Rancidness, Pain, and Confusion:
Brett Ashley and the Lack of Resolution in *The Sun Also Rises*

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“Oh, Jake,” Brett said, “we could have had a damned good time together.” Ahead was a mounted policeman in khaki directing traffic. He raised his baton. The car slowed suddenly pressing Brett against me. “Yes,” I said. “Isn’t it pretty to think so?”

The concluding lines of Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* have, deservedly, attracted extensive critical attention. Jake’s use of the feminine word “pretty” immediately invites analysis, and his ironic tone stands out as important because it dramatically contrasts with the hopeless but enduring yearning for Brett that he expresses earlier in the novel. While critics have accurately identified the ending as a crucial site for developing an understanding of Hemingway’s novel, they have consistently simplified and misinterpreted it, asserting a final state of resolution and catharsis that does not exist. Carole Vopat claims that Jake has undergone a “profound change” (96) throughout the novel and that, by the end, he realizes that what he thought was “romantic love” (96) for Brett was actually “a neurotic and uncontrollable sickness” (96); Wolfgang Rudat holds that Jake “exorcizes” (61) himself of Brett; and Jackson Benson argues that Jake finally “becomes his own man” (83). These critics traditionalize the novel’s ending by insisting that Jake reaches a redemptive, new, and fulfilling perspective, and they ignore the pain and confusion that persist in the final scene which, notably, ends not with the enlightened Jake alone and reflecting, but with Jake and Brett pressed together. In addition to misreading the ending’s tone, these readings propound a reductive reading of Brett as the villain to Jake’s hero – Benson, in fact, explicitly deems her “the closest thing to a villain” (81) in the novel – who needs and deserves to be defeated and expelled. Ultimately, these attempts to assert closure are flawed because Hemingway’s project pointedly and fundamentally represents a break from traditional
novelistic resolution. While Jake develops throughout the novel, he does not reach a point of conventional catharsis. Instead of providing conclusive resolution, the ending of *The Sun Also Rises* reflects Jake’s still raw and conflicted recognition that he cannot attain the union with Brett that he has craved. The ending illuminates his painful and continuing struggle to make sense of and engage a confusing transitional moment that deprives him of a redemptive and stabilizing romantic connection.

The pain and ambivalence that persist in the ending and the lack of satisfying resolution are, in fact, important indications and reflections of Hemingway’s depiction of a point of social transition. Hemingway’s novel locates the aftermath of World War I as a crucial moment in which normative and definite gender categories have revealed themselves as limited and inauthentic and, as a result, relationships between men and women have become confused and strained. His invocation of Gertrude Stein’s declaration, “You are all a lost generation” as an epigraph to the novel clarifies his attention to these strained relationships and illuminates his central goal. Hemingway attempts, in *The Sun Also Rises*, to represent the condition of the “lost” generation of young American and English men and women who came of age during the Great War. Eve Sedgwick’s analysis of homosocial desire and bonds in English literature and Judith Butler’s theories of gender as a cultural performance provide tools for understanding this historical moment that Hemingway explores and, ultimately, for faithfully reading the novel’s ending and responsibly understanding Lady Brett Ashley and her relationship with Jake.

Eve Sedgwick’s compelling discussion in *Between Men* of the centrality of male homosocial bonds and the secondary position of male-female relationships, and female
characters in general, in Renaissance through mid-nineteenth century English literature is helpful precisely because it does not apply neatly to *The Sun Also Rises*. Sedgwick cites and endorses Heidi Hartmann’s definition of patriarchy as “relations between men, which have a material base, and which, though hierarchical, establish or create interdependence and solidarity among men that enable them to dominate women” (Sedgwick, 3). She agrees with and uses Hartmann’s claim that the position of women and the relations between genders depend on male homosocial relationships that exclude women, and she goes beyond Hartmann to argue that “in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power” (25).

Sedgwick supports her insistence upon the importance of male homosocial bonds and desire to maintaining patriarchal structures by asserting the centrality of male-male connections in novels, poems, and plays that are produced from within and that endorse patriarchal societies. She points out and explores the recurring depictions within the literature she discusses of “erotic triangle[s]” (21), in which two men compete for a woman but the relationship between the male rivals is more developed and important than either man’s relationship to the woman. She illuminates the secondary position of female characters, explaining that they serve as “objects of symbolic exchange” (50) or “currency” (54) that are valuable because they allow for transactions between men. Furthermore, she suggests that, during and after the late eighteenth century Gothic period, men use relationships with women to mediate and deflect attention from their connections with each other, because unmediated bonds between men are threatening and suspicious.
While Sedgwick’s model of the centrality of male-male bonds in shaping gender roles and relations is persuasively applied in and conscientiously attuned to the specific historical moments she considers, it is no longer applicable when we look at *The Sun Also Rises*. It would be inaccurate to state that Lady Brett Ashley, whom Harold Bloom aptly identifies as the novel’s only alive character and the exclusive source of the work’s “vitality” (2), is simply an object of exchange between the male characters. Instead of mediating the more important bonds between men, Brett is the focus of all the men’s desire, and she determines the relationships between and the behaviors of her multiple lovers and admirers, shaping their fights and their moments of connection.

Moreover, she disrupts the male homosocial bonding that Sedgwick sees as integral to maintaining a patriarchal society. Jake, Bill Gorton, and Harris, their British friend, temporarily engage in male bonding during their fishing trip in Burguete but, crucially, the men cultivate their male-male friendships only during a brief vacation to an isolated place where Brett is not present. When Brett re-enters the novel, meeting up with Jake, Bill, and Robert Cohn in Pamplona, male homosocial bonding ends, and the men once again vie for Brett’s attention. Instead of bolstering the male-male connections that are crucial to maintaining their traditional social dominance, the men end up physically and emotionally alienated from each other: Cohn leaves Pamplona by himself after beating up Brett’s lover Pedro Romero, and the other men scatter, leaving Jake to retreat alone to San Sebastian. In *The Sun Also Rises*, the largely peripheral and undeveloped relationships between the male characters are no longer more important than Brett’s relationships with the men, and Brett and Jake’s relationship becomes the novel’s most crucial and meaningful connection.
While *The Sun Also Rises* departs from and is inconsistent with Sedgwick’s focus, however, it is productive to use her model as a yardstick to appreciate how distant Brett and Jake’s relationship is from the secondary male-female bonds she considers and how much the active Brett differs from her more passive female predecessors. Sedgwick suggests that male homosocial bonds are central to upholding patriarchal structures, but Hemingway is exploring a point of crisis in patriarchal power, caused by the demoralizing and disorienting effects of the war’s senseless violence and devastation. In this disrupted society, the bond between men and women, deprived of and liberated from the normative demands of patriarchy, which relegated the woman to an object of exchange or sharing instead of an agent, deserves primary attention because it has become uncertain and confused.

