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HEMINGWAY'S WHORE: BRETT ASHLEY AND PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS IN
THE SUN ALSO RISES

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ABSTRACT

Brett Ashley has always been regarded as one of the most prolific characters in Ernest Hemingway's, *The Sun Also Rises*. Many scholars see her as a prostitute-like figure, but the motivation behind her behavior is much deeper than the reader first sees. It is important to take into account the historical implications of her behavior and the time period in which she takes a part. This paper specifically outlines the historical period in which *The Sun Also Rises* takes place and outlines ideas about prostitution. The definition of "sex addict" and "disorder" are provided so that the audience can better understand which category Brett falls into. The audience is also given an analysis, based on the works of Deborah Cameron in *The Myth of Mars and Venus*, about how misconceptions of women in society have been shaped, and how society interprets gender roles. Finally, the audience is also presented with specific textual examples of how Brett's behavior mirrors that of a prostitute and how her previously traumatic experiences from her early youth have scarred her and influenced her in a way that she uses sex and alcohol as a coping mechanism.

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Chapter 1

Introduction: The Significance of Brett Ashley

Many people who first encounter *The Sun Also Rises* cannot help but be enthralled with and yet confused about Brett Ashley, a major character whose sexual exploits might seem excessive. Her behavior, however, must be understood within the context of her history, particularly the fact that much of her life was centered on suffering due to her abusive past. We do not really understand Brett's motivation or who she *really* is without taking her history into consideration. Renowned Hemingway scholar Delbert E. Wylder commented, "in the role of the 'New Woman', Brett does not understand herself very well" (Nagel, 89). Because of her multiple sexual relationships, many readers regard Brett Ashley as a nymphomaniac or even as a prostitute. The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines a nymphomaniac as someone who has an "excessive sexual desire," or worded differently, someone who has a severely unquenchable thirst for sex. This description does not accurately fit Brett Ashley considering that she does not seem to have a physical desire for sex for its own sake so much as she uses her sexual exploits as a means for escape. As such, she might be better defined as a sex addict.

Sexual addiction implies a medical condition, or pathology. A "sex addict," for purposes of this paper, is defined as someone who has "a progressive intimacy disorder characterized by compulsive sexual thoughts or acts" (Herkov, 1). A disorder is defined as a "mental or bodily condition marked primarily by the disorganization of the body and mind" (Merriam-Webster). The sex addict feels distressed and helpless because she cannot control her desire for attention. The sex addict feels as though she is far from morality. In fact, the negative consequences

associated with such behaviors increase in severity as time progresses. Brett's overindulgence with seemingly deviant sexual behavior is something more of a coping mechanism than an intentional way of life. Ernest Hemingway presents Brett in a sympathetic light as an individual whose sexual behavior results from a desire to be accepted, and to not feel alone. Her sexual behavior is not a product of "unquenchable thirst," nor is it a desire to gain an income (which would make her, technically, a prostitute); instead, her sexual behavior reflects a psychological attachment that eventually leads to alcoholism and dissociation, results often associated with prostitution.

Because Brett's behavior often mirrors that of a prostitute, resulting in destructive coping mechanisms such as alcoholism and dissociation, it is helpful to assess her character against the backdrop of the history of prostitution as an institution. In the following discussion, accordingly, we will begin to understand the history behind prostitution and the implications the institution had on women during the early 19th century and on into the early 20th century. We will try to understand the fundamental relationship between Brett Ashley and Jacob Barnes, and the various women in the novel who juxtapose Brett, such as Frances and Georgette. Most importantly, we will begin to understand how her behavior mirrors that of a prostitute in some respects, such as her destructive coping, but the major distinguishing feature is that she does not take money. Her behavior could be used to understand many women today who are trapped in the same deadly cycle.

There is a lack of scholarly research on prostitution during the early 1900s; so much of the assumptions made about the actual institution are based on anecdotal evidence (Elias, 23). The reason for the anonymity behind the institution of prostitution and the lack of research is because not many people who engage in such acts actually want to talk about it, and those who

do are under severe scrutiny by their fellow prostitutes and pimps. Not only this, but prostitution is much more widely accepted today than in the early 1900s which still held onto strict religious beliefs and norms. Most of the acts carried out by this institution are done in complete secrecy, which is often highly organized.

