

Research Article

## The Absurd in *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway

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Received: October 30, 2023

Accepted: November 20, 2023

Published: November 28, 2023

### Abstract

This study examines the two polarities that shape the thought of Hemingway, namely the awareness of death and Epicurean enjoyment. In the light of existentialism and sociocriticism, the aim is to use these two tendencies to highlight how the characters of Hemingway struggle against the absurdity of existence. Furthermore, what would be the ultimate outcome of the encounter between the revelation of the void that pervades the lives of these characters and their disillusionment with what they expected from life? Our analysis will consist first in showing the complexity of the characters engaged on this path without apparent landmarks that constitutes existence. Then, it will analyze the expressions of loss and despair in the characters' actions. Finally, it will unveil the emptiness of existence through Hemingway's characters.

**Keywords:** Awareness of Death, Epicurean Enjoyment, Absurdity, Disillusionment.

### Introduction

*The Sun Also Rises* fundamentally reflects the absurd breakdown of the world through a disjointed language dotted with interstices of stillness. This novel is the tale of social mavericks adrift, seeking solace in alcohol and eroticism, excitement in boxing and bullfighting, which are the peacetime equivalent of war. This Epicureanism is akin to despair. From this work, in which the two central polarities of Hemingway's thought stand out—the awareness of death and the enjoyment of the present moment—we are led to wonder about the meaning of this confrontation. Better still, what would be the outcome of the encounter between the revelation of the nothingness that haunts life and the conviction that it's futile to try to build something? In the light of existentialism coupled with sociocriticism, we will attempt to answer these questions and grasp the meaning of Hemingway's characters' struggle against the absurdity of existence through movement and noise. The enlightenment of existentialism, based on the idea of a human being entirely responsible for his own existence and destiny, can be both liberating and despairing. Sociocriticism, with its linguistic perspective, enables us to better perceive society by shedding light on the social reality portrayed in Hemingway's work, scrutinizing it and unveiling its ideology. To achieve this, we shall strive to understand the intricacies of the characters committed to the ostensibly untrodden path of existence. We shall then analyze the expressions of loss and despair in the characters' deeds. Lastly, we will demonstrate the vacuity of existence through these characters.

### 1. Human Errancy, a Reading of the Complex Nature of the Characters

In the aftermath of the First World War, some American expatriates, having suffered the horrors of war, behave strangely, even rendering some of them unsociable. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway brings us into their tangible experience. It has to be said that, at the time, it was difficult to express discontent with the disaster of war in an American society deeply dominated by the rigidity of the Puritan ethos. Confronted with the inflexibility of the puritanical religion's standards and, above all, its firm stance towards writers, some of them eschewed the harsh laws that hindered their freedom to go and live in Paris, where they could quench their thirst for freedom. So they remained in Paris to get on with their lives, as Cohn's words in *The Sun Also Rises* illustrate, "You're an expatriate. You've lost touch with soil. You get precious. Fake Europeans standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your time talking, not working. You are an expatriate, see? You hang around cafés" (p.5).

Indeed, in *The Sun Also Rises*, the characters perform all sorts of activities they would not have been able to do in America. They do not make the Puritans into restrictive ethical liabilities. As Escarpit (1964) sees it,

this is a convenient way for these characters to protest against the somewhat alienating Puritan legislation. Western culture is less concerned with the shortcomings of individual conduct. This society enables them to proceed without thinking about the crucial things that make up the world. This is evident in the conversation between Jake and Robert Cohn as they have dinner with Frances. Robert has suggested that Jake should leave town for a while to blow off some steam, but the idea didn't please Frances, who wished to wed Cohn. Jake, the novel's narrator, comments:

"I first became aware of the lady's attitude toward him one night after the three of us had dined together. We had dined at l'Avenue's and afterward went to the Café de Versailles for coffee. We had several fines after the coffee, and I said I must be going. Cohn had been talking about the two of us going off somewhere on a weekend trip. He wanted to get out of town and get in a good walk. I suggested we fly to Strasbourg and walk up to Saint Odile, or somewhere or other in Alsace. "I know a girl in Strasbourg who can show us the town," I said." (p.6)

From this extract, we realize that Jake and Cohn's attitudes are largely due to the implicit fact that they do not bother about Frances. In fact, they succeed in their journey without really getting to know her. Rather, they are more interested in getting on with their lives, wandering here and there without pondering the things in their lives. In their discussion, when Cohn came back from America, he went to Jake's office to recommend that he should head to South America, hoping to persuade Jake by showing him the vacuous monotony of a sedentary lifestyle:

"I can't stand it to think my life is going so fast and I'm not really living it." (p.10)

"Listen, Jake," he leaned forward on the bar. "Don't you ever get the feeling that all your life is going by and you're not taking advantage of it? Do you realize you've lived nearly half the time you have to live already?" "Do you know that in about thirty-years more we'll be dead?" (p.11)

He regrettably turned down the proposal. Nevertheless, in his own words, Cohn proves his keen interest in irrelevant, trivial errands such as travel and mobility. For Cohn, an individual's existence is important and meaningful when he or she is enjoying it. In fact, we can see from his behavior or his words that Cohn confines existence to rhapsodizing about trifling things; a demeanor that betrays just how confused and disenchanted he is. Cohn tries to persuade Jake to partake of his vision of life, a somewhat freewheeling one according to Young (1966). But Jake is discourteous to him and declines to follow him on this existential venture devoid of morals. He knows that Cohn would rather conceive of his life in terms of his bookish knowledge. Yet, when Cohn stubbornly insists on traveling to South America, Jake suggests an interesting alternative:

"Did you ever think about going to British East Africa to shoot?"