Judith Butler’s theories of gender, in turn, provide terms for understanding both the upheaval of gender roles during Hemingway’s specific moment and Brett’s behaviors. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Butler questions the stability of gender categories and suggests that gender is, instead of a natural fact, a cultural performance. Drawing upon Nietzsche and Foucault, she asserts the usefulness of genealogy, which “investigates the political stakes in designating as an origin and cause those identity categories that are in fact the effects of institutions, practices, [and] discourses with multiple and diffuse points of origin” (xi) and then carries out a genealogical analysis intended to “center on—and decenter—such defining institutions” (xi).

In her analysis, Butler cites and then problematizes the socially accepted “compulsory order of sex/gender/desire” (6) whereby desire follows from gender, which follows from sex. This compulsory order results from defining the sexes, with their
discreet genders and desires, in binary opposition to each other and, in doing so, consolidating and unifying the separated sexes, genders, and desire types. Agreeing with Foucault, who insists that sex varies based on the way sexuality is defined at a given historical moment, Butler insists that sex is not an unproblematic, biological given. This insistence leads her to consider how we can reformulate the idea of gender in order to “encompass the power relations that produce the effect of a prediscursive sex and so conceal that very operation of discursive production” (7). We need, according to Butler, to examine the phallogocentric social and cultural structures that construct sex and gender but simultaneously conceal their construction, causing the imposed sex and gender categories to seem natural and inevitable.

Furthermore, Butler suggests that the “regulatory practices of gender formation and division” (16) that these structures ensure and cover up ultimately shape people’s identities. These rules determine what kinds of identities are culturally “intelligible” (17) and what kinds of identities “cannot exist” (17), because they include gender behaviors or desire types that do not follow appropriately from sex. Citing transsexual and homosexual figures that cannot be expressed within the binary categories of conventional men and women and that, consequently, expose the limits of the categories and undermine their inevitability and naturalness, Butler insists that gender is fully “performative” (25). The behavior patterns, traits, and roles that correspond, in a given society, to one gender but not the other, simply represent people’s enactments of the gender behaviors that they are directed to perform and rewarded for performing. She asserts that gender identity is completely dependent on such performance, rather than on natural divisions of roles, claiming, “There is no gender identity behind the expressions
of gender...identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results” (25).

While Hemingway’s novel is considered a prototypical account of male angst, his exploration of gender roles is, in fact, consistent with and helpfully supplemented by Butler’s feminist claim that gender is culturally constructed. In *The Sun Also Rises*, the war has called traditional gender roles into question by undermining masculine power and control; the war has destabilized the “institutions, practices, [and] discourses” (Butler, xi) that have perpetuated and naturalized gender categories. Jake’s wound, which prevents him from penetrating and, thus, sexually possessing and dominating women, represents a general feeling of male impotence and self-doubt and reflects the difficulty of maintaining the accepted dominant and clear-cut male role. Because of this undermining of unproblematic male dominance, the female role undergoes crucial shifts as well.

Brett Ashley is a woman who explores the possibilities of the status she can assume now that her traditionally mandated gender role has become unstable. Wolfgang Rudat asserts that Brett “affects” (44) masculinity, appropriating traits that rightfully belong to the male sex because she envies “the male’s social status” (45). On the contrary, rather than straightforwardly usurping male behaviors, Brett represents a breakdown of binary divisions between gender roles. She is sexually eager and aggressive and she dresses like a man, but she also retains maternal qualities: she met both Jake and her fiancé Mike Campbell while nursing them. She adopts qualities that have been considered masculine (quite purposely, as her conscious decisions to dress and wear her hair like a boy suggest), but she also remains an attractive and nurturing woman.
Butler’s suggestion that people who do not fit into acceptable gender categories cannot easily be defined accounts for the common difficulty among critics to make sense of Brett, and the multiple readings and misreadings of her character in turn confirm her embodiment of this breakdown. Butler’s analysis provides helpful tools for recognizing Brett as a woman who actively and interestingly performs roles that violate and combine gendered mandates.

Harold Bloom concisely locates the differences between Brett and Jake – “his nostalgia for religion, against her aversion to faith; his aesthetic apprehension of the rituals of death, dignity, and honor in the bullfighter, against her sensual need for Romero” (2) – and then insists that Hemingway does not definitively side with Jake at Brett’s expense. Indeed, Jake is a likable and sensitive narrator, and Hemingway sympathetically depicts his nostalgia for the controlling institution of the Catholic Church and his appreciation for the heroics of bullfighting, which connect back to the time before the Great War, when men retained unproblematic strength and sought glory through competition and violence. Instead of actively experimenting with his now unsettled position, however, Jake looks back to the past, when the performance of masculinity was less complicated. While the magnitude of his crisis entitles Jake to our understanding and sympathy, Brett elicits our admiration for the ways in which she energetically experiments with her new and less stringently defined position. Thus, as Bloom insists, “Life, in Brett, has its rancid aspects, but it remains life, rather than death-in-life” (2). Brett is an attractive and fascinating character because she actively engages with the present moment, even in its rancidness and seeming hopelessness. Her vitality, in turn,
derives from her active and gratification-seeking performance of and experimentation with gendered roles.