Chapter 2

Historical Background and Gender Roles

In order to understand various aspects of Brett's character and what exactly she has in common with prostitutes, it is important to define what characteristics prostitutes actually possess. A prostitute is best defined as a person who makes it a profession to gratify the lusts of various persons of the opposite or the same sex. Saint Augustine stated that although prostitution is probably the most shameful and lewd profession, it is a necessity. For example, between 1790 and 1920, in New York City, prostitution brought in more money than any of the major developing industries. During this period, around 69 percent of young men reported having some sexual encounter with a prostitute, as it was one of the major occupations of a young woman during that time (Elias, 28).

There are certain motivations that prostitutes have experienced as they continue in their careers. The motivation is multifaceted, however. Poor housing, inadequate education, ignorance of sexual matters and perhaps even a lack of sexuality are among the most popular reasons. Historically, the woman's mission is to be "a mother, wife, and preserver of morality" (Elias 32-37), (much like Brett demonstrated towards Romero and Robert Cohn). Prostitution made sense for many women in the 1920s that were facing economic struggles during the early twentieth century. Two types of prostitutes generally emerged during this period. The commercial prostitute practiced openly and began to emerge after brothels began shutting down. Clandestine prostitutes practiced in secret and wanted to "maintain the appearance of sexual morality" (Elias, 47), which made it hard for researchers to truly gain an understanding of the institution.

Interestingly enough, New Yorkers did not see this trade as a moral failing, but rather as “symptomatic of a profound economic and social crisis” (Elias, 55). On the other hand, many women chose to keep their activities a secret so as not to “jeopardize the virtue of the women and children” where they lived; these women were also known as “furnished-room prostitutes”. Some scholars have argued that there were benefits to this behavior, such as having the ability to make “lonely” people less lonely, and help the handicapped (Elias, 114).

Prostitution essentially has two faces: one in secret and one which is generally frowned upon but accepted. Since an individual’s sexual desires are sometimes unfulfilled within the marriage bed, it is not uncommon for the lonely partner to seek refuge in the arms of a person with whom they are emotionally detached. This person, although considered the dregs of society, is like a mother providing the most basic human need to her child. It does not require any emotional commitment and provides an opportunity to choose from a number of different women; the services provided by these women are services, which, generally, would not be provided by the patrons’ wives (Elias, 163).

In the pivotal work that closely looks at the lives of prostitutes in England, *Making Sense of Prostitution*, the central question of the entire work addresses the ways in which a prostitute is like or unlike other women. It can be argued that prostitutes are biologically and psychologically different, due to social consequences (Phoenix, 36). Prostitutes turn out differently because of poverty and the social subculture. In any case, many scholars see prostitute deviant sexual behavior as some type of an “individual abnormality.” The general thought is that prostitutes, and women who behave deviantly, “exhibit more degenerative qualities and a greater number of criminal characteristics than ordinary female offenders and certainly more than normal women”. According to many, “to be a prostitute is not to be an ordinary woman” (Phoenix, 40).

The truth is, prostitutes, historically and even today, are not *really* different from other people, they are just different in “degrees of vulnerability to male domination” (Phoenix 57). Prostitution, and any addictive sexual behaviors, could be influenced by men attempting to control females sexually. Before even engaging in any such behavior, a woman usually realizes that her body is her most valuable asset and this sexuality as her primary means of support whether for her emotional, psychological, or even physical well being. It is by this fact one could recognize sexual addiction as a very real disorder (Phoenix, 64).

There are many prostitutes, however, who do not see themselves as victims. Some engage in the exchange of sexual favors for monetary rewards for a “better social and material future” (Phoenix, 76). Many of these women have a split sense of self and they see legitimate work as a “closed option” (Phoenix, 80). This is especially true for the time period in which Brett takes part, which limited her ability to gain independence apart from associations with men. What such deviant behavior often, and unfortunately, accomplishes is the ability to be used and abused in relationships later in life; “being a woman is a materially risky business” (Phoenix, 100). Even more unfortunate is the outcome of the trade. Many “punters” or pimps use and have used housing “to heighten women’s insecurity” (Phoenix, 111).

