

Existential Dilemma in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*

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Abstract

The Sun Also Rises unlike any other novels of Hemingway deals with the issue of existence of a typical American woman like Lady Brett. She has undergone with so many challenges and difficulties in life. She has tried her level best to settle in life. But all her love's labor is lost. Everybody except her husband has exploited her. She experiences the bitter moments with the manhood. She has had traumatic experiences with different people introduced to by her husband. Finally the dilemma is resolved and she reconciles with the husband when life teaches her that impotency is better infidelity.

Key Words: existentialism, infidelity, impotency, unscrupulousness, reconciliation cocktails

This article studies the existential problem of Hemingway heroine, Brett Ashley in *The Sun Also Rises*. The appearance of Lady Brett is very dramatic in the novel. It is a group of newspapermen and ex-soldiers of the world war, who meet in Paris for a little dancing and drinking and then move on to Pamplona for the reason of bull fighting. The centre of the group is Brett, a female given to cocktails and fornication. She is essentially a good sort – likable and companionable, capable of seeing the addition to the particular lure which makes them all mooncalves of love. She is a character who struggles to settle in life but fails and takes resort to a man whom she is destined to.

Her appearance and activity are such that one certainly gets the impression that she is a hopeless and unscrupulous nymphomaniac – a completely worthless character. In the course of the story certain circumstances gradually come to light which may cause some readers somewhat to mitigate this

judgment. It appears that her life with her husband had been no picnic – that he was a brutal character well fitted to drive a woman into desperate reprisals. At present she appears to be engaged to Mike, a Scotchman of good social standing, and a loving fellow, a war veteran who has gone through bankruptcy.

Well, her being engaged to Mike would seem a poor excuse for her going off with Robert Cohn, the American College Athlete, or falling in love with Romero, the young Spanish matador, and going to Madrid with him. Just what her sentiments are towards Mike is not clear, unless we are to suppose that her affairs with other men are an indication that Mike is not the natural choice of her heart.

It is Jake who introduces Brett to Romero, thus initiating him into the necessary contact with worldly corruption and providing Brett with her first experience in moral purity. Romero has tried his best to impress Brett. His conception of love is an exalting one.

He wants Brett to become a whole woman again, a purifying transformation represented by his insistence that she allows her bobbed hair to grow long. This rouses her one definite moral act as she sends Romero away, she observes that she is no longer capable of doing well, but she can still refrain from evil, no higher exaltation is open to her bruised nature.

Brett shares with Mike a carelessness of personal behavior which stems from a life time of having had things done for her. Her room in Madrid, for example, was in that disorder produced only by those who have always had servants. She makes appointments and does not keep them. She accepts the generosity of others as if were her dues. The Paris homosexuals, one feels certain, were paying her way. Count Mippipopolous finances her champagne binge. "Come on", she says at Pamplona "Are these poisonous things paid for" (Hemingway 1949: 120). In the bar of the palace Hotel in Madrid, she asks Jake, if he would buy a lady a drink. She has been given, she admits, "hell's own amount of credit" on her title. And, of course, she and Mike had jointly run up the bills they could not settle at Cannes. Moreover, she satisfies her demanding sexual appetites at the expense of others, effectively turning Robert into a swine, and Jake into a pimp.

Brett is in love with Jake, and he with her. But since he is wounded as he is, there is not much they can do about it. Brett, although engaged to man who like herself and Jake is a casualty of the war, passes from Cohn to Romero and then because she has principles too – she leaves him and in the end is back, hopelessly, with Jake. She leads nowhere

and that is perhaps the real point of her character.

In the struggle to maintain himself Jake succeeds to a remarkable degree. This is beyond him because there is ultimately nothing he can do about his disability. He loves Brett abidingly, and she with him but their love can never be consummated unlike Henry and Catherine in *A Farewell to Arms*. Moreover, he finds himself in the painful situation of introducing her to men who later become her lovers, perhaps as unconscious substitutes for himself.