Brett and Jake’s first interaction, which takes place in a taxi after they have left the dancing club, displays Jake’s love for Brett and the pain their relationship causes him, and also points to Brett’s need to perform actively, and her resulting discomfort with an immobilizing attachment to Jake. After Brett begs Jake not to touch her, Jake asks whether she loves him, and she ambiguously replies, “Love you? I simply turn all to jelly when you touch me” (34). Her statement reveals the power of her feelings for him: he affects her so strongly that she loses her acuity and self-control when he touches her. Such genuine and deep attraction seems to promise a true connection that should, if we recall traditional novelistic plots, allow for mutual fulfillment and comfort. While her assertion that she turns to jelly at his touch initially seems positive and romantic, Jake’s desperate response suggests that Brett dislikes the unguarded state that his touch creates: “Isn’t there anything we can do about it?” (34). This initial scene, then, introduces Brett and Jake’s complicated and discomforting attraction and prepares us for further exploration of their relationship and of Brett’s unusual behaviors towards men.

Jake further illuminates Brett’s desire to perform actively, and also conveys his threatening recognition of her constant performance, when he describes the way she looks at him:

She was looking into my eyes with that way she had of looking that made you wonder whether she really saw out of her own eyes. They would look on and on after every one else’s eyes in the world would have stopped looking. She looked as though there were nothing on earth she would not look at like that, and really she was afraid of so many things. (34)

His observation that she did not seem to be seeing out of her own eyes is immediately striking because the scene he describes is intimate and intense and, consequently, his
suggestion that her vision is somehow detached contradicts the power and feeling of the moment they share. Moreover, the disconnection he implies corresponds to Brett’s active mode of behavior: her eyes “would look on and on” after all others have stopped looking because she surpasses all others in her conscious desire to see and experience the people and events around her. Jake, however, recognizes the deliberate masking and performance behind her detached and persistent gaze, explaining that while she looks as though she would stare undauntedly at anything, she is actually “afraid of so many things.” His description, then, captures both Brett’s desire to maintain a conscious and detached perspective and the self-concealment that her disconnected interest inherently involves. Brett’s connection with Jake is threatening because his touch can deprive her of her active and conscious control, and because he realizes that she is performing.

Jake’s continued narrative suggests that he not only perceives her conscious performance, but that his presence in fact causes the performance to break down. Again, his description of her eyes importantly reflects the threat he poses. A few moments after Brett looks at him with enduring detachment, Jake recalls: “She had been looking into my eyes all the time. Her eyes had different depths, sometimes they seemed perfectly flat. Now you could see all the way into them” (34). While Brett initially sees actively and defensively without allowing Jake to perceive her feelings, she soon surrenders the guarded detachment of her gaze, and Jake is able to see “all the way” into her eyes, recognizing the feelings she tries to hide and deny. She confirms the uneasiness around Jake that she has expressed earlier, contradicting his statement that “it’s a lot of fun, too, to be in love” (35) with the assertion that “It’s hell on earth” (35). Furthermore, having already revealed the threat that Jake poses and her discomfort with relinquishing her
active control, Brett reinforces the vulnerability she feels by admitting that she does not have the power to avoid him. When he asks whether she wants to see him, she responds in terms of undeniable necessity rather than inclination: “I have to” (35), she tells him.

The threat and confusion that Brett’s lack of control around Jake engenders are striking because they occur in her only relationship that remains unconsummated. Brett uses sex as a means of obtaining power, and she maintains unproblematic control over the men she sleeps with. It is Jake, who cannot penetrate her, who interferes with her detached motion and makes her turn “all to jelly,” a state reminiscent of the body’s relaxation after an orgasm. Brett’s use of sex to dominate rather than to be dominated and the lack of control she suffers when she cannot have sex represent a reversal in the traditional gender dynamics of sexual relationships: Brett performs here in a conventional male manner, assuming the active role. Jake rationalizes Brett’s feelings for him, reasoning that she probably “only wanted what she couldn’t have” (39). Indeed, Jake retains a persistent and threatening attraction for Brett partly because she cannot sleep with him and, accordingly, convince herself that their relationship is based on active and common physical chemistry and gratification rather than on a unique emotional connection.

She does not want, however, the intimate and loving relationship with Jake that she could and, according to conventional romance, should have, precisely because she refuses their connection on the premise of their inability to have sex. She consciously takes on the male role of actively seeking and valuing sexual gratification, a role that Jake’s wound has forced him to abandon, but her performance of the typically male sexual aggressor cannot eliminate her desire to spend time with Jake. Brett’s refusal to
relinquish the active male role ultimately makes it impossible for her to be with Jake: she is unable to be with him not simply because they cannot have sex, but also because she realizes that a traditional and stable relationship with him will not fulfill her.

Brett confirms both her aversion to a settled living arrangement with Jake and her undermining of the conventional gender roles when Jake begs, “Couldn’t we just live together?” (62). Brett responds that they cannot because she would be unfaithful to Jake, and her infidelity would pain him: “I don’t think so,” she declares. “I’d just tromper you with everybody. You couldn’t stand it” (62). Brett’s use of the French verb “tromper” to describe her performance of the traditional male role is telling because the shift in language and italicization along with the verb’s self sufficiency – unlike comparable English constructions, it stands on its own without depending on added prepositions – draw attention to its activeness. Brett would be unable and unwilling to stop actively “add[ing]...up” (30) other men, as Jake summarizes her conquests.

In another interesting reversal of traditional gender reasoning, she adopts the conventionally male attribution of sexual needs to physiology, asserting that she is physically built to need sexual fulfillment from multiple partners. “It’s my fault, Jake,” she tells him. “It’s the way I’m made” (62). Granted, Brett’s avowed inability to remain faithful to Jake stems partially from Jake’s inability to have sex. She suggests that she would be unable to live stably with him regardless of his wound, however, when she proclaims, “But I couldn’t live quietly in the country. Not with my own true love,” (62). Her statement is counterintuitive because she suggests that loving Jake would make it harder for her to live alone with him. She refuses to retire with him not only because they cannot have sex, but also because, as much as she cannot eliminate her need to see
Jake, she resists the idea of losing her active motion, a change which living with the man she loves could have the most power to effect.