It is now completely up to the punter to determine whether or not his employee will leave the building, the number of clients she will serve, the food she will eat, and how many times she will wake up, and even if she *will* wake up. Poncing, a term generally used for males who control females’ sexual decisions, cuts women loose from all social institutions such as family and friends (Phoenix, 117). This pattern seems to be quite common in women with histories of abuse, who turn to unhealthy coping mechanisms to bear with themselves.

Such women experience a phenomena of “tied housing” in which their housing situations depend on their relationships with men. Deviant sexual behavior can be seen as a way of escaping from particular men and living independent lives. Some see themselves as businesswomen or commoditized bodies that provide a valuable service to frustrated men. Engaging in such behavior can lead persons to “dissociate themselves from their bodies” and accepting the idea they, as people, are devoid of any meaning (Phoenix, 133).

After outlining the qualities of prostitution, we move to Brett’s behavior and how it mirrors that of a prostitute. She does not experience “tied housing” in the sense that actual prostitutes do, but she is constrained economically and depends on men for her economic, as well as emotional, security. Wendy Martin commented, “Brett knows that it is the urban centers that provide mobility and choices for the new woman, not the country with its traditionally limited vision of woman as representative” (Wagner-Martin, 79). That is why she constantly surrounds herself by men, who had the upper hand in the early 20th century. So even though she knows how to maneuver through upper social strata, her behavior shows us that she needs more than mere physical affection, but rather psychological gratification instead.

It is for this reason that Brett indeed “gratifies the lusts of others” but the question becomes whether she gratifies her own desires. The most outstanding characteristics of Brett Ashley, often too emphasized by scholars, are her sexual relationships. Brett’s behavior seems to “disregard consequences” but “regards performance” (Schorer, 11). Brett essentially has become desexed; “her appearance is an indication of her loss of sexuality” (Bardacke, 13). Perhaps one of the most prominent sources of her confusion and suffering was due to Jacob Barnes’ lack of sexuality.

The novel juxtaposes two very different, but very similar characteristics in two very similar characters, Jacob Barnes' hyposexuality and Brett Ashley's hyper sexuality. "Jake's sexual functioning was taken away, but not his sexual desire" which is what he shares with Brett, even if unconsummated (Bloom, *Brett*, 16). Even Brett, along with every other character in the novel, could be considered an ex-patriot, severely war-wounded. Jake is a "sexually maimed war veteran pimping for a sexually rapacious woman" (Bloom, *Brett*, 39). Jake is actually in a very similar situation to Brett. Like many prostitutes of her era, Brett is faced with the consequences of her past and decides to engage in sexual behavior perhaps to find meaning in the chaos. Brett, Cohn, Mike, and Jake appear unaware that the true battleground of the self, the personal "bullring" of their fears and their wounds and their addictions, lies in how they perceive themselves and how they deal directly with their misfortunes and circumstances (Djos, 121).

Jake, although not a direct victim of physical abuse, has experienced the loss of an extremely important part of his manhood: his genitals. Two persons in similar situations react differently in those situations. Brett does not seem to analyze her situation, always acting on impulses, but Jake over analyzes the consequences of not only his, but everyone else's behavior. Their relationship is unique in that Jake is often a "go-between" for Brett and her lovers. Brett has essentially reduced him to a slavish pimp because of his lack of sexuality (Spilka, 54).

It is important to look at the connection of two very different institutions: the situation in the novel and the relationship between pimps and their prostitutes. When one hears the general term "pimp" a negative image immediately is created in one's mind. However, the relationship between a prostitute and her pimp is oftentimes much deeper than on a financial level. The primary method that pimps typically use to lure their women into the business is by exhibiting extreme care to the woman in question. Pimps will lure young women with kind words, gifts,

and offers of security in order to show the women that they can be trusted. Sometimes, these gestures are genuine. Some pimps have been victims of abuse as well and consider offering the opportunity to make “easy money” as a blessing rather than a curse. Many prostitutes form strong bonds and even have romantic relationships with their pimps.