"No, I wouldn't like that."

"I'd go there with you."

"No; that doesn't interest me." (p.10)

Cohn does not want to live in Paris; he tries to convince Jake to go and experience life elsewhere. Unfortunately for him, Jake has realized that he has been swayed by Mencken in his inability to appreciate life in Paris and in his choice of a wanderlust lifestyle:

"It is a street I do not mind walking down at all. But I cannot stand to ride along it. Perhaps I had read something about it once. That was the way Robert Cohn was about all of Paris. I wondered where Cohn got that Incapacity to enjoy Paris. Possibly from Mencken. Mencken hates Paris, I believe. So many young men get their likes and dislikes from Mencken." (p.42)

Cohn's behaviour is representative of many characters who have lost all self-confidence and live their lives according to the directives of a book, especially Mencken's. Furthermore, as Young (1966) points out, Hemingway's characters are both physically and psychologically injured; they carry many of the sequels of war, which drive them to absurd actions.

In fact, Jake Barnes, Brett Ashley and the others are the novel's true depiction of grief and desperation. Their patterns of behavior are nothing but abnormality and non-conformity, in the sense that they do not give a damn about what society deems right and proper. The senselessness of their deeds and their actions is

perfectly exemplified in the sequence in which Jake awakens Cohn and the latter's reaction; this is how he describes it:

"He sat in the outer room and read the papers, and the Editor and Publisher and I worked hard for two hours. Then I sorted out the carbons, stamped on a by-line, put the stuff in a couple of big manila envelopes and rang for a boy to take them to the Gare St. Lazare. I went out into the other room and there was Robert Cohn asleep in the big chair. He was asleep with his head on his arms. I did not like to wake him up, but I wanted to lock the office and shove off. I put my hand on his shoulder. He shook his head. "I can't do it," he said, and put his head deeper into his arms. "I can't do it. Nothing will make me do it." (p.12)

Undoubtedly, Cohn is still suffering from the psychological scars he suffered after the war. The excerpt above indicates that he is psychologically injured. The trauma of the shock of war disrupts his sleep. He cannot rest easy, as the sad, dark nightmarish images of war that flood his mind turn into recurring nightmares. He is agitated, scared and anxious. In *The Sun Also Rises*, almost all the characters are driven by a dreadful fear caused by recurring images of the dead and the cries of the wounded dying on the battlefield. Worse, these harrowing images of death seem to alienate the characters, as can be seen with Jake Barnes, Brett Ashley, and Robert Cohn. For Jake Barnes, for example, we see him respond strangely when a lovely girl sits down with him at his dinner table and engages him in conversation:

"Well, what will you drink?" I asked.  
"Pernod."  
"That's not good for little girls."  
"Little girl yourself. Dites garçon, un pernod."  
"A pernod for me, too."  
"What's the matter?" she asked. Going on a party?"  
"Sure. Aren't you?"  
"I don't know. You never know in this town."  
"Don't you like Paris?"  
"No."  
"Why don't you go somewhere else?"  
"Isn't anywhere else?"  
"You're happy, all right."  
"Happy, hell!" (p 14-15)

This talking shows that Jake is insane. He does not have the urge to keep girls away from nasty things like heavy drinking. In other words, Jake is a "yes-man"; he does not enforce normal matters on the lady. He takes her attitudes for granted because of his non-conformity. His estrangement is reflected in his everyday behaviour, as evidenced by his laid-back attitude. He does not model good behavior or concern for others. Even more, Jake is unable to love; he sounds worried about his inner feelings. For Knecht (1952), Jake is looking for a way out, because he lived through the First World War and still has scars that make him seem absurd and alienated in his relationships. He always appears to be on the outs; he does not know or bother where his relatives are; he has no house to return to. Jack is in a permanent inner turmoil to calm the unsettling war horror he has witnessed.

To cope with all these maddening specters of war, Jack eschews ponderous reflection like the other characters who have experienced the dread of war, and takes to alcohol. We can see them drinking here and there, relishing their lives. We find this in the discussion between Jake and Braddocks when Jake and Georgette have gone out to dinner to meet Braddocks and a few of his friends:

"You're coming to the dance, aren't you?" Braddocks asked.  
"Why, the dancings. Don't you know we've revived them?" Mrs. Braddocks put in.  
"You must come, Jake. We're all going," Frances said from the end of the table. She was tall and had a smile.  
"Of course, he's coming," Braddocks said. "Come in and have coffee with us, Barnes."  
"Right."  
"And bring your friend," said Mrs. Braddocks laughing. She was a Canadian and had all their easy social graces.  
"Thanks, we'll be in," I said. (p.17)

This dinner conversation between Jake and Braddocks, when Jake and Georgette have gone out to meet Braddocks and some of his friends, substantiates what has been said above, and more importantly, shows their despair and isolation, which they try to hide by drinking and promiscuity. The characters are anxious to go out to pubs and restaurants to forget the obsessive reminders that seem to be alienating them. The alienation is reflected in the way they invite each other to bars and restaurants. In this way, they try to overcome their solitude. In short, the protagonists find no purpose in their existence and are merely content to profit from it. Jake, for example, is shown in recurring images of feasting that always finish with emptied glasses, as if life ended in death. This oversimplified approach to life has the concomitant effect of clouding the protagonists' sense of morality. They have a blinkered understanding of religion, as we can see with Jake, for whom religious issues are a mere plaything; he does not see their relevance. Richard Ruland and Bradbury Malcolm suggest that, "Religious belief is a problematic preoccupation in a post-war period when characters are trying to cope by finding meaning in life. Religion is the last thing on their minds in a topsy-turvy world where man is always plunged into nightmarish catastrophes" (1992:125). In a discussion between Bill and Jake, the latter reveals that he often considers religion unimportant:

