

# **The Sun Also Rises On Its Own Ground**

**by W. J. Stuckey, of Purdue University,  
Indiana, in the Journal of Narrative  
Technique, Autumn 1975.**

IN 1952 when Philip Young, despite some reservations, asserted that *The Sun Also Rises* was Hemingway's waste land and that Jake Barnes was his Fisher King, he was articulating what has become a familiar — and in some quarters at least — an orthodox reading of this novel. Although there are variations in the reading and in the degree of enthusiasm with which it is accepted, it is widely held that *The Sun Also Rises* is a prose version of *The Waste Land*; its theme, the sterility of life in the modern world. Jake Barnes, Hemingway's version of Eliot's protagonist, is a representative victim of this world, and his famous wound, received in the Great War, is a symbol of the general impotence of the times.

From the standpoint of literary history, this is a convenient reading; from the standpoint of accuracy, it is a presumptuous one. For it has never been satisfactorily explained how Hemingway could borrow from Eliot's poem what is literally not there, unless, of course, one intends to argue that he had also read and mastered Eliot's sources as well. But even if Hemingway had absorbed not only *The Waste Land* but also *From Ritual to Romance* and portions of *The Golden Bough* and had scrupulously modelled his novel on them, there is still to be explained the 'gaping cleavage', as Young calls it, between the pessimistic theme of the novel and the obvious pleasure Hemingway's characters take in being 'good and lost.' A *Waste Land* that is fun doesn't make a great deal of sense, or, at any rate, makes a sense very different from that of Eliot's poem and would therefore demand a different sort of reading.

Indeed, what *The Sun Also Rises* requires — what critical responsibility requires — is that Hemingway's novel be examined in the light of its own working, not by the alien light of another very different sensibility.

*The Sun Also Rises* is not a prose version of *The Waste Land*. It is an autobiographical novel by a man whose imagination and intellect and mode of life were in many ways the antithesis of Eliot's. If there are resemblances between them, these should be acknowledged, of course, but only after *The Sun Also Rises* has been allowed to stand on its own ground and make manifest its own distinguishing features.

## I

THE Sun Also Rises is not an easy novel to get hold of, mainly because Hemingway has so successfully managed to exclude from view his own judgments about what is going on. Jake Barnes is the narrator, but he is neither neutral nor clearly partial. We see through his eyes, and yet part of what we see is always him. Like an optical instrument, his power of vision controls and modifies what is shown, and yet it remains impervious to judgment. For example, in the scene when Jake betrays Montoya's trust by arranging for Romero to be taken over by Brett, we are allowed to see Montoya's disapproval, but we are given no overt clue as to Hemingway's judgment about what Jake has done. There is no indication of embarrassment, self-disgust, regret — only Montoya's look, as Jake reports it, and later Jake's statement that being watched by the 'hard-eyed people at the bullfighter table was not pleasant'. The reader is free to make his own moral assessment of Jake's act.

But how did Hemingway intend the reader to respond not only to Jake's betrayal of Montoya but to everything else in this novel — Brett's numerous affairs, the mindless pursuit of sensation? The question is irrelevant. What counts is the total effect of the 'tragedy' rather than any immediate moral point. Brett's affairs, Jake's betrayal, etc. are all part of what happens. Only Robert Cohn and a few minor characters are held up for judgment (Frances Clyne, the band of homosexuals); the rest are simply there, like the prostitute Georgette, sometimes pleasant, sometimes awful, but always interesting and very much part of the life Hemingway is observing and reporting.

To suggest that he is being critical of the lives of these characters or holding them up to some moral scale (as Eliot might) is to misrepresent what the novel is doing. Instead of criticism, there is a great deal of implicit sympathy, more for some characters than for others, but some even for Robert Cohn, romantic fool though he is, suffering over the loss of Brett: 'I felt so terrible. I've been through such hell, Jake. Now everything's gone. Everything.' What Cohn finally learns is what the other characters seem to have known before the novel opens: 'Everything is gone.' We mustn't take this loss too seriously, of course, since it is part pose and part rationale for the drinking and the self-indulgence. We are meant to have sympathy for these characters — for Jake for being unable to love Brett and for being afraid at night, and for Brett for the death of her first lover, and even for Mike when he discovers Brett is having an affair with Romero.