Interestingly enough, Jake and Brett share a strong bond that no character in the novel can break. Their relationship, however, as described in a 1920s New York Times review, “is an erotic attraction which is destined from the start to be frustrated” (p.7). Jake, after having inquired as to the whereabouts of Brett, received an interesting response from Robert Cohn. The exchange is as follows:

“At the Cafe Suizo we had just sat down and ordered Fundador when Robert Cohn came up. ‘Where’s Brett?’ he asked. ‘I don’t know.’ . . . ‘I’ll make you tell me’—he stepped forward—‘You damned pimp.’ I swung at him and he ducked” (Hemingway 190-91).

Now that we have established Jake’s role as one of the mediators in Brett’s life, several women are presented in the novel that deserve to be noticed for the purpose of contrasting the different characteristics of deviant women and prostitute-like behavior: Frances and Georgette. “As Linda Wagner-Martin argues it, Hemingway has worked hard to establish a contradiction from the very beginning of the novel” (p.7). Frances is the embodiment of everything negative a woman’s personality can possess. Hemingway does not particularly “admire prostitutes, but he looked with complete disdain on women like Frances” (Bloom, *Guides*, 19). Hemingway, in *The Sun Also Rises*, describes her as “very forceful”, exhibiting an attitude of “careless possession and exploitation to the absolute determination that he should marry her” (Hemingway, 13). This “he” is Robert Cohn. Robert led a particularly sad and mundane life and found himself in abusive relationships with women, especially Frances. Jake recalls,

“... When this lady saw that the magazine was not going to rise, she became a little disgusted with Cohn and decided that she might as well get what there was to get while there was still something available, so she urged that they go to Europe” (Hemingway, 13).

Not only did Frances exploit Cohn financially, but she exhibited dominance over his life in every area to the point of anxiety. This is seen in the opening chapters of the novel when Jake suggests that he, Frances, and Cohn take a trip and have a different girl show them around town:

R: Why did you say that about that girl in Strasbourg for? Didn't you see Frances?

J: No, why should I? If I know an American girl that lives in Strasbourg what the hell is it to Frances?

R: It doesn't make any difference. Any girl. I couldn't go, that would be all. (Hemingway, 14).

It is in those lines that the reader notices that evidently “she led him quite a life” (Hemingway, 15). Cohn's entire life revolved around Frances and her control. Here we see a woman deeply contrasted from the image of Brett, who lets things in the novel flow and allows each person in her life to be who they want to be. She does not exploit any man financially, but she is looking for an emotional attachment. Frances merely sought financial gain and disregarded the feelings of her husband.

Georgette, on the other hand, is actually presented as a prostitute, toothless and ugly. Like Brett's affairs, “Georgette's profession reduces love and sex to a transient and purchased offer” (Bloom, *Guides*, 18). What both Brett and Georgette have in common, however, is that they are both “afflicted with the disease of the trade” (Bloom, *Guides*, 22). Jake even mistakes Georgette and Brett for each other. Brett needs the attention of men, which signals the underlying sexual disorder that she possesses; Georgette needs monetary reward for her behavior. Georgette also

has no depth to her character. Jake states, “ It was a long time since I had dined with a poule, and I had forgotten how dull it could be” (Hemingway, 24).

Even though both women are presented as prostitutes, Georgette is a different kind of prostitute. After a group of homosexuals entered a bar in which Georgette, Jake and his friends were spending their time, they noticed Georgette and one of them remarked, “ I do declare. There is an actual harlot. I’m going to dance with her, Lett. You watch me” (Hemingway, 28). An *actual* harlot, that is, Georgette. They entered the room with Brett, equally as deviant although not carrying the official title of a prostitute. Even deviant individuals such as homosexuals during that time recognized Georgette as someone inherently dirty. Even Georgette recognized herself as someone inherently dirty. After ordering Pernod and being teased by Jake for doing so, she replies, “ Little girl yourself,” which “emphasizes that while she might appear to be young, she is really old in street knowledge” and not necessarily in good things (Hemingway, 12).