"I'm going to sleep," Bill said. He put a newspaper over his.  
"Listen, Jake," he said, "are you really a catholic?"  
"Technically."  
"What does that mean?"  
"I don't know." (p.124)

This excerpt highlights the complexity of Jack's being and the senselessness of his responses. Jack seems to have no clue what he is babbling about. When he says "Technically" (p.124), he implies that he is not even sure of what he is talking about. More importantly, he displays his disbelief in any saving faith guaranteed by religion. The absurdity of Jake's answers is largely due to his failure to believe in God anymore, but also to the contradiction they clearly contain, namely his misunderstanding of the confessional language:

"It was a quiet life and no one was drunk. I went to church a couple of times, once with Brett Ashley. She said she wanted to hear me go to confession, but I told her that not only was it impossible but it was not as it sounded, and, besides, it would be in a language she did not know." (p.151)

It is clear here that Jake considers his declaration absurd and senseless. For him, the words he will use to confess will be gibberish. Jake does not see religion as rescue for the hopeless. Moreover, Jake is doubtful about the existence of this almighty being who could do everything. He is incapable of asserting his faith in a transcendent being, and the uncertainty in his responses underscores the character's complex nature. This complexity is mirrored in Brett Ashley, one of the book's other characters. It shows in the way she plays with romance when she accompanies Count Mippipopolous to Jake's apartment:

"What's the matter, darling? Do you feel rocky?"  
She kissed me coolly on the forehead.  
"Oh, Brett Ashley, I love you so much."  
"Darling," she said. Then: "Do you want me to send him away?"  
"No, He's nice."  
"I'll send him away."  
"No, don't."  
"Yes, I'll send him away."  
"You can't just like that."  
"Can't I, though? You stay here. He's mad about me, I tell you." (p.54-55)

The Count is very much in love with Brett Ashley. However, she does not care. Even Worse, she submits the Count's destiny to Jake, who must determine whether or not she should dispose of him like a bulky rag. It's hard to assess her behavior in coming with somebody who is in love with her and sending him away just to get intimacy with Jake. Brett Ashley proves immature in her attitude by beating around the bush in her romantic relationship with Jake. In fact, she is unable to stay with Jake; she is afraid of being with him for nothing. In other words, she does not think it is worth staying forever with a man who is helpless and unable to have sex with her. It is easy to perceive her inconsistent attitude when she and Jake are conversing in her bedroom:

"Couldn't we live together, Brett Ashley? Couldn't we just live together?"

"I don't think so. I'd just tromped you with everybody. You couldn't stand it."

"I stand it now."

"That would be different. It's my fault, Jake. It's the way I'm made."

"Couldn't we go off in the country for a while?"

"It wouldn't be any good. I'll go if you like. But I couldn't live quietly in the country. Not with my own love."

"I know."

"Isn't it rotten? There isn't any use my telling you I love you."

"You know I love you."

"Let's not talk. Talking's all bilge. I'm going away from you, and then Michael's coming back."

"Why are you going away?"

"Better for you. Better for me." (p.55)

Based on this discussion, there is no longer any doubt that Brett Ashley is a nymphomaniac. Moreover, she is so consumed with sex that she behaves like a callous prostitute in the midst of a large number of men, who clearly approve of her. Like Jake and Brett Ashley, Cohn's behavior is also paradoxical. Cohn's attitude when he meets Brett Ashley is pure absurdity. Cohn does not keep his composure when he meets her. He looks like he is losing his mental faculties at the sight of her. He is ridiculously articulate about his love for Brett Ashley; he is in control of his emotions for her. We cannot figure out his behavior when he speaks with Jake about Brett Ashley:

"What do you know about Lady Brett Ashley, Jake?"

"Her name's Lady Ashley. She's a nice girl," I said. "She's getting a divorce and she's going to marry Mike Campbell. He's over Scotland now, why?"

"She's a remarkably attractive woman."

"Isn't she?"

"There's a certain quality about her, a certain fineness. She seems to be absolutely fine and straight."

"She's very nice."

"I don't know how to describe the quality," Cohn said. "I suppose it's breeding."

"You sound as though you liked her pretty well."

"I do. I shouldn't wonder if I were in love with her."

"She's a drunk," I said. "She's love with Mike Campbell, and she's going to marry him. He's going to be rich as hell someday."

"I don't believe she'll ever marry him."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I just believe it. Have you known her a long time?"

"Yes," I said. "She was a V. A. D. in a hospital I was in during the war."

"When did she marry Ashley?"

"During the war. Her own true love had just kicked off with the dysentery."

"You talk sort of bitter."

"Sorry. I didn't mean to. I was just trying to give the facts."

"I don't believe she would marry anybody she didn't love."

"Well," I said. "She's done it twice."

"I don't believe it."

"Well," I said, "don't ask me a lot of fool questions if you don't like the answers."

"I didn't ask you that."

"You asked me what I know about Brett Ashley."

"I didn't ask you to insult her."

"Oh, go to hell."