When Count Mippipopolous asks Brett and Jake why they don’t get married, their responses again attest to the confused complication of their frustrated union. While Jake wants to marry Brett, he does not admit this wish but, instead, he answers the Count before she does, explaining, “We want to lead our own lives” (68). His statement is ironic because he is, at this point, incapable of leading a life that excludes Brett: he thinks about her whether she is with him or not, and he refuses to give himself space from her, even when she is with her fiancé or her other admirers. Brett’s response reinforces the irony that Jake’s initiates: “We have our careers,” (68) she adds. Her remark is striking because, as a British aristocrat who lets the men who love her financially support her, she does not work and, moreover, Jake’s writing is subordinate to and perpetually put off for his escapades with his friends. The strange indirectness of their responses again suggests the confusion that surrounds their failed relationship; their inability to be together is too complicated to be explained by Jake’s wound and, instead, crucially involves Brett’s inability to stop moving, acting, and performing.

As Harold Bloom suggests, recognizing Brett’s vitality, the trait that centrally defines her, facilitates a responsible reading of her character. Understanding that, without Brett, The Sun Also Rises would lose its driving force of action and inspiration and its male characters would remain directionless, unmemorable, and anesthetized defends against a simplistic reading of Brett as a villain. Milton Cohen develops a problematically disapproving reading of Brett, assuming that Cohn’s characterization of her as a Circe figure is “revealing” (157) because it attunes readers to the themes of
“sexual domination and debasement” (157) and “emascula" tion” (158) within the novel. The sexual themes that Cohen’s allusion emphasizes are, indeed, prominent within the text, but the implication that Brett mercilessly and purposefully ruins the men she lures in is overly simplistic and invalid. While she is at times careless and insensitive, and always unwilling to be vulnerable to the men she, in Bill’s words, “kidnaps” (80), Brett retains an attractive and unique energy that lends conviction and motion to the lives of Jake and Cohn, the characters whom she seems to degrade the most.

In addition to guarding against a reading of Brett as a straightforward villain, understanding her active and alive mode of performance prevents the equally reductive conception of Brett as a wounded figure entitled solely to our pity. Roger Whitlow suggests that Brett cannot be held accountable for her destructive actions because she is pitiable. He aptly maintains that it is reductive and inaccurate to read Brett as a “bitch,” but the three reasons he uses to refute such a reading reveal his incomplete understanding of her energy and importance. She escapes villain status, he claims, because she lives in a “milieu in which relationships and responsibilities are intentionally loose and disordered” (150); because she is “thoughtless” but never “cruel” (150) to men; and because her mind is “disordered by the impact of war” (150).

Whitlow neatly computes her culpability in reducing the men who love her, and he decides that her guilt is negligible; Cohn and Mike, he insists, deserve to be treated badly, and Brett is more self-destructive than she is destructive towards Jake. Moreover, he claims that what he calls her “nymphomania” is rooted in her woundedness and insecurity rather than in her threatening performance of the dominant role: it is, he asserts, an “attempt to overcome social or sexual self-doubt, by demonstrating, through
one sexual experience after another, that she is, in fact, attractive, desirable, wanted” (154). While Whitlow sets out to acquit Brett of the status of bitch or villain, he denies her agency and vitality by asserting that she is simply a victim who cannot be held blameworthy. Reading Brett as a woman who only warrants our sympathy misses the aspects of her character that are most important, engaging, and, ultimately, moral.

Brett initially seems to excuse her hurtful treatment of men by citing her traumatic failed marriages and, thus, she arguably presents herself as the pitiable victim that Whitlow describes. When Mike protests her infidelity, giving her “a fearful hiding about Jews and bull-fighters, and all those sort of people” (207) whom she has taken as lovers, he admits that she is “rather good” (207) at defending herself. Mike explains that Brett has responded to his complaint with the apparent excuse, “Yes, I’ve had such a hell of a happy life with the British aristocracy” (207). As his own account of the conversation conveys, however, Brett’s response does not follow logically from his statement; her biting suggestion that she has had to seek pleasure outside of her unhappy marriages ignores and deflects, but does not productively address, his complaint. This statement, then, does not support Whitlow’s assertion that she is a pitiable victim whose past traumas excuse and explain her current actions. Her conversation with Jake, in which she audaciously asks him, if he still loves her, to help her get Romero, more accurately reveals her motivations and behavior patterns.

While Brett’s request that Jake help her to get Romero is unfeeling and presumptuous, it illuminates her need to act and to attain sexual fulfillment. In contrast to Jake, who anesthetizes himself with alcohol, anticipating and following Bill’s advice to “Get tight. Get over your damned depression” (225), Brett insists that she “can’t just stay
tight all the time” (187) and that, because she feels miserable and has lost her “self-respect” (187), she needs to “do something” (187, my italics). She emphasizes her need to act in order to overcome her feeling of depression, repeating, “I’ve got to do something I really want to do” (187). While she maintains that she cannot resist attempting to win Romero, refusing accountability by insisting, “I can’t help it. I’ve never been able to help anything” (187), she also acknowledges that an affair with him might be morally inappropriate: “I don’t say it’s right” (188). She immediately claims, however, that the problem of whether sleeping with Romero is “right” is irrelevant, and she negates her first statement with the qualification, “It is right though for me” (188). Brett’s assertion that, although sleeping with Romero is not objectively “right,” she will pursue him because it is “right for her” questions the certainty of general morality. Indeed, Brett’s statements suggest that, because gender roles are no longer absolute and unproblematic, rules for moral behavior, which follow from gendered mandates, are similarly undermined. The only behavior guidelines that Brett concedes are individualized and related to her own pleasure and gratification. She problematizes her moral code, however, when she explicitly admits and soon restates that while getting Romero is what is right for her, always doing “just what [she] wanted” (188) makes her “feel such a bitch” (188).

Ultimately, despite her insensitive and entitled demand that Jake “see [her] through” (188) her quest for Romero, her affair with the bullfighter, by demonstrating her need to act in order to avoid depression, illuminates her attempt to live fully and passionately. Early in the novel, Jake claims that “Nobody ever lives their life all the way up except bull-fighters” (18). His afición, a deep and fervent appreciation for and
understanding of the bull-fights, importantly reveals the value he places on living “all the way up,” but it remains a removed appreciation. Of all of the other characters, Brett comes closest to Jake in her admiration for and natural understanding of the bull-fights and, in wanting to connect sexually with Romero, she surpasses Jake’s appreciation by attempting to live “all the way up” with the bull-fighter he stops at cherishing.