'It's a hell of a world,' we are meant to feel, and all there is left is to eat, drink and enjoy oneself. Only a foolishly romantic Cohn believes there is anything worth fighting for. And Cohn at last appears to be cured of that illusion. 'You know,' Mike says, 'I don't think Cohn will ever want to knock people about again.' As for Romero, and Montoya, and the Spanish peasants that Jake and Bill meet on the Burguete, they are part of that lost world that the Cohns and Jakes Mikes of this world can never regain, except vicariously. A difference here between the way Eliot and Hemingway use the past is that for Eliot the past provides a moral perspective; for Hemingway, it has sentimental value. It is what 'we' would like to have if we could but can only now enjoy as spectators.

## II

ANOTHER alleged resemblance — of the wounded protagonists — on close inspection turns out to be no resemblance at all. Eliot's protagonist is neither wounded nor sexually incapacitated but suffers from an emotional failure. Hemingway's narrator, on the contrary, while literally wounded and physically incapacitated for performing sexually, is, nonetheless, said to be in love. The resemblance readers may be responding to is the absence in both works of traditional romantic sentiment. In Eliot the absence is what the poem is about. In Hemingway it appears to be accidental, a by-product of the special point-of-view from which the novel is told. To call that absence evidence of sterility may be justified from a certain point of view, but to do so misrepresents what the novel is literally about. If — instead of bestowing the title *Fisher King* on Jake Barnes — we ask instead why Hemingway has chosen to have such a narrator, wounded in just this way, and if we look for strategic advantages to be gained from such a limited narrator, taking into account Jake's involvement in the lives of the other characters, we shall see how impossible it would have been for Hemingway to have told his story in any other way. Jake's wound is an important aspect of Hemingway's point of view, for it permits him to provide his ostensibly subjective narrator the rationale for a purely objective presentation. There is, in other words, a contradiction in Hemingway's narrative stance which the wounded Jake Barnes conceals. On the one hand, Jake loves Brett (we are told); on the other, he is able to describe her as coolly and dispassionately as though she were a stranger to him. The wound serves as the psychological justification for Jake's detachment. Without it, he would be simply a monster. With it, he is the victim of an atrocious war for whom any allowances can be made.

The wound 'works', however, only because we do not understand either the physiology or the psychology of it. We are 'taken in' by our own romantic readiness to blame the war and by Hemingway's skill in shifting our interest away from Jake's problem with Brett, which is not the story he has to tell; the extent of his success and our own gullibility can be seen in the readiness with which we accept without protest Jake's handing Brett over to another man. By then, of course, the story of Brett's effect on the fiesta has taken that story over completely and that is the story Hemingway most wishes to tell.

*The Sun Also Rises* is not about the sterility of life or the decline of love in the modern world; it is about a group of characters who go off to a fiesta, who thoroughly enjoy themselves eating and drinking, fishing, dancing and (some of them) fornicating, and then have their pleasure spoiled by the inevitable change that always takes place in human affairs. Love does not last, fiestas do not last, human affairs, generations do not last, not only this generation, but any generation. Only the earth abides and the endless cycle of daily change. Philip Young is mistaken, I believe, when he argues that the structure of the novel is circular. On the contrary: events move forward in time and toward a climax and resolution and the main issues are closely bound up with the structure of those events. Brett's sexual attractiveness provides the main those events, but it is Jake who helps us understand the issues.

### III

THE novel begins as it does — with Jake sitting in on the conflict between Robert Cohn and Frances Clyne — because that conflict not only introduces the basic conflict in the novel; it also anticipates the conclusion as well. One hesitates to state that conflict for fear of making it appear too simple, but it has to do with the whole question of happiness — of masculine happiness, to be sure — and whether it is to be found in the love of a woman, as romance writers traditionally suggest, or whether it is to be found in some more strictly masculine pursuit, such as fishing or bullfighting.