(p.38-39)

This dialogue illustrates how difficult it often is to grasp Cohn's attitude to the extent that he cannot stand what Jake says about Brett Ashley; there is something silly about the way he likes Brett Ashley without having spoken to him. He does not want to hear some ugly thing about a lady he does not know properly. He even delves into senseless anger at Jake for what he says about Lady Brett Ashley. This conversation between Jake and Cohn underscores once again Brett Ashley's nymphomaniac nature. Jake is furious when he hears Cohn's nasty words about Brett Ashley. He is unwilling to see Brett's true nature as outlined by Cohn, even though he knows deep down that she is a mischievous, narcissistic individual focused solely on epicurean pleasure-seeking. Yet, he cannot stop reminiscing about her. Nor can he help loving her despite

her defects. Jake's heroic inability to distance himself from Brett Ashley's thoughts renders him unable to be consistent and logical in what he says or does. Obsessively in love with Brett Ashley, he recurrently demands, "Couldn't we live together, Brett Ashley? Couldn't we live together?" (p.55). It is obvious that Jake is silently and deeply suffering from this situation, which is exacerbating his state of mind already impaired by wartime images of atrocities.

Jake's conduct is very equivocal. With Brett Ashley, he appears lost and bewildered, while with Cohn and his other friends, he is rude, as can be seen in the way he replies to Cohn, "tell her to go to hell" (p.36). He never approves of what his friends are doing. Jake does not speak pleasantly to Cohn to urge him to adopt a gentler attitude toward Frances. Rather, he bluntly addresses Cohn and tells him to tell Frances to go to hell:

"Well, why don't you start off?"

"Frances."

"Well," I said, "take her with you."

"She wouldn't like it. That isn't the sort of thing she likes. She likes a lot of people around."

"Tell her to go to hell." (p.37-38)

Hemingway, through Jake in *The Sun Also Rises*, exemplifies the intricacies of loss and despair of a generation psychologically stricken by the First World War. This lost generation fails to find meaning in its existence, as Hemingway reveals through the characters' conversations as they head to Pamplona for a mere celebration:

"Let us rejoice in our blessings. Let us utilize the fowls of the air. Let us utilize the product of the vine. Will you utilize a little; brother?"

"After you, brother."

Bill took a long drink.

"Utilize a little, brother," he handed me the bottle. "Let us not doubt, brother. Let us not pry into the holy mysteries of the hencoop with simian fingers. Let us accept on faith and simply say—I want you to join with saying—What shall we say, brother?" He pointed the drumstick at me and went on. "Let me tell you. We will say, and I for me am proud to say—and I want you to say with me, on your knees, brother. Let no man be ashamed to kneel here in the great out-of-doors. Remember the woods were God's first temples. Let us kneel and say: 'Don't eat that, Lady—that's Mencken.' " (p.122)

Thus, Hemingway elucidates the characters' equivocal willingness to take advantage of their times and make the most of them. He also reveals the debauchery experienced by American citizens in Europe due to the despair engendered by America's false promises of being the center of the world, as described by Magny (1948). They are disoriented and bewildered by the atrocious repercussions of war. In so doing, this generation seems to be making up for what it was deprived of in wartime, as Harris bears witness in the book, "I say. Really, you don't know what that means. I haven't had much fun since the war" (p.129). The protagonists are concerned with useless matters that do not enhance their behaviour in order to comply with society.

From the foregoing, characters' behavioral disorders are generally due to their intense stress, which causes them to be fickle, incoherent and inconsistent. For Young (1966), the ambiguity of their actions and gestures underscores their complexity, which becomes increasingly apparent in depressive behavior.

## **2. Loss and Despair**

The First World War was a painful experience for the lost generation who were involved in the atrocities and psychological injury and trauma it engendered. In fact, according to Scott Donaldson, "American citizens who suffered through the war suffer from anxiety, depression and even post-traumatic stress" (1996:98). Hemingway's protagonists then undertake a journey of wandering that sometimes leads to social insecurity, isolation and even suicide. In *The Sun Also Rises*, these characters do not commit suicide. Rather, they are so confused that they are trapped in solitude, wandering in search of a new meaning to their existence. However, regardless of their efforts to emerge from this post-traumatic stress syndrome, Weeks argues that, "these characters are still embraced by a sense of intense fear of being alone, of horror and helplessness" (1962:67). In a word, they enjoy promiscuity to forget the war flashbacks. The scene in which Jake appears talking in his sleep are highly evocative. It lays bare the anguish he endures when he is alone, and particularly when he falls asleep, "I could picture it. I have a nasty habit of imagining my friends' bedroom scenes. We went out to the Café Napolitain to have an aperitif and watch the evening crowds on the Boulevard" (p.13).

In a word, the characters wander the cafés and bistros of Paris day and night, drinking here and there until they get home drunk. In this way, they attempt to escape the alienating burden of solitude and the pain of post-war trauma:

"I do not know what time I got to bed. I remember undressing, putting on a bathrobe, and standing out the balcony. I knew I was quite drunk, and when. The country became very clear and the feeling of pressure in my head seemed to loosen. I was very drunk. I heard Brett Ashley and Robert Cohn come up the stairs. Cohn said good night outside the door and went on up to his room. I heard Brett Ashley go into the room next door. Mike was already in bed. He had come in with me an hour before. He woke as she came in, and they talked together. I heard them laugh. I turned off the turn off the light and tried to go to sleep. It was not necessary to read any more. That was another bright idea. To hell with women, anyway. To hell with you, Brett Ashley." (p.147-148)

Jake is haunted and troubled by shattered memories of the war. He dreads the darkness, which reminds him of the atrocities of the First World War. So he cannot even sleep with the lights off. Jake is a victim of war; he has suffered psychological repercussions. He is inward-looking and self-denying to the extent that the war has lost and disillusioned him.

