The Wounded Man:

Jake Barnes' Trauma and Identity in *The Sun Also Rises*

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"I looked at myself in the mirror of the big armoire beside the bed . . . Of all the ways to be wounded. I suppose it was funny." (Hemingway 38)

These words, said by narrator Jake Barnes in Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises,* illustrate the ironic and complicated nature of Jake's character. The broader plot of *The Sun Also Rises* centers around the lives of several American and British expatriates finding their way through the intricacies of life after WWI. Jake sustained a genital injury during the war, resulting in his impotence. This was not only a physical injury, but a complete decimation of his pre-war identity. This physical and psychological injury infiltrates all of Jake's actions, relationships, and emotions, rendering him an artiste manqué (tortured artist), who is paralyzed by the very thing that defines his character.

Symbolically, the wound represents a fracture in the modern idea of manhood, leaving Jake to discover who he is as a man without the ability to fulfill the traditional masculine roles. It also symbolizes the emotional turmoil that plagued the "Lost Generation" after WWI; who is Jake if he cannot be a "real man" and who are they if they have nothing to fight for? The part of the expatriates' identities that defined them for so long was no longer there, and neither was Jake's, which led to many of his anxieties about his identity as a man. Aside from this aspect of his identity, he would have been validated by his position as a soldier, like many of the other expatriates.

WWI was not just a massive global conflict; it was a cultural disturbance as well. It replaced the traditional ideals of heroism, valor, and masculine identity with disillusionment and a deep emptiness. Because Jake's injury is a direct result of this historical violence, it becomes symbolic of the entire generation's trauma as well as his own. Jake's wound carries no glory; it is personal and humiliating for him, and this distinguishes it from the other "more noble" scars of

war. As cultural and literary historian Paul Fussell argues in *The Great War and Modern Memory*, “Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends” (9). Jake’s life embodies this irony; the war was intended to preserve order and civilization but instead left him permanently damaged. The war stole his ability to fulfill his role as a patriarch, lover, or husband, that he would have previously been defined by, or as David Blackmore described it in his article for *The Hemingway Review*, “The wound literalizes Jake's inability to perform the traditional masculine role” (II). His wound is now a symbol of his failure rather than glory or sacrifice.

Jake is also surrounded by men whose value is seemingly determined by sexual conquest and dominance. The bullfighter Pedro Romero is everything Jake admires, and Hemingway portrays him as an almost mythical representation of masculinity. He is brave, young, and graceful, and his ability to expertly navigate the bulls as well as women, gives him value. His composure in the arena translates into romantic appeal and internal masculinity, which is why Jake ultimately helps him seduce Brett, because he finds him worthy.

Robert Cohn’s obsession with Brett represents his desire for masculine value. Cohn may be masculine by society’s standards, but Jake views him as pathetic. The first thing we learn about Jake is that he is unimpressed by Cohn’s previous boxing career, immediately highlighting his negative opinion of Cohn (Hemingway 11). Jake then proceeds to give a detailed account of Cohn’s dull life and failed marriage, always following up any compliment with something negative, which I believe to be an implicit comparison between Cohn and himself. After Cohn later sleeps with Brett, he follows her across Europe (borderline obsessed), hoping to reaffirm his masculinity by sleeping with her again, but this further illuminates his insecurity to Jake.

Jake also sees Brett's fiancé, Mike Campbell, as pathetic because he uses bragging and shallow displays of dominance to prove his value. Mike is also frequently embarrassing himself with his financial troubles, drinking, and bitter attitude. His attempts to possess Brett, much like Cohn's, are evidence of his insecurity. Ultimately, Cohn and Mike's fragile masculinity allows Jake to see himself as more masculine than them even though he is physically emasculated. I think Jake's admiration of Romero is honest, but it is also an attempt to suppress his own envy for Romero's inherent physical masculinity.