The question, as I have said, is raised in the first chapter when Robert Cohn attempts to break the hold Frances Clyne has established over him. Jake suggests hunting or fishing trips, or cruising alone enjoying the sights and sounds of Paris, but Cohn rejects these (he doesn't like Paris!); his head is full of romantic ideas borrowed mainly from romantic books full of exciting adventures in far-off places.

The question of happiness is brought closer to home in the next chapter when it is revealed that Jake is in love with Brett Ashley but is physically incapable of consummating that love. Jake's situation with Brett temporarily suspends the answer to the question about happiness, leaving the impression that something romantic and satisfactory might have developed between them. In the trip south into Spain it is opened again: Hemingway shows us the pleasure that Jake and his friends take in fishing the mountain streams of Burguete, and then we are permitted to see the effects of Brett's love on several other candidates for her affection.

The joy and pleasure, the good humor and the camaraderie generated in the mountains are dissipated and then destroyed by the working out of the conflict over Brett's affections: Cohn, Romero, and Mike Campbell and even Jake are seriously involved. Cohn is 'crushed.' Romero badly battered. Mike becomes a drunken zombie and Jake is turned a pimp and a traitor (as much perhaps because of the necessities of plot as anything, but a change that reflects the change that has taken place in the fiesta atmosphere). For what Jake has discovered by the end of book is the answer to the question posed at the beginning: does love of the kind offered by Brett bring happiness? It is, of course, Brett who raises the question when she says, 'Oh, Jake, we could have had such damned good time together.' And Jake who supplies the answer: 'Isn't it pretty to think so?'

A distinction must be made between Brett the character and Brett the symbolic focus of the novel's issue: for the view of Brett as a Circe, as a destroyer of men's happiness, is only part of the story and therefore by itself a distortion. Brett is more ambiguous than that. We are told that she is very attractive, built like a racing yacht; she has, moreover, all the right attitudes, holds her liquor well, never overstates or makes a scene. Jake Barnes is said to love her, as do Cohn, Mike Campbell, and of course, Romero, who wants to marry her. And Brett herself has a great deal of physical passion. But clearly she is also destructive. She turns men's heads, causes rivalries and fights, and almost ruins the career of a promising young bullfighter. To call Brett a Waste Land figure, however, does little to illuminate the way she is working in this novel. Brett's failings have nothing to do with fertility or sterility, but with an excess of passion, a passion she cannot control. And control is always an

ideal in Hemingway, whether it be control over one's drinking, fighting, or sexual instinct. The ideal is to enjoy physical sensations but to keep the enjoyment within bounds. And enjoyment is the ideal behind *The Sun Also Rises* — disciplined enjoyment, and that is what the fiesta is all about.

Hemingway's early passion for what he called 'the fiesta concept of life' is well known; the fiesta in this novel is both a real excursion to an actual place and also a theater, so to speak, for the working out of a certain 'philosophy' of life. There is a measured, formal quality in everything associated with it, from the fishing in the mountains, to the bullfights, to the riau-riau dancers; even the drinking (as has often been noted) takes on the solemnity and seriousness of a ritual. There is a proper way to hold the wine skin, a proper way to drink from it, etc. It is this formal quality, this control that is eroded and then swept away by the intrusion into the fiesta of what Hemingway in another context calls 'consequences'.

Brett, in a sense, is simply the precipitator of consequences. For instead of remaining cool and above personal emotion, which seems to be the way to enter into the fiesta, Brett grows personal. She thinks the fiesta is being given for her, she takes over for her own private gratification the cultural hero of the fiesta, and the men no longer drink for pleasure but for extinction of consciousness pitting themselves no longer against what destroys (the bull and what the bull suggests) but against each other.

One can, in short, see the fiesta with its consequences as a metaphor expressing a familiar Hemingway attitude towards life, hedonistic and ultimately pessimistic. Brett's situation simply illustrates how we are bitched from the start. Control and pleasure — these are the proper responses to an existence that must inevitably end in disaster. In this novel it is the control and, especially, the pleasure that get the emphasis. The disaster is underlying and at the end mute in irony. And this seems to be the effect Hemingway was aiming for in juxtaposing the quotation from Gertrude Stein and the lines from Ecclesiastes.