The negative consequences of post-war trauma can be seen in Jake's mental paralysis stemming from the psychosis of darkness. He has been skimming the same pages of the book over and over again for several nights, without making any real forward progress. His mind is frozen by this fear of the night:

"I came in I put on the light over the head of the bed and started to read. I was reading a book by Turgenieff. Probably I read the same pages over several times. It was one of the stories in "A Sportsman's sketches." I had read it before, but it seemed quite new. I did not want to shut my eyes because the room would go round and round. If I kept on reading that feeling would pass. I could shut my eyes without getting the wheeling sensation. But I could not sleep. There is no reason why because it is dark you should look at things differently from when it is light. The hell there isn't. I figured that all out once, and for six months I never slept with the electric light off." (pp.147-148)

Jake's depression is also expressed in his reluctance to avoid solitude and isolation. Indeed, like the other characters, he is always on the lookout for open spaces, for to him the world is like a jail or coffin in which men are locked forever in darkness. To avoid this feeling, he is always wandering from place to place, as if an evil spirit were at his heels:

"Bill was still sleeping, so I dressed, put on my shoes outside in the hall, and went down-stairs. No one was stirring down-stairs, so I unbolted the door and went out. It was cool outside in the early morning and the sun had not yet dried the dew that had come when the wind died down. I hunted around in the shed behind the inn and found a sort of mattock, and went down toward the stream to try and dig some worms for bait. The stream was clear and shallow but it did not look trouty. On the grassy bank where it was damp I dove the mattock into the earth and loosened a chunk of sod. There were worms underneath. They slid out of sight as I lifted the sod and I dug carefully and got a good many. Digging at the edge of the damp ground I filled two empty tobacco-tins with worms and sifted dirt onto them. The goats watched me dig." (pp.112-113)

He is depressed, and his behaviour mirrors that of an erratic person. The war has embittered his mind. Like Jack, Brett Ashley appears as a traumatized and depressed person in the book. In fact, she is impudent and has lost her sense of self-esteem. She is psychologically stressed to the point of taking comfort in debauchery and sexual gambling. She suffers throughout the novel from behavioral disorders that make her feel lost and hopeless. Indeed, the war has denied her sweetheart, and she is in love with another person called Jake, who is unfortunately sexually disabled. So, since she cannot live the life she dreams of, she is doomed to move from man to man to satiate her sexual cravings.

In other words, self-fulfillment with sex, as she declares: "It's my kind of thing." (p.26); "It would be different. It's my fault, Jake. I'm made that way" (p.55). This confession lays bare her nymphomania and paranoia. Worse, it indicates that she has lost all her dignity, as Jack has; she is desperate and feels lost. As a consequence, she takes a pessimistic view of events around her and in her life. For her, anything that can happen in her life can happen, and so it goes. She does not bother about the outcome of her behavior. She is psychologically disturbed and confused, as she can witness when she talks to Jake:

"Do you still love me, Jake?"

"Yes," I said.

"Because I'm a goner," Brett Ashley said.

"How?"

"I'm a goner. I'm mad about the Romero boy. I'm in love with him, I think."

"I can't help it. I'm a goner. It's tearing me up inside."

"Don't do it."

"I can't help it. I've never been able to help anything."

"You ought to stop it."

"How can I stop it? I can't stop things. Feel that?"

Her hand was trembling.

"I'm like that all though."

"You oughtn't to do it."

"I can't help it. I'm a goner now, anyway. Don't you see the difference?"

"No."

"I've got to do something. I've got to do something I really want to do. I've lost my self-respect."

"Oh, darling, don't be difficult. What do you think it's meant to have that damned Jew about, and Mike the way he's acted?"

"I can't just stay tight all the time."

"No."

"Oh, darling, please stay by me. Please stay by me and see me through this."

"Sure." (p183-184)

It seems that Brett Ashley is desperate in a community that she considers unfair to her. Furthermore, Brett Ashley no longer believes in the future because of the psychological burdens she suffers. Brett Ashley is a paranoid and depressive character, because she has no hope of improving herself and avoiding condemnation and becoming a "sex-sharer". In fact, Brett Ashley has lost her self-respect, morality and dignity because she's hopeless. She refuses to act in a conscious way; she scolds herself for having lost her self-respect and morality. Despite Jake's urging to discourage her from doing what she is about to do, she doesn't listen. Nevertheless, she is not ready to give up the lifestyle. She has no hope of a brighter future since the tragic death of her love, for which she endures a great deal of pain, adding the helplessness of impossible love to Jake.

Like Jake and Brett Ashley, Robert Cohn is the epitome of an alienated, paranoid character. As we've discussed, he enjoys beating around the bush. He secretly dies of jealousy whenever he happens to see Brett Ashley with a man; he can't stand it. He is so obsessed with Brett Ashley that he is out of control:

"I'm going to sit here," Brett Ashley said.

"I'll stay with you," Cohn said.

"Oh, don't!" Brett Ashley said. "For God's sake, go off somewhere. Can't you see Jake and I want to talk?"

"I didn't," Cohn said. "I thought I'd sit here because I felt a little tight."

"What a hell of reason for sitting with any one. If you're tight, go to bed. Go on to bed."

"Was I rude enough to him?" Brett Ashley asked. Cohn was gone. "My God! I'm so sick of him!"

"He doesn't add much to the gayety."

"He depresses me so."

"He's behaved very badly."

"Damned badly. He had a chance to behave so well."

"He's probably waiting just outside the door now."

