflection of the lack of harmony in Hemingway's own life.

The women in Hemingway's life had a huge effect on his philosophy. One of the women with the most profound effect was Agnes von Kurowsky, his first real lover. As Hemingway biographer Jeffrey Meyers puts it, "the most influential woman in Hemingway's life, other than his mother, was Agnes von Kurowsky" (Meyers 41). Hemingway met Agnes at a hospital in Italy during the First World War, when he was wounded in battle. Hemingway and Agnes fell in love, but when Hemingway recovered, Agnes urged him to go home and make a living before they got married. Hemingway went home, but things did not go as planned: Agnes became engaged to another man and Hemingway was heartbroken (Tyler 3).

I believe this original disharmony went on to shape Hemingway's idea of romance and the viability of true satisfaction of the romantic impulse. Who among us does not remember the first time we were truly in love? More importantly, who among us can say that our ideas of

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romance were not significantly shaped by this first experience with love? Hemingway's rejection by a woman, the "standardly" submissive party in a relationship, wounded him deeply, forcing him to believe that it was impossible to be truly romantically satisfied. This did not stop Hemingway from going out and pursuing sex and love, but always Hemingway was on the defensive. Meyers writes about this and describes how "for the rest of his life [Hemingway] guarded himself against betrayal and loneliness" (Meyers 41). This shows the effect Agnes had on Hemingway's way of life.

This defense can be seen in *The Sun Also Rises*, in Jake the protagonist's calmly carried, almost emotionless way of going about his life. The descriptions of physical things, such as the setting in which a scene takes place, are vague at best; the descriptions of emotions are only present and still quite muted at key points in the novel. It is at such moments, when there is an implied emotion, that it is possible to see Jake's defense mechanism. When Brett is telling Jake that she is in love with Romero, the bullfighter, and it has just been made clear that Jake is still in love with Brett, his words are not affected by his likely emotions at all. Brett is having a hysterical fit, yet Jake is calm and rational when dealing with her (Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* 187). This reveals Jake's defense mechanism: distance. Jake takes himself far away from emotion in order to escape entrapment in the pain of rejection and lost love.

Jake developed this defense mechanism from a life situation that parallels Hemingway's: he was wounded physically and that led a woman to wound him emotionally. On July 8, 1918, Hemingway sustained multiple shrapnel wounds in his right leg. He ended up in a hospital. If he had not sustained these wounds he would not have ended up in a vulnerable position. Meyer writes that "[Agnes] first taught [Hemingway], when he was young and vulnerable, to accept the care and protection of a woman" (Meyers 41), revealing the connection between Hemingway's vulnerability and the effect that Agnes had on him. Hemingway accepted this protection and had it ripped away from him; from then on he found it very difficult to accept protection from anyone except himself. This element of Hemingway's life is seen clearly in Jake in how

his physical wound creates a situation in which Brett wounds him. In *The Sun Also Rises* it becomes clear that no matter how they try Brett and Jake are always drawn to each other. When Brett says, "That's my fault" (Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* 34) in reference to this phenomenon it reveals how Jake's wound has forced them to attempt to avoid romance. In attempting to avoid romance and failing Jake was wounded emotionally.

Brett Ashley is a woman to fall in love with: that much is clear from the beginning. From Hemingway's description of her body as "damned good-looking" (Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* 29), it is clear that Brett is a sexual object, not just to the main character, Jake, but to the men (and perhaps women) around her. The presence of the romantic impulse is revealed in Hemingway's description of Brett's soul, through her eyes, when he writes, "[her eyes] would look on and on after everyone else's eyes in the world would have stopped looking" (Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* 34), showing how deeply the protagonist is in love with Brett. Finally, Lady Brett's masculine name and the fact that when we are first introduced to her when her hair is "brushed back like a boy's" (Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* 30) reveals how Brett plays with her feminine role in society and flirts with androgyny. All of this leads to the creation of Lady Brett as a construct of deep love, lust, and confusion, a construct that is impossible to possess as one might commonly possess a person in a romantic relationship. However, this does not directly connect to Hemingway's love life. In order to explain how possession is related to Hemingway's actual love life I must elucidate Hemingway's beliefs about the romance.