Pedro Romero, who maintains a patriarchal “system of authority” (189) that involves smoking phallic and traditionally masculine cigars, and who wants Brett to get “more womanly” (246), represents, both in his intense and violent bull-fighting and in his ideas about love, a traditional and romantic male hero. At a time when most bull-fighters, as Jake explains to Brett, escape the threat of violent death that is at the sport’s true core by “simulat[ing] the appearance of danger in order to give a fake emotional feeling” (172), Romero’s bull-fighting creates “real emotion” (171) because its risks are genuine. Jake observes that Romero is the first “real one” (168) in a “long time” (168) because he returns to the dangerous and stirring tactics of classic bull-fighting:

Romero had the old thing, the holding of his purity of line through the maximum of exposure, while he dominated the bull by making him realize he was unattainable while he prepared him for the killing. (172)

Romero retains honor in his bull-fighting, both by confronting “maximum” danger and by respecting the power of the bulls and the aesthetics of the fight. He maintains fair and exciting fights, rather than pursuing cheap victories, because he refuses to “wast[e] the bull” (171) with jerky and uncontrolled movements and he finally kills bulls that are “smoothly worn down” (171), rather than hastily and disrespectfully “winded and decomposed” (171). Jake admires Romero’s honor, talent, and dedication, and he expresses his passionate veneration for Romero with his repeated assertions that Romero is “a fine boy” (167) and a “damned good-looking kid” (171). Jake continually refers to
Romero’s looks not because of a specifically homosexual attraction to Romero but because Romero embodies the virility that Jake lacks and possesses a general and, now anomalous, eroticism and energy. He elicits “real emotion” from and captures the instinctive attention and admiration of Jake, Brett, and even the less perceptive Mike, who drunkenly misremembers Romero’s name, but comments, “I say...that Romero what’s his name is somebody. Am I wrong?” (169).

While Romero is “unattainable” (172) for powerful bulls, and while he confidently retains the masculine power that the other male characters have lost, he is, paradoxically, vulnerable to the discouraged members of the “lost generation,” who threaten to corrupt the purity of his dedicated and courageous bull-fighting. Jake and his Spanish friend Montoya suggest Romero’s fragility when they discuss the danger of exposing him to the greedy American Ambassador, who would not appreciate the importance of his bull-fighting and who could easily dissolve his spirit by turning him into a common celebrity:

People take a boy like that. They don’t know what he’s worth. They don’t know what he means. Any foreigner can flatter him. They start this Grand Hotel business, and in one year they’re through. (176)

Jake’s mention of an American woman who “collects bull-fighters” (176) foreshadows Brett’s upcoming insistence that she needs Romero and suggests that, in her pursuit of him, she will inevitably destroy his passion and dedication. Montoya again displays this bitter belief that Romero’s purity cannot survive exposure to Jake’s friends or, especially, a romance with Brett, when he finds Romero sitting next to Brett and holding a “large glass of cognac” (180), and refuses to acknowledge Jake: “He didn’t even nod” (181).

The threat that Brett poses to Romero’s glorious bull-fighting, however, is less certain than Jake and Montoya anticipate, because Romero’s intact virility also threatens
to disrupt Brett’s energetic performances of traditionally masculine behaviors. Jake remembers that, after she first meets Romero, “Brett was as nervous as I had ever seen her before” (185) and her hand was “trembling” (187). Moreover, while Brett unapologetically commands male attention when she enters earlier scenes, she is so unsettled by seeing Romero engaged in conventional, but now anomalous, male bonding with a group of cigar-smoking bull-fighters and critics that she “can’t look at him” (188). Her surprised avowal, “My God...the things a woman goes through” (188) is striking because her identification with the plight of “a woman” contrasts with earlier scenes, in which she calls herself a “chap” (29), and claims an intra-gender commonality of experience that her usual combination of gendered traits refuses. Romero initially disrupts Brett’s self-assured performance, and her nervous and unassertive behaviors around him suggest that a traditional male hero, who has not been demoralized by the Great War, might be able to destabilize her active performance, returning her to the role of the conventional woman.

Once Brett and Romero begin to talk, Jake notes that Brett resumes her usual confidence, but his description of their interaction suggests that she remains distinctly feminine in appearance and manner. Jake reflects, “She was not at all nervous now. She looked lovely” (189), and his use of the adjective “lovely” connotes feminine grace. Her remarks become increasingly assertive, but her statements are conspicuously coy: she tells Romero that she “would like a hat like [his]” (191) and when he offers to get her one she declares, “Right. See that you do” (191). Her demands, while forceful, are flirtatious, and conjure an imperious British lady. Wolfgang Rudat asserts that Brett’s request for a hat like Romero’s “symbolizes her phallic aggression” (51, Rudat’s emphasis) because
the hat that Romero has, and that Brett wants, represents a condom: “the hat specifically designed for the penis” (51). On the contrary, Brett’s desire for a bull-fighter’s hat conveys her appreciation for Romero’s masculinity and virility; earlier in the novel, Brett wears “a man’s felt hat” (35) and resists Mike’s appeal that she get a new one, but here she lacks a hat and needs Romero to obtain one for her. Moreover, it is clear that Brett does not want to steal the active male role from Romero, because she does not want to take the hat that he wears. Instead, she wants one like his, and her request reveals her desire to support and share his passion for bull-fighting. Furthermore, after Romero asserts that the bulls are his “best friends” (189) and Brett points out that he kills them, Romero responds, “Always...So they don’t kill me” (190). Importantly, he speaks here in English, which he does not admit to having mastered because a practical facility with unromantic English is inconsistent with his bull-fighter image. The language shift and content of his reply suggest that he understands Brett, in her language and her behaviors, and that he will be less vulnerable to her corruption than Jake and Montoya have predicted because he will adopt an approach similar to his tactic in bull-fighting: he will change her so that she cannot ruin him.

