

Gender Identity and the Modern Condition in *The Sun Also Rises*

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Following his literary debut in Paris with the publication of *Three Stories and Ten Poems* and his subsequent introduction to American audiences with the short-story collection *In Our Time*, Ernest Hemingway published his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, in 1926. The book, which presented an intense portrait of the modern world through an emotionally disfigured group of American expatriates living in France and Spain during the years immediately following World War I, met with immediate success and propelled its author to literary stardom. Chronicling the deepest psychological effects of the war and presenting a hauntingly candid look at a society struggling to redefine itself and reconsider its values in the conflict's unsettling aftermath, Hemingway was able to present a fictional drama of a uniquely personal nature, using his characters to yield deeply complex insights into the human condition. More than eighty years later, *The Sun Also Rises* remains one of Hemingway's most significant novels and is also recognized as one of the most important works within the canon of American literature.

Examining the reasons for the novel's lasting success, one is compelled to consider first its extraordinary characters: they seem infinitely complex and haunt the reader long after the book is set down. In fact, despite the revolutionary style of *The Sun Also Rises*, which has commanded the attention of scholars and critics with its lean, precise prose, the deepest and most significant concerns of the novel begin with Hemingway's treatment of character. Through its dynamic characters, such as Jake Barnes, Robert Cohn, and Lady Brett Ashley, Hemingway is able to demonstrate the enormity of the effects of World War I. The book presents a startling discourse on gender roles in modern times alongside considerations of topics such as modern sexuality, androgyny, and the endurance (or extinction) of traditional models of

romance in the postwar world. It raises questions about identity, challenging conventional definitions of manhood and womanhood, and ruminates on the bounds of human nature, asking which parts of oneself, if any, may remain unchanged and how loss can affect one's core identity. Through its exploration of these topics, the novel is also able to speak about the complexity of modern relationships, both sexual and platonic, utilizing Jake's impotence as an allegory of the condition of the modern world.

World War I and the staggering amount of injury, death, and loss it inflicted on the generation that fought in it threw into question traditional notions of love and romance, challenged religious faith, and raised moral issues. An entire generation underwent an overwhelming loss of innocence, making it impossible for them to continue living as they had before the war. The changes were of such great significance that they were manifested in people's everyday behavior and appearance, with the war affecting the very way that people identified themselves. The issue of gender identity and its correlation to the greater human condition, which could no longer be denied, became a key focus for Hemingway in *The Sun Also Rises*.

Within the novel, one finds that traditional gender roles are often overturned and definitions of gender blurred, making the characters representative of an androgyny that extends beyond the sexual. In other words, the sexual androgyny represented by the characters in the novel has its basis in gender—women act and even dress in a masculine manner, and men possess characteristics typically identified as feminine—and their androgyny performs as an allegorical representation of a larger cultural condition tangled up in the postwar spirit of uncertainty. This androgyny, defined by scholar Mark Spilka in his book *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny* as “a mixture or exchange of traditionally male and female traits, roles, activities, and sexual positions,” was the symptom of an existential crisis born of the postwar world in which old values were no longer functional and even those most basic parts of human nature had to be reevaluated. As Spilka