"Yes. He would. You know I do know how he feels. He can't believe it didn't mean anything." (p.180-181)

Cohn appears idiotic and oblivious to what's being said to him. Even worse, he is stubbornly ridiculous, the victim of a pipe dream. There is a kind of "loss" in Cohn's attitudes. In fact, Cohn is disillusioned when he discovers the nymphomania of Brett Ashley, to whom he is blindly devoted, even though he knows deep in his heart that this love cannot be fulfilled because he is Jewish. After the First World War, Jews were few in number and were stigmatized and somewhat ostracized by the rest of the population. This hatred of Jews had an enormous impact on Cohn, who developed a perpetually paradoxical behavior. Occasionally, he's



scared by everything that is happening around him and sinks into a kind of anxiety, and at other times he becomes violent and brutal, as in this example where he manhandles Jake and Romero Boy:

"Tell me where she is."  
"Sit down," I said. "I don't know where she is."  
"The hell you don't!"  
"You can shut your face."  
"Tell me where Brett Ashley is."  
"I'll not tell you a damn thing."  
"You know where she is."  
"If I did I wouldn't tell you."  
"Oh, go to hell, Cohn," Mike called from the table. "Brett Ashley 's gone off with the bull-fighter chap. They're on their honeymoon."  
"You shut up."  
"Oh, go to hell!" Mike said languidly.  
"Is that where she is?" Cohn turned to me."  
"Go to hell!"  
"She was with you. Is that where she is?"  
"Go to hell!"  
"I'll made you tell me" - he stepped forward-"you damned pimp." (p.190)

The discussion makes it clear that Cohn is insane; he rudely blames Jake for not telling him where he could find Brett Ashley, whose slave he has become. He does not even comprehend what is wrong with him and what this romance has done to him.

As far as their attitudes are concerned, these three characters undergo an intense fear that, as Baker (1963) points out, should generally disappear within a few hours of the event. However, in people suffering from post-traumatic stress, these reactions do not disappear completely. The person continues to relive them with the same intensity as the first time, in the form of dreams or flashbacks. Flashbacks are mental images that bring the traumatic situation back to life. The individual can also repeat these responses when confronted with a situation reminiscent of the one that triggered the trauma (Weeks, 1962).

The traumatized individual may then try to avoid all situations or circumstances that will remind him or her of the trauma. The studies carried out by Gerry Brenner and Rovit Earl show that, "the need to avoid any threatening situation can have significant consequences on personal, family and social activities. Out of this trauma arise certain thoughts which impose themselves on the mind and become uncontrollable" (1986:42). For these two authors, these thoughts cause some of those afflicted to experience distress in the form of anxiety and depression, while others, like Jake, find it difficult to feel certain feelings, such as tenderness and sexual desire; they also have difficulty concentrating and falling asleep, and must be constantly on the alert, ready to react, as can be observed in most of the characters in *The Sun Also Rises*.

In such a psychic and relational mess, even the characters' language changes permanently, becoming bitter. Their interactions are characterized by despair, disillusionment and loss, as evidenced by Jake Barnes' discourse when addressing Robert Cohn:

"Listen, Jake," he leaned forward on the bar. "Don't you ever get the feeling that all your life is going by and you're not taking advantage of it? Do you realize you've lived nearly half the time you have to live already?"  
"Yes, every once in a while."  
"Do you know that in about thirty-five years more we'll be dead?"  
"What the hell, Robert," I said. "What the hell."  
"I'm serious."  
"It's one thing I don't worry about," I said.  
"You ought to."  
"I've had plenty to worry about one time or other. I'm through worrying."  
"Well, I want to go to South America."  
"Listen, Robert, going to another country doesn't make any difference. I've tried all that. You can't get away from yourself by moving from one place to another.  
There's nothing to that."

"But you've never been to South America."

"South America hell! If you went there the way you feel now it would be exactly the same. This is a good town. Why don't you start living your life in Paris?" (p.11)

Jake resorts to argot to convey his anger and despair. The use of the word "hell" fosters interaction between the different characters. The recurrent use of this word by the protagonists reflects their state of mind. From this experience, he does not believe in any change for the better. For Jake, it's not important to go to South America, "there's nothing to do" (p.13). Jake's point is that you can make the most of your life anywhere and everywhere. He maintains this position even in his discussion with Georgette:

We came out of the Tuileries into the light and crossed the Seine and then turned up the Rue des Saints Pères.

"You oughtn't to drink pernod if you're sick."

"You neither."

"It doesn't make any difference with me. It doesn't make any difference with a woman."

"What are you called?"

"Georgette. How are you called?"

"Jacob."

"That's a Flemish name."

"American too."

"You're not Flamand?"

"No, American."

"Good. I detest Flamands." (p.16)

It is noticeable in the conversation between Jake and Georgette that both protagonists use the language to suit the circumstances, "what are you called?" and "how are you called? Mostly, this sociolinguistic structure operates in the way they communicate. It reveals Jake's secret despair and disgust with his homeland, which he does not proudly speak of: "no, American".

It is worth pointing out, however, that it is difficult to provide a precise definition of a swearword, as the semantic delineation changes according to the circumstances of the communication and the purpose of the utterer. The phenomenon is closely linked to swearing and insults. In *The Sun Also Rises*, the characters use swear words. They sound like interjections they are addressing to themselves and, above all, to the fate that has compelled them to leave their homeland and take sanctuary in another, where swearing could represent the semantization of their shared reality. This representation is driven by the displeasure reproached to fate. It's affect that seems to underpin their utterance in anger or jubilation. Occasionally, on the line between pleasure and displeasure, the swearwords used by the characters cross the line into the obscene. From this point of view, swearing, along with vehemence, is a cathartic outlet for Hemingway's characters in their search for equilibrium between desire and reason:

"And there's not a damn thing we could do," I said.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't want to go through that hell again."

"When I think of the hell I've put chaps through. I'm paying for it all now."