The important thing to remember is that both women become completely entrenched in the world of sex. Brett remarks, “ You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex, you spend all your time talking, not working” (Hemingway, 120). While Brett is presented as a heroic character who experiences distress due to her actions, she takes her actions by the reins and accepts the consequences. Georgette, on the other hand, “embodies the degradation of sex for money” and she has “no real depth” (Nagel, 79). Brett has so much depth that we often see several sides of her character.

In *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake mentioned that “Brett wanted to dance but they did not want her to. They wanted her as an image to dance around” (Hemingway, 159). Other characters in the novel, however, looked down upon her behavior. Mike calls her a “wench” (Hemingway, 169),

which could be due to his realization that Brett will never really be “his”; she is not even her own. Mike continues by calling her a “sadist”; “Brett’s not a sadist, she’s just a lovely, healthy wench” (Hemingway, 170). The point is, rather than excusing her actions for a psychological malfunction as some other characters did, Mike comments that her behavior is due to her personal choice: she likes what she does.

Brett does not, however, take money from any of her partners for sexual favors but the fact that the Count actually asked to go on such a trip deserves consideration. Count Mippipopulous asks Brett to go on a trip with him and offers her ten thousand dollars. Brett however, is not literally a prostitute so she rejects the offer. He behaves cordially towards her and Brett often refers to him as, “one of us”. The Count does not need sexual gratification from Brett, which is why he does not get mad at her refusal. His “prodigious detachment” unlike Brett, shields him from any psychological pain associated with rejection (Seltzer, 45). Brett still must depend, however, “both financially and socially on hooking up with one man or another” (Moddelmog, 82). The truth is, Brett constantly “has had affairs with men before” (Hemingway, 147) and these affairs unfortunately define her prostitute-like image.

Brett is aware of her problem. Some characters, such as Jake, have less severe moral failings, in Brett’s eyes, than herself. She believes that her failings cannot be atoned for. This is specifically seen in the exchange between her and Jake in Part I of the novel:

CB: Hello darling. Aren’t you going to let us in?

J: Come on. I was just bathing.

B: Aren’t you the fortunate man. Bathing (Hemingway, 60).

Brett is aware of her position in society and her awareness is demonstrated by calling her behavior a “career” (Hemingway, 68). So the question becomes, how does Brett exactly

resemble a prostitute? It is a known fact that she had many sexual encounters in her young life, and that many of those sexual encounters have only led her to a path of destruction and self-hate. The one person she expressed not “wanting to ruin” was Romero, who was only a young man untouched by women like Brett. Her “clients” were known to have taken her on trips and excursions, particularly expensive ones.

The major difference, however, between Brett and a definite prostitute is that she does not behave in such a manner overtly and economically. This means that she did not perform sex for money, she performed sex more for emotional gratification and a desire to mend the broken past she had simply by not even acknowledging its existence. Because of her many sexual partners, she is seen by others as a whore, a prostitute who compromises herself for trips across Europe and for financial security.

Brett has a broken past, being the victim of abuse by the hands of her first husband, Lord Ashley. Just as prostitutes’ housing situations depend on their pimps, Brett depended upon her first husband with a title to house and care for her. This begins the conversation of gender roles during Brett’s time. Deborah Cameron in *The Myth of Mars and Venus* addressed a pertinent issue that particularly applies to Brett’s situation: gender inequality. She is forbidden from entering holy locations simply due to her lifestyle and the “aura” she gives off, but the men who are equally as promiscuous are more than encouraged in their endeavors. In the novel, we see the social isolation she is forced to experience on a daily basis:

“...The woman standing in the door of the wine-shop looked at us as we passed. She called to someone in the house and three girls came to the window and stared. They were staring at Brett” (Hemingway, 142).

