“This Novel is About a Lady”: Brett Ashley in The Sun Also Rises

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While Ernest Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises is told from the viewpoint of one Jake Barnes, another prominent figure within the novel is Lady Brett Ashley. In fact, in Hemingway’s original opening for the novel, he had written, “This novel is about a lady. Her name is Lady Ashley” (Qtd. in Martin 70). Brett, as she is developed in the novel, has been painted in different lights, depending on the interpreter, ranging from a sympathetic view to one of condemnation. The portrait of her that I will attempt to show is one of a human being, caught between the ideologies of two eras. Brett Ashley is a woman living during an age of a new femininity and sexual freedom, during the end of the repressive Victorian era. Reflecting changing behaviors, she wears pants and has her hair cropped, and she is sexually uninhibited. Her experience may be analogous to the stereotypical college freshman who grew up in a strict household, one where the idea of drinking before twentyone is demonized, so the freshman was not educated in safe practice. The newfound freedom is exhilarating, and the freshman is known to binge-drink, not thinking of his or her tolerance level and the consequences, such as an incapacitating hangover. The sexual promiscuity of Brett, and other women of her time period, may be viewed in the same light: after a repressive era, sex is, in a way, “new” and exciting. However, because of the prior taboo of discussing sex, a sense of responsibility, self-respect, and self-care was likely not passed down to Brett. Because of this, she, as a “new woman,” binges on sex. This is not necessarily because she is an emasculating man-eater. Rather, this is a reflection on her being almost child-like in her behavior, being given power without being made aware of the responsibility of it. As Martin expresses, for Brett, the need to rebel against the traditional idea of the feminine outweighs the practice of responsible sex (67-8, 71). However, her existence during such a cultural transition takes a toll on Brett’s psychological well-being. In trying to cope with Robert Cohn’s infatuation with her, for example, she turns to alcohol: As Jake returns a bottle of Fundador to the bartender, she stops him. “Let’s have one
“more drink of that,” Brett said. “My nerves are rotten” (Hemingway 186). As stated by Martin, “in spite of the fact that Brett tries to break free of patriarchal control, she often vacillates between the extremes of self-abnegation and self-indulgence, and her relationships... are filled with ambivalence, anxiety, and frequently alienation” (69). Among one of her many discussions with Jake where she admits her dissatisfaction and misery, Brett confides in him that “When I think of all the hell I put chaps through. I’m paying for it all now” (34). Thus, Brett is not without a sense of guilt. Despite this, she continues with one affair after another, knowing how it has affected the men she has been and will be with. There must then be other driving factors in her behavior beyond a desire for sexual pleasure. Like many people of her generation, in testing out a life free of restrictive and seemingly worn-out Victorian ideologies, Brett feels disillusionment and a loss of agency after World War I, leaving her with a “moral and emotional vacuum” (Spilka 36). She cannot even take solace in religion. When she attempts to pray for her young lover Romero before his bull fight, she becomes uncomfortable in the atmosphere of the chapel: “‘Come on,’ she whispered throatily. ‘Let’s get out of here. Makes me damned nervous’” (Hemingway 212). She attempts to fill this void using intimate encounters with men, seeking a momentary feeling of human connection, but remains unwilling to submit herself to anyone long term. This is particularly seen in her relationship with Jake, as she constantly uses him as a financial source and emotional support, all the while knowing that he is tormented by all her lovers (Spilka 42-3). Onderdonk points out that, at times, Brett appears to want a true relationship, such as with Romero, before he attempts to “tame” her (81). Yet, as Djos notes, she generally manipulates men, asserts her dominance over them, and avoids commitment to them 111 The Truths of Fiction (143, 148). This behavior might be interpreted as a sign that the sexual freedom Brett is trying out inevitably leads to an ethical dead end. Unlike an imperialistic government, however, Brett is a human being with a conscience, giving rise to the aforementioned guilt. This guilt, coupled with the internal void common to the Lost Generation, is what drives her and her colleagues to seek comfort in a bottle. Often taken for a sign of immorality, alcoholism here signifies quite the opposite. It is Brett’s conscience and her discomfort with the lack of moral direction that drive her to drink. Djos presents the following theory, based on real-life alcoholics: “There is a great deal of fear here, fear of self-understanding, fear of emotional and physical inadequacy, and ... fear of each other” (141-2). Because Brett and her friends are travelling an unmapped road, with no signs pointing to ethical landmarks or spiritual meaning, they must deal with the uncertainty of their situation. The characters throughout the novel do seem to have shallow interactions and relationships with each other, yet the fact that so much is left unsaid between them is evidence of Hemingway’s “tip of the iceberg” style. For them alcohol is a social lubricant, and even a means to survive day by day, minute by minute, suggesting that these characters are navigating great psychological challenges (Djos 141) and must suffer in isolation as they do so. Brett is no exception to this experience. Early on in the novel, Brett alludes to this despair when she bemoans to Jake, “Oh, darling, I’ve been so miserable” (Hemingway 32). Brett is far from being a role model or the picture of perfection. Yet, she is not a cold-hearted succubus, either. She is a woman attempting to find her place in the wake of a war and a gender revolution, surrounded by changing ideas, gender roles, and cultural standards. Hiding behind a wall of alcohol abuse, she struggles, as did many women of her time, between her libido and desire for freedom from patriarchy and male ownership, and her sense of guilt and discomfort with herself and others. Brett is nothing more, or less, than a human being experiencing the tumultuous waves produced by life.

Works Cited

Hemingway, Ernest. The Sun Also Rises. Scribner, 1926.