"Don't talk like a fool," I said. "Besides, what happened to me is supposed to be funny.

I never think about it."

"Oh, no. I'll lay you don't."

"Well, let's shut up about it."

"I laughed about it too, myself, once." She wasn't looking at me. "A friend of my brother's came home that way from Mons. It seemed like a hell of a joke. Chaps never know anything, do they?"

"No," I said. "Nobody ever knows anything."

"It's funny," I said. "It's very funny. And it's a lot of fun, too, to be in love."

"Do you think so?" her eyes looked flat again.

"I don't mean fun that way. In a way it's an enjoyable feeling."

"No," she said. "I think it's a hell on earth."

"It's good to see each other."

"No. I don't think it is."

"Don't you want to?"

"I have to." (pp.18-19)

From a standpoint of objectivity, in the scope of this dialogue, these swear words are a factor of assimilation, as they are used to purposeful effect by the characters in the Parisian context. They thereby underline an affective and identity-based closeness that goes beyond the dictates of social propriety, in the context of *The Sun Also Rises* as a response to their fate (Weeks: 78).

Indeed, this way of communicating is a means for them to set themselves apart from other non-American communities by creating a new identity for themselves. This new self-identity will enable them to demonstrate a new state of mind, and will help them express their dissatisfaction and disenchantment with the war. For them, the First World War was a source of disappointment and despair. As Jacques Cabau puts it, "it was a sham and a nightmarish phenomenon" (1966: 255). It was with these perspectives in mind, in a critical period such as the post-World War I era, that Hemingway painted this reality with his characters. The latter attach no significance to the religious observances that society praises or makes important. This can be seen in the way Bill Gorton criticizes the Pilgrim Fathers he encounters on the train journey from Paris to Bayonne:

"When do us Protestants get a chance to eat, father?"  
"I don't know anything about it. Haven't you got tickets?"  
"It's enough to make a man join the Klan," Bill said. The Priest looked back at him. (p.88)

Bill Gorton's sarcastic tone shows his despair and even dismay at religion. He does not comprehend that, despite the turbulence and psychological effects of war, it still causes differences. Even more, he does not realize that religion, one of whose primary aims is to provide help to souls in distress, cannot ease his pain, and offers no hope of redemption to people who, like him, no longer expect anything from life. In his conversation with Jake on the train, Bill Gorton bitterly voices his dissatisfaction, despair and deception:

"Better have a drink." (p.70)  
"Go on. Take that drink and remember." (p.70);  
"Good. Come on and eat with us, and we'll all go to meet him."  
"Must clean myself."  
"Oh, rot! Come on."  
"Must bathe. He doesn't get in till nine."  
"Come and have a drink, then, before you bathe."  
"Might do that. Now you're not talking rot." (p.74)  
"Hel-lo, Jake," he said. "Hel-lo! Hel-lo! How are you, old lad?" (p.78)  
"Chap bought it for me. Don't you like it?" (p.79)

Obviously, in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, the lost generation has lost its belief in its country and, more importantly, in the basic values of human existence.

### **3. The Vacuity of the Existence**

Some American citizens stayed in Europe after the war because they no longer felt the urge to go back to the U.S., since they were benefiting from other cultures to the detriment of American culture. That is why, after the success of his book in America, Robert Cohn, once back in Paris, told Jake of his intention to discover other cultures in South America:

This is a good town. Why don't you start living your life in Paris?"  
"I'm sick of Paris, and I'm sick of the Quarter."  
"Stay away from the Quarter. Cruise around by yourself and see what happens to you."  
"Nothing happens to me. I walked alone all one night and nothing happened except a bicycle cop stopped me and asked to see my papers."  
"Wasn't the nice at night?"  
"I don't care for Paris." (p.11-12)

Cohn is looking forward to going elsewhere to experience other ways of life. For many Americans, like him, have come to recognize the war's disgust for those who fought in it. Following the success of his book in New York, Cohn didn't just stay and enjoy his success. He travels to Paris and finds that it's not where he wants to be; he does not encounter what he expects as a sensation for a writer in search of new inspiration. He convinced himself that he had to go to South America. This quest for a new experience or a new way of life makes Cohn so stubborn that he even refuses to listen to what Jake tells him about staying in Paris. Cohn

enjoys reading: he has shaped his life and desires through books. This is echoed in what Jake says about him, "I wondered where Cohn got this inability to appreciate Paris. Maybe Mencken. Mencken hates Paris, I think. So many young men get their likes and dislikes from Mencken." (p.42)

As we outlined earlier in the book, this aversion to Paris is due to the fact that Cohn has been affected by what Mencken says in his novels. The pleasure and experience of another culture becomes significant for Cohn, as it is for the other characters in *The Sun Also Rises*. In fact, in the minds of this disillusioned Lost Generation after the First World War, Europe appears as the place where equality and freedom of expression are respected and fostered, in contrast to the United States, where no one can enjoy this freedom, as we read in *Configuration critique* (1957). In the same article published in *Lettres Modernes*, we read that, "In the 1920s, in Paris, people and especially women were free to do what they wanted. Above all, Paris was recognized as a cultural epicenter; it was the center of literature, art, gastronomy". The Lost Generation certainly found Paris the ideal setting for writing novels while indulging in a life of debauchery. In their books, the Lost Generation criticizes the false promises on which their country was built. They believed that the war was the end of everything, but they realize that it was only the beginning of their misery. In *The Sun Also Rises*, the characters travel across Europe, from city to city, to enjoy their lives to the utmost, to see other countries and experience other lifestyles than the U.S. model in which they were born until the war. Further analysis demonstrates that the protagonists raise cultural divergences. We notice that the characters don't worry about their own country. Jake and Bill don't even care about America, to the extent that they'd rather go anywhere else to benefit from nature and a different culture, as seen here:

"Say, there's plenty of Americans on this train," the husband said. "They've got seven cars of them from Dayton, Ohio. They've been on a pilgrimage to Rome, and now they're going down to Biarritz and Lourdes."