What the women were doing was singling out Brett, a seemingly deviant woman who does not conform to societal norms. The woman signaled to her daughters to come outside and see a spectacle, Brett. A woman who is not even allowed in a church and who has a bad reputation everywhere she goes, which is one of the reasons she refused to go on any trip with the Count, because people might “know” her there. There is no doubt that the era in which Brett took part had an influence on her sexual behavior. She realized the importance of a title, stating, “We all have titles. Why haven’t you a title, Jake?” (Hemingway, 63). She is defined by that title and by relationships she has with men. Bill asked, “Is she really Lady something or other?” and Jake replied, “Oh, yes. In the stud-book and everything” (Hemingway, 82).

There are three forms of “love” in *The Sun Also Rises*: 1) eros 2) agape 3) romantic love. Much of the love Brett is used to experiencing is eros, or strictly sexual. She only experiences agape (or unconditional) and romantic love by the hands of Jacob Barnes. Brett says, “This can’t be love because I feel so well”, something she is not used to. There is no love for Brett “except through the bonds of marriage” (Hemingway, 66- 68).

Most of our knowledge about gender comes from anecdotal evidence stories and selective research that is not contextualized. We accept this knowledge because it is easy to reiterate and is cross-cultural. The “myth” is that females and males have significant neurological differences, which cause them to behave in a certain way. Women like to shop and wear makeup; men like to play sports and are unable to communicate effectively. There is no doubt that there are gender differences, but most of these differences are created by power structures (Cameron, 14). Women are responsible for making any intimate relationship “work”. They are presumed to be better communicators, followers, and generally more emotional than their male counterparts (Cameron, 15).

It is automatically presumed by society that men just cannot communicate as well as women, leaving the majority of responsibility in a relationship on the female (Cameron 20). Such assertions, however, ignore in-group differences. Instead, we divide these differences by gender. Cameron notes a significant court case nicknamed the “Just Say No” campaign of the 1990s. The defense counsel in this case argued that the two women alleging rape might not have made their refusal to have sex clear enough, resulting in the rape itself (Cameron, 50). Again, avoiding miscommunication is seen as a female responsibility (Cameron, 91). Oftentimes, “just saying no” causes the perpetrator to become even angrier. Rape, however, is absolutely not about miscommunication; it simply occurs because many perpetrators do not care or do not experience empathy.

Women have also rarely taken part in the public sphere. They were either interlopers, a small group in predominantly male-oriented positions, or caretakers. Unfortunately, women had to assume a manly attitude to be successful in the public sphere; they were encouraged to break fewer rules. Cameron gives the example of women involved in the priesthood in the early 1990s. Women in the Anglican Church argued that they could add to the maternal side of the Church; however, they were still generally assigned to feminine-like roles like visiting the sick or the elderly (Cameron, 50).

The further up one climbs the social ladder, the more male-centered the positions seem to be (Cameron, 52). The idea that a woman should be more cooperative puts her at a disadvantage in the public sphere (Cameron, 15). In an era which espoused the idea that women should listen, motivate, and support, it is no wonder that Brett Ashley tried as much as possible to adopt a masculine attitude. Realizing that gender has been a problem for Brett Ashley and for women in

the early 1990s, it is important to notice how such an atmosphere would influence her behavior in the 1920s.

And so, given the time period that Brett is a part of, it is no surprise that deviance, whether overt or in secret, had severe consequences. Brett demonstrates this deviance in many ways. According to the social dislocation model, women have a strong relationship to and their behaviors are influenced by the wider society. Deviant women, in particular, are women who are both “within and without normal society” (Phoenix, 43). In the novel, we see how Brett befriends a very specific deviant subculture, homosexuals. Jake states, “ As they went in, under the light I saw white hands, wavy hair, white faces, grimacing, gesturing, talking. With them was Brett. She looked very lovely and she was very much with them” (Hemingway, 28). We see that even someone as tolerant as Jake cannot bear the sight of socially deviant individuals like homosexuals during that time.

