

Hemingway's Bullfighting: Blood, Brutes, and Beatitude

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Bullfighting exemplifies the juxtaposition of the primal and the civilized. The bull is reduced to a slab of meat that, with significantly deliberate efforts, is pierced with a series of emotional and physical spears that effectively destroy the wildness of the bull while restoring a sense of pride in humanity. When the bullfighter executes his victim, he additionally shapes his meat by caging the animal with his muleta and his sword. He is containing the pervasive rage and danger with human means, proving to his audience that one can force the chaos of world into structural forms and keep order. From a more human perspective, the crusades of the bullfighter give humans the hope that they too can contain their own undomesticated souls. Hemingway's bullfights in *The Sun Also Rises* define humans as shapers of the natural world who attack disorder with precision and control. Hemingway uses this dichotomy to illustrate his conceptions of art, humanity, and psychological chaos. In a brilliant paradox, the bullfighter's engagement with the primal activity of fighting a bull, because it is done with such precision, embodies the human ability to create order.

Hemingway believed that the matador "must have a spiritual enjoyment of the moment of killing. Killing cleanly and in a way that gives one esthetic pleasure and pride has always been one of the greatest enjoyments of a part of the human race" (Duffus). While the setting of the bullfight is animalistic, it is up to the matador to captivate his audience with purity and "esthetic pleasure." In the novel, Jake favors Romero's bullfighting because it "gave real emotion, because he kept the absolute purity of line in his movements and always quietly and calmly let the horns pass him close each time" (Hemingway 171). Hemingway believes bullfighting requires significant artistry as he glorifies the matador's interactions with the bull by suggesting that the matador's movements are "lines of purity." Humanity is prized for

This paper was written for Vicky Greenbaum's Modern Writers class in the fall of 2009.

being artistic in the presence of animalistic nature, transforming the raging charge of a bull into the graceful swoop of the matador's caped arm. By interacting with nature and artistically extracting emotional energy, the struggle between humanity and nature becomes beautiful. Hemingway illustrates the idea that the chaos and struggle of human passion can be manipulated and guided by the matador's skillful limbs into something emotional yet beautiful.

In *The Dangerous Summer*, Hemingway describes the perfection of a matador's interaction with a bull as "the most beautiful way to kill." He writes, "The bull has to be prepared for it all through the faena. It is also the most dangerous since, if the bull is not perfectly controlled by the left hand and raises his head, the horn wound will come in the chest" (Hemingway 58). This description emphasizes the power humanity must have in the dangerous presence of animals in order to prove its civility. What separates humanity from the animal world is that, in a dangerous confrontation, humanity accesses its artistry of skilled and swift movement and uses these techniques to gain control over the bull. Humanity may be defined as a group of beings that use art in order to control and kill other animals. Not only does humanity transform the primal into art, it also uses this transformation to conquer the primal. The human art of bullfighting transcends the limitations of animals and nature in a way that is not an engagement of human animalistic behavior but instead a reassurance of art's transcendental abilities over the natural and animal world.

Hemingway notes the interactions of Brett with her bull's ear, as she is neither an artist nor a bullfighter. When Romero gives her the ear of a bull he has killed, she shoves it "far back in the drawer of the bed-table" (Hemingway 203). Through this anti-artistic interaction with the primal, Brett, rather than conquering the ear or channeling it into art that transcends its bloody gore, preserves the primal and in turn preserves it into herself. Because she merely responds to the animal struggle of an ear with a hiding place, she is not embracing the artistry of humanity and instead allows a small part of herself to preserve the primal and become submissive to it. Hemingway portrays humanity as a state of action of those such as the bullfighter. Brett, who interacts with the bull but does not conquer it, seems to fall short of the artistic expectations of humanity.

While Brett preserves the primal, she also behaves aggressively and indulges in her primal urges to manipulate the men in her life. Brett's role in life is not as a bullfighter but instead as a bull. Rather than interacting with the inhumane in order to restore humanity, she seems bullish in the sense that she enjoys a series of partners merely to satisfy her brutish sexual hunger and craving for novelty. She fails to recognize the art within her own human struggle and merely views this struggle as a product of spontaneity and confidence. Through her physical progress of activity and "life," there is a non-artistic meaninglessness in addition to an overindulgence of her sensory desires. Robert Cohn, a previous lover, is said to "follow Brett around like a poor bloody steer" (Hemingway 146). Rather than escaping the cycle of humanity brooding to be brutish, Brett, unable to conquer the inhumane within herself, perpetuates the brutish tendencies of mankind. She subtly encourages characters like Cohn and Jake to pursue her so that she can convince herself that she makes progress with her humanity and sexual being when she rejects them and keeps them chasing her. There is a quality of meaninglessness to her behavior, but it is mainly animalistic as she fails to transcend the earthly cycles of new lovers and new lives. Perhaps she strives to be more animalistic than not. She seems to idealize the vivacity of bulls when she is entranced by a "beautiful" bull (Hemingway 144). She may see the artistic reflection of humanity as static while idealizing the visceral vigor of trotting aimlessly through life, living rather than contemplating. Instead of transforming the brutish and non-artistic into something more substantial and intellectual, Brett runs around a ring of men, with her horns down, charging forward at full throttle.