#### IV

*THE Sun Also Rises*, then, is largely a book about pleasure, masculine pleasure, a kind of puritan hedonist's manual. Enjoy but control. That is the book's surface message (if it can be said to have one) and the fact that it continues to interest and even excite readers is a testimony not perhaps to the soundness of Hemingway's philosophy but to the soundness of his art. He found exactly the right set of circumstances and the right set of characters to exemplify his theme, or perhaps — for this is an autobiographical book — he found in his own experiences and observations exactly what it was that made him feel that this was true, and he expressed it with restraint and economy as well as with pleasure.' 'Enjoy' and 'control' are not very close in meaning to the words of Buddha that conclude *The Waste Land*. Give. Sympathize. Control. But they are close to Hemingway's habitual themes.

Those who respond to *The Sun Also Rises* with a different set of assumptions and a different way of feeling will doubtless find this reading inadequate for explaining what is clearly (at least from another point of view) a set of irresponsible characters going through meaningless actions, but this is not a judgment Hemingway would have made nor one that we are invited to make either. If we see *The Waste Land* in *The Sun Also Rises*, that is because we are prepared to find it there, and of course there is no reason why one cannot read Hemingway's novel symptomatically. He was writing about the world as he knew it, the same world that Eliot wrote about, and it may be that in treating his material objectively he inadvertently and unintentionally revealed the emotional hollowness that Eliot consciously and critically exposed. It may be the emotional emptiness, the absence of traditional manifestations of romantic love that make one feel — even if the waste land symbolism is spurious — that Hemingway has indeed created his own version of *The Waste Land*.

The difference, of course, is more than a matter of consciousness. Eliot reacted with horror to what Hemingway treated with ironic detachment. Eliot's poem is an outcry against perversions of the spirit. Hemingway's novel is an extended definition of pleasure and a protest against the romantic 'lies' that would spoil it by substituting for actual experience half-baked theories about it.

Of course, *The Sun Also Rises* has its own form of romanticism, a special blending of self-indulgence and self-control, a love for and a hatred of life because, though sweet, life must end. It comes out — this romanticism — in a need to confront life not only directly but with violent calm, offering oneself as the bullfighter does to a force that will destroy him but which for a time he can control and master. It is in this confrontation that love and hate are balanced and the tension between them released, in fishing, in bullfighting. In love, or in sex that is more than a brief relationship, tension grows, demands are made, obligations incurred, jealousies aroused. Life grows messy and complicated. One cannot any longer do the simple things that give so much pleasure.

In a letter to Archibald MacLeish, Hemingway said that *The Sun Also Rises* was a book about promiscuity; however, it is not the illicit aspect of the various relationships with Brett that is destructive, but the sexual relationship itself; and the more permanent it becomes (as with Romero), the more deadly. One thinks of Nick and George skiing in 'Cross-Country Snow' and lamenting that their skiing days are over. Nick is married and about to become a father and return home and settle down. 'Maybe we'll never go skiing again, Nick,' George says. Nick replies, 'we've got to. It isn't worthwhile if you can't.' Growing up, getting married, family responsibility — all get in the way of things that matter most in Hemingway. And Brett, being the right sort, recognizes the inevitable and calls off her affair with Romero before it becomes permanently destructive. But Brett is still something of a romantic herself. After all she has been through, she still believes that she and Jake could have 'had such a good time together.'

The title of this novel and the biblical verses from which it comes catch very nicely the romantic attitude that underlies *The Sun Also Rises*, that disputes Brett's words and pervades not only this work but so much of Hemingway's fiction — an

attitude that says, with chin up and lowered eyes, that we are all bitched from the start but that we must live with the knowledge of death and extinction, taking what pleasure we can from the sensuous contemplation of that fact and some little comfort in the permanence of nature itself; generations pass away, but the earth abides. The belief that man can ever be happy for long in any human relationship, even in joyous Spain, is to be smiled at a little sadly. 'Isn't it pretty to think so?'