Soon, however, the fight with Romero that Robert Cohn instigates and decisively wins suggests that Romero’s honor and courage cannot survive outside of the bull-fighting arena. In a desperate attempt to claim Brett’s love and “make an honest woman out of her” (205), Cohn storms into Romero’s room and, finding him with Brett, beats him up: Mike explains that Cohn has “massacred the poor, bloody bull-fighter” (205). The fact that Cohn can beat up Romero immediately undermines Romero’s hero status: Romero may be invincible among bulls, but in a modern fist-fight, he is no match for
Cohn. Furthermore, the episode calls Romero’s honor into question: Romero acts dishonorably when he takes advantage of Cohn’s attempt to shake hands by hitting him in the face. The fight with Cohn, then, suggests the instability of Romero’s traditional, and anachronistic, heroics.

Ultimately, parting with Romero is painful for Brett but, despite her dramatic profession that she’s had “such a hell of a time” (245), Brett confirms that Romero’s traditional masculinity is less secure than her active performances. Brett explains that Romero wanted to change and control her, instructing her to grow her hair long and expressing the desire to marry her so that she “couldn’t go away from him” (246). She insists, however, that Romero could not have forced her to change, and she asserts that their marriage would have been “bad for him” (247), rather than restricting for her. She recognizes the instability of his performance of traditional masculinity, responding to Jake’s snide comment that they got along well “outside of [her] personal appearance” (247) with the confident assertion, “Oh, he’d have gotten used to that” (247). As she now understands, Brett could have “ruin[ed]” (247) Romero because her performance of behaviors traditionally assigned to both genders would have exposed the limits of his conventional masculinity. Her decision to leave him, then, reflects her realization that she cannot go back to a traditional romance. The pain she displays after leaving Romero and her knowledge that the unworthy Mike is now her “sort of thing” (247) reveal the excruciating difficulty of leaving conventional romance behind.

Brett’s renunciation of Romero reflects her exploration of the possibility for moral action in a disrupted historical moment that lacks guiding rules for conduct. She sacrifices the object of her desire, and she consciously refrains from adopting the Circe
role that Cohn and Milton Cohen erroneously ascribe to her. Brett, then, experiments with adapting the code of behavior that only factors in her own goals, recognizing the satisfaction of sparing Romero from being ruined and leaving him capable of living “all the way up” as a “real” (168) bull-fighter. She summarizes the contentment that, despite her lingering pain and disappointment, her attempt at a new kind of moral action gives her, explaining, “You know I feel rather damned good, Jake” (249). Jake sarcastically humors her, agreeing, “You should” (249), but Brett repeats and elaborates on the importance of her renunciation, insisting, “You know it makes one feel rather good deciding not to be a bitch” (249). Interestingly, Brett, who has thrived on action and experience throughout the novel, derives fulfillment from the negation of an action: it is “deciding not to be a bitch” (249) and relinquishing her pursuit of Romero that represents, according to her, “what we have instead of God” (249). Brett energetically engages the present moment, then, by actively pursuing gratification and by experimenting with new kinds of moral standards. Thus, she becomes the authentic protagonist of this “modern” novel that, as Romero’s vulnerability to the members of the “lost generation” has suggested, cannot have a traditional hero.

Jake differs from Brett in that, while she operates actively and grows uncomfortable when she cannot effectively perform and control, he presents himself as passive and apathetic. Early in the novel, he explains his former behavior patterns and the break from passivity that Brett has forced. Before he met Brett, he recalls, his mindset was one of negative performance: instead of trying to connect with or seek enjoyment from people, he simply wanted to “play it along and just not make trouble for people” (39). He suggests that, if he had not met Brett, he would have been able to
maintain his passive and directionless patterns, reasoning, “Probably I never would have had any trouble if I hadn’t run into Brett when they shipped me to England” (39).

His characterization of meeting Brett as “run[ning] into” her is important because it emphasizes the forceful change and positive motion that meeting her causes. He asserts that, without meeting her, he would have avoided trouble but, ultimately, as his description of his indifferent mindset before knowing her indicates, she brings purpose and passion to his life and gives him something to desire. She has a similar effect on Robert Cohn, who is unexceptional until he falls in love with her: before Brett, Jake reflects, “I never heard him make one comment that would, in any way, detach him from other people” (151). While loving Brett proves painful for Jake, who admits to having cried at night when he let himself think about her, and destructive for Cohn, who becomes pitiful and desperate, it spares both men from indifference and dullness. Brett will not let either man possess her in a gratifying way, but she reawakens their desire, giving Robert Cohn individuality and providing Jake with the inspiration for and the subject of the story he ultimately tells.

Brett’s destructive effect on Robert Cohn and her disgust with and anger at his attempts to win and defend her are central to understanding her fierce refusal to take on a tamed and traditional female role. Moreover, and even more importantly, the Cohn plot confirms the impossibility for the males of the “lost generation” of reassuming their conventional role now that women like Brett have assumed active agency. Cohn’s place in and disappearance from the narrative, and his mix of traditionally masculine and emasculate traits, immediately position him as a character who attempts to be a conventional romantic male hero but who cannot fulfill or hold on to the role.
Hemingway begins the published version of *The Sun Also Rises* as a story that sets out with Robert Cohn as its hero, and Jake Barnes initially emerges as a detached narrator telling Cohn’s story. In the first sentence of the novel, Jake declares that Cohn “was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton” (11). His pointed reference to Cohn’s background as a boxer is important because boxing is a traditionally masculine and heroic sport: it involves two men brutally competing and, in its violence and structure, it represents a modern equivalent of jousts between knights in medieval times.

While the reference to boxing initially confirms Cohn’s role as a romantic male hero capable of doing battle for a female love, Jake also immediately reveals that Cohn is Jewish and, thus, marginalized and “bitter” (12). Already, then, Cohn is not an unequivocally dominant male and, moreover, the bitterness and “painful self-consciousness” (12) that feeling “different” (12) and inferior at Princeton have created in him leave him unable to carry out a successful romantic quest for a wife. Instead of fighting for the love of a worthy woman, Cohn “was married by the first girl who was nice to him” (12). Despite his boxing prowess, then, Cohn cannot assume control or seek a woman he really loves and, instead, an unexceptional woman usurps his unachieved agency and claims him. After his first wife extends his emasculation by leaving him for another man, Cohn finds a new girlfriend, Frances, who similarly controls and bullies him; Jake again summarizes Cohn’s complete lack of power in the relationship, commenting that Frances “led him quite a life” (15).