Jake's coping mechanisms are replacements for his lost physical masculinity. To give himself value in his hyper-masculine society, he embraces things he deems masculine, i.e. emotional detachment, silence, and drinking. Jake's dry, ironic narration style throughout *The Sun Also Rises,* further indicates his emotional detachment. In chapter nineteen, Jake receives a telegram from Brett requesting his assistance after her relationship with the bullfighter Pedro Romero fails. His relationship with Brett has been long and painful, but he agrees to help her, recounting:

> That seemed to handle it. That was it. Send a girl off with one man. Introduce her to another to go off with him. Now go and bring her back. And sign the wire with love. That was it all right. I went in to lunch. (Hemingway 243)

The repetition of the phrase "that was it" suggests resignation, implying that Jake is reducing this interaction to a simple task. This is an inherently heartbreaking situation; the woman who he is deeply in love with is careless with his feelings, but there is no evidence of heartbreak in Jake's tone, just casual indifference. Bell Hooks writes, "patriarchy demands of men that they become and remain emotional cripples" (45). Jake's performance of masculinity, in his refusal to show vulnerability, is not strength, but the result of harmful patriarchal values. His trauma forces him

into a role where emotional repression is a survival tactic, not a choice. Jake also does not allow himself to express frustration at Brett's actions, because he is loyal to her to a fault, and Brett creating messes for him to clean up is a cornerstone of their relationship. He uses prose to emotionally detach from the situation, allowing him to continue sacrificing his own happiness for Brett's and remaining a shell of a person.

Another example of his outlook on life preventing him from overcoming his mental injury is in chapter two, where Jake explains to Robert Cohn, "you can't get away from yourself by moving from one place to another" (Hemingway 19). The irony here is that Jake himself is doing the exact same thing. He practically exists in various cafes and spends his time making travel plans, but he never expresses joy at these things. His awareness of the problem only when applied to Cohn demonstrates that he recognizes intellectually that his choices are not helping him progress towards anything. He possesses the ability to gather great insights and make poignant assertions, but lacks the introspection needed to apply them to his own life.

During the same conversation with Robert Cohn mentioned previously, Jake asserts that "nobody ever lives their life all the way up except bull-fighters" (Hemingway 18). Jake's admiration for bullfighting is also envy for the masculinity he feels he cannot have, which I believe is why he admires but does not participate. The bullfighters have passion and purpose which Jake wants, but his inability to emotionally mature in a healthy way keeps him from having either. Jake's idea of masculinity is inherently flawed, leading to his stoic nature, quiet suffering, and emotional control. Rather than being authentic, Jake uses these qualities to mask his true feelings to preserve and potentially amplify what masculinity he has left. However, no amount of perceived internal masculinity can fix Jake's broken romantic relationship with Lady Brett.

Brett, and situations relating to her, appear to be the only things that chip at Jake's emotional shield. In chapter four, they are kissing in the back of a taxi when Brett abruptly shoves him off saying "you musn't. You must know. I can't stand it, that's all. Oh, darling, please understand!" (Hemingway 34). She then explains that essentially, she cannot handle Jake starting something he cannot finish. Jake reflects on this later in the chapter while crying, further indicating his weakness in Lady Brett. They have a deep and vulnerable emotional intimacy, but their relationship is incomplete due to their physical incompatibility. Brett's romantic love for Jake is conditional; she is not willing to give up her sexual freedom to be with him, but Jake's love for her is unconditional. Jake is unable to "possess" Brett in the way that Mike, Cohn, and Romero can, and while "possession" in the traditional, physical sense is impossible, his relationship with Brett is arguably deeper than any of the other men's relationships are. I believe Jake is aware of this irony; he acknowledges "it is awfully easy to be hard-boiled about everything in the daytime, but at night it is another thing" (Hemingway 42). This implies that he recognizes the distance between his stoic performance and his internal suffering.

Jake is also affected by Brett's relationships with other men, specifically Cohn and Romero. I believe he is jealous of the two men, but because Cohn does not meet Jake's definition of ideal masculinity, he does not allow it to affect him as much. He is not jealous of Cohn specifically; he envies Cohn's ability to have a sexual relationship with Brett. Jake's feelings about Romero are slightly more complex. While Jake is in love with Brett, he facilitates her and Romero's relationship, which is motivated by his admiration for Romero, but also a sort of masochistic acceptance of his own impotence. It hurts Jake to look at them together and know that he can never be what Romero is to Brett, and he can never sexually fulfill her. He sets his

own feelings for Brett aside, because ultimately, he does love her and thinks that Romero can make her happier than he can.