"So, that's what they are. Pilgrims. Goddam Puritans," Bill said

"What part of the States you boys from?"

"Kansas City," I said. "He's from Chicago."

"You both going to Biarritz?"

"No, we're going fishing in Spain."

"Well, I never cared for it, myself. There's plenty that do out where I come from, though. We got some of the best fishing in the State of Montana. I've been out with the boys, but I never cared for it any." (p.85-86)

Yet, Jake and Bill do not really know much about their homeland; they do not even seem to know that the U.S. has the best peach in the state of Montana, because they do not bother with what their country has. There's a mismatch between what the characters aspire to and what already prevails in their homeland; they are discouraged and seem deluded. This is why, throughout the novel, we see them wandering from country to country, trying to find or give some meaning to their own lives. Jake and his friends live in the hedonistic (sensual and self-indulgent) world of post-World War I Paris. This world, nevertheless, is in keeping with the philosophy of Epicurus. Meaninglessness is expressed in the characters' propensity to barely work, but spend most of their time partying, drinking and arguing like oblivious, desperate people. In fact, they do not project themselves into an uncertain future in which they have lost faith. They have no tomorrow.

British nurse Lady Brett Ashley, distraught over the loss of her wartime lover, becomes a sex-starved woman with a gloomy view of herself, "It would be different. It's my fault, Jake. It's the way I'm made" (p.55). In short, the pursuit of sexual pleasure appears to be Brett Ashley's way of rebelling against a life that has been unfair to her. For her, the way she conducts herself is the only way to give meaning to her life; she has lost her dignity. More, as the novel is a "roman à clef", it features characters inspired by real people in Hemingway's circle, and the actions are based on real events. While Hemingway shows that the lives of the characters living across Europe are meaningless, his novel is also about the pleasures of drinking and travel. Travel enables the protagonists to contemplate nature and the countryside:

"Well," I said, "I hear you had a wonderful trip."

"Wonderful," he said. "Budapest is absolutely wonderful."

"How about Vienna?"

"Not so good, Jake. Not so good. It seemed better than it was."

"How do you mean?" I was getting glasses and a siphon.

"Tight, Jake. I was tight."

"That's strange. Better have a drink." (p.70)

From this point of view, the characters' main concern is to enjoy their lives. They just want to contemplate beautiful cities and spend most of their lives drinking lots of whisky, as revealed in the conversations between Mike Campbell, who is always drunk, Bill and Jake when they head to Spain:

"We've to go into Pamplona. We're meeting people there."

"What rotten luck of me. We've had a jolly time here at Burguete."

"Come on in to Pamplona. We can play some bridge there, and there's going to be a damned fine fiesta."

"You want those big ones in the Irati."

"I say, I do, you know. They've enormous trout there."

"I'd like to try them once more." (p.127)

The characters are seeking meaning in their hedonistic lives. Indeed, the characters consider the festival of Pamplona to be the very substance of their existence, so much so that they prepare for it as their last day on earth.

Indeed, once in Pamplona, the protagonists attend and enjoy the bullfighting festivities. The party begins here and there throughout the city, in a total mess that resembles that which the war has instilled in Jake's mind. The corollary of this disorder is that Jake becomes an erratic, impotent man. At the risk of being repetitious, Jake cannot have sex. This inability makes him restless and unstable; he has lost his reference points in life, just as things have lost their intrinsic value.

In short, Jake does not strive for a significant life like the other protagonists who have lived through the traumatizing aftermath of war. As Phillips Young says of *The Sun Also Rises*, "the novel presents Paris as a citadel of the lost generation, where people cling desperately to life but fail to live it meaningfully" (p.107). All this shows how meaningless life has turned out to be for post-World War I expatriates.

## Conclusion

*The Sun Also Rises* is a bohemian story featuring characters attempting to live a life stripped of meaning; they act without considering the essential things and what makes up the world. These characters are reminiscent of those American citizens who have had the bitter experience of war, and whose memories have become a psychological gangrene. They suffer from anxiety, depression and even post-traumatic stress. They then enter a wandering path that sometimes leads to social insecurity, isolation and even suicide. In *The Sun Also Rises*, the characters don't go so far as to commit suicide. Instead, they remain in such confusion that they are locked in solitude, wandering in search of a new purpose for their existence. However, despite their best efforts to overcome post-traumatic stress disorder, these characters are still overwhelmed by an intense sense of fear of being alone, horror and helplessness. By triggering emotional upheavals in their lives and bringing about shifts in their religious faiths, the World War shaped the way Hemingway's protagonists addressed existence. The lingering effects of the war injury are at the root of the cultural crisis undergone by the protagonists in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*.

## Declarations

**Acknowledgments:** I would like to thank the Université Jean Lorougnon-Guédé/Daloa (Côte d'Ivoire) for the encouragement and support.

**Author Contribution:** The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

**Consent to Publish:** The author agrees to publish the paper in International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research.

**Data Availability Statement:** Data are contained within the article.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Institutional Review Board Statement:** Not applicable.

**Informed Consent Statement:** Not applicable.

**Research Content:** The research content of manuscript is original and has not been published elsewhere.

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**Citation:** NAOUNOU Amédée. 2023. The Absurd in *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway. *International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research*, 7(11): 49-62.

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