In addition to lacking dominance and control, Cohn clearly reflects the confusion and lack of meaning that characterize the condition of the “lost generation” and that separate its members from Pedro Romero, who maintains passion and glory in his bull-
fighting. Cohn begs Jake to accompany him to South America because he wants to take action and find the meaning that his life needs; “I can’t stand it to think my life is going so fast and I’m not really living it” (18), he confides. While Cohn departs from the conventional romantic hero in his lack of power and his confusion, his ideas about love and his faith in romance are entirely traditional. When he first sees Brett, he forgets his plan to go to South America and decides that Brett will provide the meaning that is missing in his life. Jake describes Cohn’s conviction that Brett will be a reward for his hardships and a source of meaning and happiness for him, recalling:

She stood holding the glass and I saw Robert Cohn looking at her. He looked a great deal as his compatriot must have looked when he saw the promised land. Cohn, of course, was much younger. But he had that look of eager, deserving expectation. (29)

His reference to Biblical history both reminds us of Cohn’s marginality as a Jew and emphasizes the mythic quest for Brett that Cohn begins: Cohn is as invested in winning Brett as Moses was committed to reaching the promised land, and Cohn believes that he will deserve and obtain her through his devotion and determination.

While Cohn indefatigably pursues Brett, his hope for a relationship with her is based on a fundamental misunderstanding of her character. He first reveals his inability to comprehend Brett, as well as his dogmatic but uninformed insistence that he knows what she is like and what will make her happy, when he asks Jake about her and then contradicts the information Jake provides. He fails to recognize Brett’s subversive gender performances when he suggests that she presents herself as a proper lady, erroneously describing the aggressive and playful Brett as “absolutely fine and straight” (46). Moreover, he refuses to believe that she will marry Mike Campbell, smugly proclaiming “I don’t believe she would marry anybody she didn’t love” (46).
In addition to basing his avowed love for Brett on traits and moral principles that she does not possess, Cohn attempts to protect Brett and to turn her into an honorable companion. His goals of protecting and transforming her, however, disregard and antagonize her aversion to being treated as a traditional maiden. Brett proclaims that she “hate[s]” (186) Cohn and treats him rudely, ignoring his feelings and angrily shooing him away when she is with Jake, because she does not want a man to protect and defend her and, crucially, because the traditional female role that Cohn wants her to occupy involves being possessed by a man. Brett’s incensed and cruel treatment of Cohn, then, demonstrates her fierce refusal to be tamed into the role of the maiden who needs to be defended, and for whose love more powerful males battle. She expresses her surprise at Cohn’s inappropriate attempts to win her, telling Jake, “I rather thought it [an affair with her] would be good for him” (89). Brett tries to disabuse Cohn of his conventional and outdated perceptions of gender and gender relations and to give him sexual fulfillment, but he is unable to learn from her because he inflexibly pursues a traditional male conquest.

Brett’s refusal to have a traditional relationship with Cohn ultimately breaks him and, although he initially seemed positioned to be the novel’s romantic hero, he retreats from the narrative two-thirds of the way through. The demoralizing effects of war have originally undermined the traditional male role and prompted the shift in female behavior that Brett reflects. Cohn’s inability to tame and possess Brett and his resulting breakdown and banishment from the novel crucially suggest, however, that men will not be able to reassert the currently unstable traditional male role, because the active role that women like Brett have begun to assert makes it impracticable. The Cohn plot, then, informs the
central relationship between Jake and Brett. Jake’s wound symbolizes the changed male condition and, because it is physical and irreversible, makes a restoration of traditional masculinity impossible for him. Cohn’s inability to take on the conventional masculine role and the destruction he suffers when he tries to possess Brett indicate, though, that, more than men’s confusion and lack of power, it is women’s active performance and their refusal to be controlled that distinguishes this historical moment and that makes a return to traditional roles utterly impossible. Ultimately, then, while Jake’s wound appears to be the crux of his problem, it is Brett’s refusal to be a traditional female partner to him, not simply because of his wound but, more accurately, because of the problems with that passive and limited role and her insistence upon active behaviors, that causes his confusion and misery.

Critics are correct in asserting that Jake undergoes a transition by the end of The Sun Also Rises. An understanding of Brett’s aggressive performance of an active and vital sexual role for women, and the resulting impossibility for males of reassuming their traditionally dominant role, illuminates the nature of this development. Instead of reaching a sense of resolution that banishes Brett, Jake comes to a final recognition that depends on her. Clearly, Jake’s ironic reply to Brett’s closing statement that they could have “had such a damned good time together” (251) marks a break from the desperate and persistent wish to be with her to which he clings throughout their previous interactions. Earlier in the novel, Jake claims that he has detached himself from Brett and that he accepts that they will not be together, but his behaviors around and declarations to her contradict his assertions. After he leaves Brett the first time, Jake curses her and suggests that he will renounce his hope to be with her, declaring, “To hell with Brett. To
ell with Lady Ashley” (38). He loses his resolution, however, when Brett soon appears at his apartment; at first he orders her not to “be sentimental” (42), but he quickly softens and tells the departing Brett that she does not have to leave. Similarly, when Bill asks Jake whether he is in love with Brett, Jake claims detachment, telling him, “I don’t give a damn anymore” (128). His assertion loses weight, however, when we remember that he has just admitted to having been “unforgivably jealous” (105) of Cohn, who has slept with Brett, and when we realize that when Brett later asks him whether he still loves her, he responds with an unapologetic and direct, “Yes” (187).