In the last line of the novel, Jake responds to Brett's reminiscing about what they could have been saying "isn't it pretty to think so?" (Hemingway 251). This poetic sentiment contrasts with how Jake feels about the rest of his life. While Jake seems to think that most of his life would have been different had he not been injured, his response to Brett indicates that he believes they would have never worked out regardless. I believe this is a defense mechanism, because he does not want to accept that he and Brett's relationship failed because of his injury, even though that is the crux of their incompatibility. The statement also has a resigned tone, indicating that Jake understands Brett's nature, but does not give any indication that he plans to end their relationship or change anything. This supports his designation as an artiste manqué, because at this point in the novel, he recognizes that his relationship with Brett is harmful, but he cannot bring himself to let her go even if it means moving on to greater things.

His emotions surrounding Brett and her relationships reveal a buried desire for control, possession, and masculinity. Jake's impotence keeps him from fully obtaining these desires, so they reflect inwards, leading to his careful control of his outward emotions and his constant comparison of himself to the other male characters. Brett's character is a further representation of Jake's unfulfilled desires. She freely expresses love, virility, and she is able to act on her romantic feelings for others, just not Jake. Her presence serves as both comfort and torment for Jake, as it reminds him of what he cannot have as a result of his injury.

Jake's fulfillment of the "artiste manqué" archetype is metaphorical rather than literal. He does not attempt to make tangible art; he has all the necessary qualities to be an artist, but his wound is his mental block. He recognizes the beauty in his life through Brett Ashley, Spain, and

the art of bullfighting, but he always puts distance between himself and those things, hence his position as the narrator. Jake documents, witnesses, and narrates, but he cannot *make* art. Instead, he chooses to reclaim the power and control he lost because of his injury by being the one telling the story.

His occupation is also a symbol of his stunted self-expression. Jake works as a professional journalist writing impersonal, report-style pieces rather than creative work. This furthers the distance between himself and his life, as he elects to write about life instead of immersing himself in it. He perceives his own life as dull, but throughout the book he talks about seeing a multitude of beautiful places and people. His personality is inherently observant, but his trauma has left him unable to enjoy his observations anymore, preventing him from fully experiencing and appreciating what he does have.

Some scholars argue that Jake Barnes represents redefined masculinity rather than a lost one. His composed personality, emotional restraint, and financial independence could be evidence of Jake's ability to grow and overcome his injury. This could even indicate the beginnings of his alignment with a more modern definition of masculinity, where anger and physical dominance are not the most important qualities in men anymore (Willis 53). However, Jake's emotional "restraint" is not a stylistic choice; it is simply his attempt to replace his lost physical masculinity with other external indicators.

Donald A. Daiker also writes a similar interpretation in his article for *The Hemingway Review*, asserting that Jake's war injury is a catalyst for his growth. He uses Hemingway's own rejection of the "Lost Generation" label and how it applies to Jake, arguing that Jake is not lost at all. He makes detailed plans for his life, he consciously chooses to set Brett up with Romero, and he has a clear-cut definition of masculinity and morality (85-87). I agree with Daiker that Jake is

not lost, but I contest that his injury led to any emotional growth. Jake's ability to make choices for himself and his life does not equate to him overcoming his trauma. Furthermore, Jake's inability to have a sexual relationship with Brett represents the actual loss experienced by his generation; everyone lost a part of themselves because of the war, and Jake is the physical evidence. Jake's masculine performance is also a direct result of his injury. Had he not become impotent, his identity would not have been destroyed, and the "masculine" identity he has constructed in the book is the culmination of multiple attempts to recover his identity. Jake has not fully recovered from his injury by any means; it haunts the narrative and prevents him from feeling whole, i.e., he may not be lost, but he is stuck.

Jake allows his wound to define his body, his identity, relationships, and ability to live a fulfilling life. He is suspended between his need for intimacy and detachment, ultimately letting detachment and his carefully constructed masculine performance win. Jake's inability to be emotionally vulnerable is directly related to his wound, because without the primary physical indicator of masculinity, he feels the need to compensate with other hyper-masculine attributes. Jake is a tortured artist, only his life is his piece, and it will never be completed because he is incapable of moving past his injury. He will continue to trudge along with the potential to live a full life, but never quite make it there.

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