In the final section of the novel Brett, rescued once again by Jake, says to him, "we could have had such a dam good time together" (Hemingway 1949 : 206) referring of course to how it might have been had he not been wounded. Jake replies wryly, "Isn't it pretty to think so" and the book ends on this realistic note.

In the mean time Brett assesses the values of her love. In a way, the count has the advantage over Brett. He thinks that he knows the values, whereas her experience has led her into some doubt as to what the values are. "Doesn't anything ever happen to your values?" She asks him, and he says, "No not any more" (Hemingway: 1949: 51). She wants to know if he never falls in love, and he says he is always in love. "What does that do to your values?" She evidently thinks he is a trifler in love, and that no trifler can have a true notion of the meaning of the word. She is confirmed in this opinion by his reply. "Love" too, he says, "has got a place in my values". She says, "You haven't any values. You're dead, that's all". He does not admit it. "No, my dear, you're not right.

I'm not dead at all." (Hemingway: 1949: 52).

Brett means that love is not love unless it is exclusive and serious – serious enough to upset the cool calculation of an artist in living. And the count either disagrees – he will keep love in its due place in the system of a hedonist – or else, quite possibly, he agrees with Brett at bottom. He agrees with her, and is actually on the look-out for the kind of love she means. If I am not mistaken, he is another of the men in love with Brett, or prepared to fall in love with her. But he is a man of certain delicacy of feeling - her appreciation of that is another reason for judging him "one of us". What he is doing in this festive night of champagne – drinking, feeling his way to an understanding of the relation between Brett and Jake. If that is serious he will make no moves in her direction. For this Greek - American merchant who has been in so many wars and received arrow wound in Abyssinia is at bottom a gentleman, that is why Brett recognizes him as "one of us". No such word is dropped by any of them. But that is what is practically comes to. That is what she has instead of God.

Brett is quite a contrast to Georgette, another woman character. Jake buys her dinner as a preliminary to the sexual encounter she has bargained for and deserts her for Brett and leaves fifty francs with the patron – compensation for her wasted evening to be delivered to Georgette if she goes home alone. The patron is supposed to hold the money for Jake if Georgette secures another male customer. To it, Brett assures him that he would lose fifty francs had it been France. Georgette is too sick, a sexual

cripple, and she pursues her trade openly and honestly.

The case is different with Lady Ashley, who acquires and casts off her lovers nearly as casually as Georgette, but does so without thought of the consequences to others. There is certain irony in Brett's telling Jake that it was wrong of him to bring Georgette to the dance, in restraint of trade. Surely, that is a case of the pot and kettle, for she has arrived in the company of covey of homosexuals. More to the point, it is women like Brett and even to a lesser degree, Cohn's companion Frances Clyn – who provides unfair competition to the street walkers of Paris.

Oddly though, Brett observes a strict code in connection with her sexual activity. She will not accept money for her favors. Thus she rejects the Count's offer of ten thousand dollars to go to Cannes with him. She pays Mike's way, not vice versa, out of the Hotel Mantoya. Though Romero pays the hotel bill in Madrid, she will take nothing else from him. "He tried to give me a lot of money, you know. I told him I had scads of it. He knew that was a lie. I couldn't take his money. You know" (Hemingway 1949: 202)

There is one more point in her favors. She does capture the matador, and he does wish to marry her in spite of the discrepancy of their ages. In sending Romero away, against the urgings of the flesh, she has done the right thing at the cost of her real personal anguish. She realizes that he is too young; she realizes that marriage will not be good for his career. She does not want to be a bitch, and so she insists on giving him up. She tells Jake that she is not going to be that way as she says: "I'm not going to be one of

the bitches that ruin children” (Hemingway 1949: 203). And then, as if to show that she has made the “moral” choice, the author has her say: “I feel rather good, you know. I feel rather set up”. (Hemingway 1949: 203). She is a trifle tipsy, and she repeats herself. “You know it makes one feel rather good deciding not to be a bitch”. And then she adds: “It’s sort of what we have instead of God” (Hemingway 1949: 205)