To Hemingway, part of being the masculine party in a "true" romantic relationship is putting the feminine in a box. Hemingway believes that the masculine party in a relationship should take possession of the feminine party, at the very least in the emotional sense. Hemingway's style is short and ambiguous; he leaves out a lot of the details about what goes on, how, and where. Therefore what he does mention seems to have some sort of intent. With this in mind, notice that whenever Brett and Jake are having a tender moment, a moment when they are making themselves vulnerable to each other, Jake feels the need to en-

close Brett with his body. The first time we see Brett and Jake alone together is in a taxi and Jake has his “[arm around Brett as] she [leans] back against [him]” (Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* 34). This encircling of Brett physically is natural because society gives the female the passive role. This can again be seen in the last scene of the book, which is a showcase of Jake and Brett’s love and its inconsummate nature. Even in this twisted love affair, our narrator tells the reader how he “put [his] arm around her and she rested against [him] comfortably” (Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* 251), showing his need to possess Brett.

This need to possess in a romantic relationship is a natural byproduct of the environment Hemingway grew up in—one where women, while given more rights than in most of history, were still seen mostly as sexual-romantic objects. By the time of his first love in the form of Agnes von Kurowsky, Hemingway had likely become accustomed to this idea of sexual-romantic objects. Therefore when Agnes “[pushed] him out of her life,” (Kert 70) Hemingway felt as if the natural order of things had crumbled. What he saw was a feminine figure taking a masculine action, which thus emasculated him. From this it is easy to see why Jake has wounded genitalia. Not only was Hemingway wounded in the upper leg, but also that wound sparked an emotional wound, which effectively castrated him, a perfect parallel to Jake Barnes.

Meyers also goes on to talk about how Agnes’s rejection awakened in Hemingway a “desire for revenge” (Meyers 41). This is reflected in *The Sun Also Rises* in how he tortures Brett, who parallels Agnes in her exploitation of men. When Brett says “When I think of the hell I’ve put chaps through. I’m paying for it all now” (Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* 34), Hemingway is making this exact connection; he is punishing a woman who has played with the hearts of men. By making himself (through Jake) the object of Brett’s desire, he wins a final victory over Agnes by making her yearn for him, at least in his caricature of her. *The Sun Also Rises* is not the only text in which Hemingway “punishes” Agnes for her actions. Hemingway uses elements of Agnes in a number of his works, the most obvious of which is “A Very Short Story” in which Agnes is portrayed as a pitiful girl who never got what she wanted (Hemingway, “A Very Short Story”). This characterization is, however,

childish and angry. Hemingway's true feelings come out when the effects of Agnes's actions are examined, rather than looking straight at Hemingway's representations of Agnes.

After Agnes, Hemingway began to believe that it was impossible for love to have any sort of assured stability. This is what started a pattern that Meyers observes as always "conducting a liaison with a future wife during his current marriage" (Meyers 41) in order to ensure his own emotional security. This total disbelief in the security and health of any kind of romance comes out early in the novel with Georgette, a woman Jake picks up on the street. When Jake says that he is sick Georgette replies that "Everybody's sick" (Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises* 23). This brings to light Hemingway's idea that nobody is truly healthy. Finally, the perfect example of Hemingway's total disbelief in the possibility of romantic satisfaction comes in the last line of the book. When Brett talks about how wonderful she and Jake would have been together, Jake says simply, "Isn't it pretty to think so?" (Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*), showcasing Hemingway's belief that the only truly healthy romance exists in one's head; all other romances are sick representations, which end with pain for one or more parties. When Agnes left Hemingway, he lost all belief in the security of romance, and though his life went on, he was never able to be so romantically vulnerable again.

Hemingway is a great artist. But he is also a little bit of a fool. Hemingway let a single woman decide that he could not feel secure. The thing is, no one is ever secure. Hemingway himself said that young men go to war believing they are immortal and come back knowing they aren't (Putnam). However, he failed to realize that the important thing is to be able to *feel* secure in order to live life as fully as if one truly were secure. Without that Hemingway was bound to be the nervous wreck he was all his life.

Hemingway thought of himself as a true man. He always had been a man, but Agnes ripped his sense of security out of his hands: something a man would do. Because of this, Hemingway wanted to make sure he never got emasculated again, at least not when it wasn't his idea. ●

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