At the end of the novel, however, Brett initiates the physical proximity that she has previously resisted by “mov[ing] close” (251) to Jake, allowing him to put his arm around her, and leaning “comfortably” (251) against him. Moreover, it is Brett, and not Jake, who brings up the idea of being together when she regrets what a “damned good time” (251) they “could have had” (251). Granted, the verb tense of Brett’s comment is crucial here: she invites Jake to reflect, not on what is possible for them to have but, instead, on what cannot be but “could have” been in other circumstances. In the novel’s concluding lines, though, Jake understands this distinction in what Brett says. His response that it is “pretty to think so” (251) suggests that he perceives the futility of thinking about what they could have had; it is “pretty” but fully impractical and ineffective to consider how things could have been between them under more traditional circumstances, in which a conventional romantic conclusion would have been possible.

The process Jake undergoes, then, ends in his important recognition that he cannot tame or possess Brett and that, because she will not reassume the conventional female role and he cannot readopt the traditional male role, any sort of conventional union

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between them is now impossible. Understanding Jake’s process of recognition both guards against asserting inauthentic resolution and catharsis and, again, emphasizes Brett’s centrality to the narrative. Through her vitality, her active performance, and her refusal to be stabilized or possessed, Brett teaches Jake that traditional relations between the sexes can no longer work, and that he needs to stop anesthetizing himself from the sadness and hopelessness that emerge “at night” (42) and to start recognizing and dealing with the present moment. By the end of the novel, then, Jake has learned from Brett in a way that Robert Cohn could not.

Jake’s way of engaging with the present moment that he begins to recognize and understand at the point at which his narrative ends is to write his story. He disobeys both Brett, who insists that “Talking’s all bilge” (62), and Bill, who claims that Jake’s wound is “the sort of thing that can never be spoken of” (120), and uses writing to work through the consequences of finding himself in a world where the traditional enactment of male virility is no longer possible and where the reward of “getting the girl” is denied. Jake’s writing process depends on Brett for its inspiration and its plot, which she supplies with action and passion, but Jake goes beyond reflecting on Brett to personalize and use her lesson. Writing allows him to contemplate his own pain and situation, and the book represents an achievement and reflects a sense of direction that he lacked before knowing Brett. Telling his story provides a means of engaging with the historical moment that Brett has explored through active performance.

Jake retains some nostalgia, contradicting, even at the end, Brett’s claim that “deciding no to be a bitch” (249) is “sort of what we have instead of God” (249): “Some people have God[,]” he informs her, “Quite a lot” (249). While Jake resists giving up the
prospect of a comforting relationship with God, he no longer protests that he is “pretty religious” (211) himself, as he does earlier in the novel when Brett first asserts that praying “never does [her] any good” (211). Jake now distances himself from the people who still “have God,” understanding that he cannot look to the Catholic Church for comfort and meaning. Furthermore, he responds to Brett’s rejoinder that God has “never worked very well with [her]” (249) by expressing his common, overwhelmed impulse to anesthetize himself – “Should we have another martini?” (249) – but Brett urges Jake not to get drunk, insisting, “You don’t have to” (250). Her statement suggests that he does not need to deaden himself because he’ll “be all right” (250) sober and aware, but he at first refuses her advice. After Brett repeats her pointedly repeats her instruction, urging, “Don’t get drunk…Jake, don’t get drunk” (250), Jake listens to and processes her counsel, and he suggests that, instead of drinking, they go for a ride. While his recognition remains painful and conflicted, then, Jake stops using alcohol or the hope for religion to distract and comfort himself, and begins to attend to and, through writing, attempt to process, the conditions under which he must live as a member of the “lost generation.”

Interestingly, the only male in the novel who learns Brett’s lesson and understands the impossibility of reassuming traditional gender roles and relationship types is Jake, who is physically incapable of such a return. The differences between Jake and Cohn’s reactions to Brett and their receptiveness to her actions suggest that recognition remains unattainable, or at least unattained, for men whose virility is intact. When Brett reflects that Cohn has behaved “Damned badly” (185) when “He had the chance to behave so well” (185), she implies that, through their affair, she meant to give
Cohn sexual fulfillment and an understanding of the changed gender roles. Jake, however, suggests that having had a sexual relationship with Brett makes it more difficult to behave well and to accept her refusal of a formal and traditional connection. He insists that “Everybody behaves badly” (185) if you “give them the proper chance” (185), and he rejects Brett’s assertion that he “wouldn’t behave so badly” (185) by avowing that he would “be as big an ass as Cohn” (185).

Brett and Jake never define the “proper chance” that they discuss but, clearly, the factor that most fundamentally distinguishes Jake from Cohn, and the opportunity Jake misses, is sex with Brett. Jake’s statement, then, suggests that if he had been physically capable of a sexual relationship with Brett, he would not have been able to reach the recognition that they could not be together. Jake’s recognition, which is already complex and ambivalent, becomes even more complicated when we understand that it does not reflect, or even anticipate, a comparable acceptance among most men. Despite Jake’s important process of understanding, then, the ending does not promise any resolution to the tumultuous and bleak interactions between males and females that the novel depicts.

While Judith Butler’s theories on gender help to illuminate Brett’s performance and vitality, Hemingway crucially differs from Butler in his lack of a goal-directed message. The ending of Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* is fundamentally descriptive while Butler’s writing is political. Butler advocates a recognition of and destabilizing attack on the patriarchal institutions that mandate gendered roles and limit and control identities, and she suggests that “decenter[ing]” (xi) these institutions will allow for the emergence of more legitimate and encompassing sex, gender, and desire types. Hemingway’s ending, however, is strikingly apolitical, morally ambivalent, and
unresolved. Rather than suggesting a way to eliminate the pain and confusion that his characters experience and to establish relationships between the sexes that allot agency and flexibility to both men and women, Hemingway stops at depicting characters’ struggles with, and attempts to make sense of, their disrupted historical moment. Brett and Jake, the novel’s most prominent and important characters, cannot be the traditional hero and heroine who behave correctly, according to set standards, and are rewarded: instead, they can only begin to accept and to live in their unsettled society. The gender and relationship upheaval that Hemingway portrays as resulting from a crisis in the patriarchy after World War I, and that sparks a crucial change in the behavior of women, ultimately represents a crisis in the novelistic form, which can no longer end in resolved relationships and conventional marriages.
Bibliography