Cohn's fight with Romero similarly demonstrates how Romero is considered human because he conquers the inhumane. When Cohn "went in and found Brett" and "massacred the poor, bloody bullfighter," the characters emphasize his violence and immediately define his behavior as unnecessarily volatile compared to the helpless and level-headed bullfighter (Hemingway 205). While Cohn is considered a "ruddy ass," Romero is considered human because "he kept getting up and getting knocked down again" (Hemingway 205–206). Romero then begins to repeatedly knock Cohn in the face and in the morning Brett is "looking after this Romero lad" (Hemingway 206). Cohn

exhibits uncontrollable rage against Romero due to his lust or passion for Brett, despite her current infatuation with the bullfighter. Cohn has been known to act bull-headed—many of the characters have referred to him as a “steer”—so his interaction with Romero in the heat of a fight is consistent with Hemingway’s definition of humanity (Hemingway 146). Romero is portrayed as humane despite the fact that he, in the face of the vigorous threat posed by Cohn, fights and conquers his brutal opponent. The relationship between humanity and the animal world is merely a crusade where the human prevails due to his ability to conquer animals with art.

Although the matadors of Hemingway’s fiction expertly balance the inherent violence in their viscera with the sacred artistry of humanity, Hemingway himself was strongly tempted towards his own brutish instincts. When describing a gored matador in *The Dangerous Summer*, a work of non-fiction, he sensed that the bullfighter’s intensity was composed of “beatitude and intelligent, deadly anger” (Hemingway 95). While the bullfighter considers making art that is extrapolated from his physical interaction with the bull, there remains an intelligent yet animalistic “anger” that slightly stains the “beatitude” of his humanity. The matador, who is human, conquers the primal by transforming animal struggle into artistic ceremony, but the force that drives him derives from a natural rage all too similar to that of the bull. Encapsulated within the artistic aspect of humanity is a small vial of primal blood, distant but pulsating nonetheless. Brett has a similar connection to the primal, as she is repulsed by the bloody bull’s ear, yet she provides it with a permanent existence in the drawer and attaches herself to it. While Hemingway credits humanity with extracting artistic beauty from the chaos of the animal and natural worlds, his observations of the bullfighter’s avenging, angry, and rash energy—the same energy that invigorates him to create art—delivers a nasty aftertaste to his pursuit of human achievement. This is the same sour aftertaste left by the ever-present alcohol, a poisonous return to reality after an attempted escape from emotional struggle. Whether one escapes the personal calamities of mortality through alcohol or destroys the animalistic with art in an audacious confrontation, the blood of the bull swims in the minds of all, whether it finds one at the end of carefree partying or acts as the energy that physically invigorates one.

The interaction of the bull and the bullfighter is a physically intertwining experience, as Romero's relationship with his bull is valued for its intimacy. Romero "let the bull pass so close that the man and the bull and the cape that filled and pivoted ahead of the bull were all one sharply etched mass" (Hemingway 221). The closeness of the bullfighter to its victim is idealized because it captures the emotional attention of the audience and increases the danger for the bullfighter. When Romero killed the bull, "he became one with the bull, the sword [went] in high between the shoulders" (Hemingway 224). While this confrontation seems to be an example of Romero transforming his struggle with the bull into something more humane, it also demonstrates his essential similarity to the bull. The "sharply etched mass" juxtaposes the bullfighter's animal self with the bull's. In order for Romero to enter the territory of the bull and successfully conquer it with humanity, he must recognize his own animalism and attach himself to the bull. Hemingway suggests that in order to fully embody humanity one must engage with one's own primal existence. In this way, a symbiotic relationship between the bull and the bullfighter is created. Although the bullfighter's humanity seems to make him independent of the bull, the intimacy required in his extraction of art conjoins his existence with the bull's. The death of the bull becomes a resonance of the bullfighter and his victim's primal instincts, and in nanoseconds the bullfighter recognizes his similarity to the bull, creates an emotional connection, and uses this intimacy and closeness to kill most efficiently. The bullfighter needs the bull to provide differentiation between the humane and the primal and to understand his primal self. The continuation of humanity simultaneously perpetuates man's connection to the primal, as a bullfighter becomes more aware of his primal existence when he kills more bulls.

Hemingway portrays bullfighting, at first glance, as the continuation of humanity, as the bullfighter destroys the chaos of an animal while utilizing the interaction to create art. But Hemingway also reveals man's own animalism, as often the bullfighter interacts with the bull by using his own personal primal emotions in order to pluck up enough adrenaline to attack. Man requires intimacy in order to understand the insides of his victim and ultimately uses this emotional competency to kill his bull. While this defines humanity in a certain way, the plot

of the novel interprets the human experience differently. Throughout *The Sun Also Rises*, the characters come to the conclusion that life is meaningless. Whether the characters drink in order to escape or indulge the greed of sexuality, the constant exacerbation of stimulus generates a meaninglessness that discourages the reader and presents the human experience as a sad and prolonged process of decay. The main character, Jake, ends the story with his love interest, Brett. Instead of commenting on a significant culmination of their affections towards one another, Brett remarks that they “could have had such a damned good time together” (Hemingway 251). The taxi that they are riding in slows down, and they slightly “press” together while both of them realize that this contact is the closest that they will ever get. It was hardly a bullfight, and hardly passionate (Hemingway 251). While the plot ends with an air of hopelessness, a close analysis of the bullfight scenes perhaps reveals Hemingway’s true sense of the human experience. Hemingway seems to believe that humanity is a slowly rotting dandelion on the side of the road, yet he also subtly provides an alternate definition. Humans become fighters in the face of chaos, smearing the sweaty struggle on the sand beneath their feet. Their fingers proudly clench their capes and swords as their hearts race wildly with the thought of fighting for survival. They clench their buttocks, sore from the previous goring that scarred their reputations and boiled their blood in anticipation for this next encounter. The beast is released, as the black mass thrusts its entirety onto the intricate costumes that clothe the brave bodies. For Hemingway, the human experience begins here. The raw energy and passion that permeate the passages about bullfighting viscerally excite the reader and present the human condition itself as a bullfight. It may be a dangerous game, but it is wondrous nonetheless. ●

Works Cited

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