

The Unsexed Characters in Ernest Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises

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Abstract

Ernest Hemingway's renowned novel *The Sun Also Rises* is mainly dedicated to demonstrate the lives of Lost Generation, the lost souls of expatriates in the post-war era. The current paper aims at studying the characters of the novel regarding their gender identification based on Judith Butler's ideas of performativity and gender/sex consolidation. The two main characters of the novels are discussed in terms of their conformity or resistance towards their gender roles. Being to a great extent detached from their pre-defined sexual and gender roles, these characters are believed to be devoid of a conventional gender identity that chords with the eccentric and queer spirit of the post-war era.

Keywords: Ernest Hemingway, The Sun Also Rises, Judith Butler, Performativity.

War has been the common background of Ernest Hemingway novels in the 1920s and *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) is one of the best examples. *The Sun Also Rises* is the story of a group of young people who live in Paris. Lost in their lives, they spend every night and day in an unsuccessful search for love, wandering among bars and drinking. It is a story about war and love in the absence of them. There is no war, on the contrary, all there is are festivals, fiestas, and parties, but it still plays an important role in everyone's life; everyone is chasing love, but all the attempts lead to failure. After the war, people had lost their ideals of life. In F. Scott Fitzgerald's words they had "grown up to find all gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken" (292).

Sexuality is one of the aspects that is deformed in the characters of the novel. By giving characteristics that are attributed to the opposite sex of the characters, the writer tries to depict them as genderless people who constantly fail in the attempt to establish a sexual identity for themselves. While many critics have only focused on the tragic fate of a couple that are alienated from their sexuality and are deprived of a heterosexual relationship, this essay attempts to explore the creation of two non-binary gendered characters, Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley; their encounter with their sexuality and the possibility of resistance through their transformation in the novel.

In Judith Butler's definition, performativity is a series of acts and repetitions through which one expresses their fabricated gender identity (178). She argues that sex and gender are socially and culturally constructed notions that are repeated and performed by the members of each gender category and any rupture in this heterosexual matrix would result in severe punishments for the resisting individuals that refuse to abide by the characteristics and behaviors attributed to a specific gender category (178).

Jake Barnes is an American expatriate who is the main character and the protagonist of the story. Jake might be considered the biggest victim of the war among the characters of the novel, for he is injured both physically and mentally. He has been wounded in the war; a wound that is rather mysterious and is never directly mentioned in the story. We do not know what exactly has happened to him or how it has happened. All we know is that it has made him sexually impotent. This Impotence has a broader meaning in the story. It is considered as a symbol of his generation, including himself (Spiller 205). Even though he does not lack sexual desire, he is unable to perform intercourse and therefore unable to reproduce. In the heterosexual matrix people are categorized based on reproduction, hence a wide variety of people, the ones that cannot or do not want

to reproduce for any possible reason, are not sexed in that system. Also in that categorization, the male acts as the active agent (Butler 141). Jake's inability to perform the most masculine role that has been imposed on men is the first and most obvious sign of his unsexed character.

At first, Jake is a typical stoic Hemingway character. He never complains. He seems to live and work like a normal person with no problems. Even though he witnesses Brett's frequent affairs with other men, he never shows any weakness about it. When they go to Spain to see bullfighting, he even agrees to introduce her to a nineteen-year-old bullfighter, Pedro Romero, to which Brett is strongly attracted. Despite the strong mask that he puts on, there are some moments of weakness. His asking "Couldn't we live together Brett? Couldn't we just live together?", telling her he loves her and his weeping while thinking about Brett when he is alone at night, are all the brief moments that Jake distances the masculine roles that were defined for him and shifts to a sentimentality as opposed to his stoicism that disrupts the flow of performativity as the normal performance of a gendered individual. Jake's abortive love for Brett is one of the main issues in the novel. But it is resolved at the end when he finally accepts the impossibility of a relationship with her in a world in which he is not a "man" as it is defined. When Jake realizes whether or not he pursues love or make love, there is no love left in the world, everything becomes easier for him to accept.

Brett Ashley is an English expatriate who has met Jake when she was a nurse in England during the war. Even though the war has affected her indirectly, she is wounded as bad as any soldier. Her fiancé is dead, and Jake, her only true love, is sexually mutilated. At this time, she is trying to divorce a man who suffers from a post-traumatic stress disorder and marry an American bankrupted expatriate. Her two failed marriages and several purposeless relationships are evidence of her riskiness and casualness towards men. Many critics

have treated Brett Ashley as a nymphomaniac, for she is involved with almost all the male characters in the novel. She has a husband that she wants to divorce (Ashley), she is engaged to someone she does not love (Mike), She seduces a guy who mistakes her attention for love (Cohn), is in love with a sexually impotent man (Jake) and is strongly attracted to a nineteen year old bullfighter (Pedro Romero).

Brett is one of the free women of the post-war era who rejects conventional standards of behavior. "The post-war feminist consciousness was especially evident in Paris in the early 1920s" (Martin 68). Hanging around bars with short skirts and revealing clothes while drinking overtly, makes her a real post-war flapper. On the other hand, her androgynous looks have caused her to be called "A female who never becomes a woman" and "woman devoid of womanhood" by some critics. As Jake is known to be "unmanly" and unable to perform his sexual role, Brett is also alienated from her sexuality. We cannot fail to notice her ignorance towards gender binaries. Her boyish looks with her short, brushed-back hair, the way she dresses, the language she uses and considering herself "one of the chaps" gives her an androgynous look. Romero says he wants to marry her but she has to grow her hair out because it would make her look more "womanly". But of course Brett refuses to do so. She does not grow her hair again or get her defined womanhood back. She refuses to "ruin" Pedro Romero with his strong masculine identity.

Hemingway probably did not mean to do so, but in depicting a portrait of the lost generation, he has inadvertently created two characters who display at least an attempt of resistance toward their predefined sexual roles. Brett and Jake both express behaviors that were not in harmony with the gender categorizations of the society. Brett did not turn out to be an infamous nymphomaniac, but a woman resisting the gender binaries and Jake is not an impotent man trying desperately to be

with a hyper sexual woman; he defines a his own gender while lacking the basic behaviors attributed to men. A couple with displaced roles, each close to what the other is expected to be.

References

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The story ends almost where it had started, with Brett and Jake sitting in the backseat of a cab, talking about the life they could have never had together. But there is a slight change in their

characters now. They are both more realistic. It is easier for them to accept themselves now. Other than that, nothing is changed. The world is the same, they are still aliens, love is still dead and all the faiths are gone. But they will never die; after them comes another generation. Because according to the opening epigraph: One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abides forever... The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to the place where he arose... The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north, it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits...All the rivers run into the sea; yet the sea is not full; unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again.(320)