Furthermore, Brett’s apparent nymphomania can be at least partly exonerated by the unhappy circumstances of her past life. She has lost one man she loved in the war, and married another who has returned quite mad from serving as a sailor. When he came home, Mike explains, he wouldn’t sleep in a bed. He always made Brett sleep on the floor. Finally, when he really got bad, he used to tell her he’d kill her. He also always slept with a loaded service revolver. Brett used to take the shells out when he had gone to sleep. She hasn’t had an absolutely happy life. Like Jake, she also suffers from war wounds. Like him, too, she articulates her awareness of the law of compensation. If she has chaps through hell, she’s paying for it all now. “Don’t we pay for all the things we do, though?” (Hemingway 1949: 29)

Obviously, there are reasons for Brett turning herself into nymphomaniac. The other characters share with Jake his stoic knowledge of the universe but share with Cohn a common failure of the will. Brett knows what it is all about but finds the knowledge too painful to bear and sinks into the endless oblivion of unsatisfying and impermanent sex.

The count points out to Brett that she is divorced she won’t have a title. “No what a pity”, says Brett ironically. “No”, says the count. “You don’t need a title. You got class all over you” (Hemingway 1949: 49). It is a serious shock to the essential aristocracy of Brett. Brett acknowledges his good opinion in light ironic tone. “Thanks. Awfully decent of you”. “I’m not joking you”, says the Count. “You got the most class of anybody I ever seen.” (Hemingway 1949: 49). This very remark prolongs the relish taken in the thought of Brett’s “class” and the unmistakable fact of her possessing it.

Brett’s case is far more ambiguous than that of Robert Cohn or Mike Campbell. If she recklessly imposes nearly insupportable burdens on others, she carries an even heavier burden herself. Morally, she is neither angel nor devil, but somewhere rather fascinatingly, in between. It is a bit autobiographical. It is almost as if Hemingway himself were alternately attracted to and repelled by Duff Twysden, the prototype for Brett.

However, the fact is that Lady Brett is first seen defeminized with a group of homosexuals, her hair is cropped and brushed back like a boy’s. She is forever bathing and washing herself, speaks in unfinished sentence, and tries in vain to feel an emotion in Church. Cohn compares her to Circe, turning men into swine, but though he is jeered at for the image, the comparison is valid.

Brett is shown to have built the edifice of her moral code. She tells Jake the way she feels on having given up her Spanish lover. It is for her an edifying experience;

something which in earlier times would have been called a “spiritual” experience, for it is a state of the spirit with Brett. Her last word to Jake is very appealing. At any rate, that the one man she loved was out of the question is a circumstance that will relieve her somewhat of the imputation of being a nymphomaniac and a completely abandoned character.

As far as sex is concerned she cannot help herself. Her being nymphomaniac is situational and circumstantial. She has witnessed sundry unsuccessful sunrises. The first husband dies in the war. The second husband, a sailor, threatens to kill her and sleeps with loaded revolver. So she lives in a world of uncertainty and insecurity. But she does not gratify her carnal designs at the cost of her humanity and conscience. Her milk of human kindness is best exhibited when she decides not to be a bitch and sends Romero away.

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Rejecting the world of uncertainty, she chooses the world of liberty. She seeks the help of Robert Cohn and Mike and runs after them but in vain. Nobody has assured her a pretty happy life. She has been exploited, victimized and in return gains nothing.

Having had a series of sexual experience, knowing pretty well that Jake is sexually crippled, she returns to him as the permanent solution of her personal predicament. She makes up her mind with Jake. She does not pay any heed to his impotency. To her, impotency is better than betrayal and instability. Now her helplessness and hopelessness come to an end. Her despair and frustration get automatically ceased. She takes Jake as a full stop to all her cravings and finds space with him to live the rest of the life.