Interestingly enough, Brett associates herself with them because it is the only group in which she feels completely comfortable. She does not have to worry about being victimized, or isolated because of these individuals have experienced isolation themselves because of their lifestyles, which we see when she says “ I’ve had such a hell of a happy life with the British aristocracy!” (Hemingway, 207). In other words, she feels more comfortable with outcasts than with the dominant culture because they look down upon her. Jake says, “ I said if she would go about with Jews and bull-fighters and such people, she must expect trouble” because each of these subgroups are looked down upon by society (Hemingway, 207).

At some point in her life, the various social institutions, which once kept her behavior in line, have failed her (Phoenix, 44). She does not feel as though she belongs to a family, or to the institution of motherhood and could be said to be constantly experiencing “social restlessness”.

She is not even accepted in places of worship due to her deviant behavior. This leaves her without any comfort even in places that should afford such comfort. In the novel, Jake describes this phenomenon and says:

“... We started inside and there was a smell of incense and people filing back into the church, but Brett was stopped just inside the door because she had no hat. Brett wanted to dance but they did not want her to. They wanted her as an image to dance around” (Hemingway, 159).

Unfortunately, any intimate relationships she becomes involved in only mirror what an actual relationship should function like. It is for this reason that she is “unable to sustain the same attitude or relationship with people for long” (Phoenix, 49). The cause of her deviant behavior is due to past negative experiences, the present situation, and a personal interpretation of them both (Phoenix, 46). It is essential to look at the era in which Brett lives and the individuals whose interests she frustrates (Whitlow, 76). The community shuns Brett for her seemingly immoral actions. When Brett is prevented from entering a church because she had on no hat, it was almost like a witch being prevented from entering a holy place; she is essentially isolated from society. Brett says, “I’m damned bad for a religious atmosphere. I’ve got the wrong type of face” (Baker, 19). Traditional religious pathways are closed to people like Brett, so she finds meaning in deviant activity and sexual relations, however, “you won’t get away from yourself by moving from one place to another” (Hemingway, 45).

Scholars have often tried to categorize and rationalize deviant behavior, especially sexual. The poverty-explanatory model of deviance, and particularly prostitution, asserts, “women inhabit a social environment that offers few opportunities to earn an independent income” (Phoenix, 53). So, they have very few legitimate means to financial success, resorting to what they know best: sexual pleasure. Aside from mere speculation, “there is nothing

particularly distinctive about prostitutes themselves” (Phoenix, 56). Labeling deviant sexual behavior as “prostitution” puts individuals who engage in such acts at a disadvantage because it gives them a criminal status that leaves them vulnerable, and in turn pushes them to seek refuge in the arms of an abusive relationship. Prostitution involves “being scapegoated by the State in its attempt to protect public morality” (Phoenix, 56) which suggests that such individuals are actually responsible for the existence of the institution itself.

Consequently, as a result of her social isolation, past abuse, and lack of comfort, Brett turns to alcohol as her only comfort. She has no choice but to be surrounded by friends who also make a habit of turning to alcohol when facing their problems. When experiencing a loss of hope or an absence of conversation to fill the silence, Brett turns to her only nonjudgmental company. She says, “ This is a hell of a dull talk... How about some of that champagne?”. Jake tells her, “When you talk to me you never finish your sentences at all” (Hemingway, 65). Brett “needed that” to handle all of the pain inside her (Hemingway, 89). The absinthe made everything seem better. We see this coping mechanism being extended even to Jake, when Brett tells him, “ Sure. Get tight. Get over your damn depression” (Hemingway, 226-227).

Ernest Hemingway himself suffered from alcoholic tendencies. Towards the end of his life, he began to lean “more and more heavily on alcohol for relief from intense anxiety and depression” (Yalom, 8). Hemingway sought to “replenish his youth through associations with young women” (Yalom, 9). In a study published by Asberg &Renk (2012), the researchers asserted, “rates of substance use and maltreatment are alarmingly high among incarcerated women” (p. 799). This finding not only applies to incarcerated women, but to women in general, women such as Brett.

There is a direct link between substance abuse and trauma and this phenomenon is referred to as “avoidance coping” (Asberg & Renk, 799). In fact, “studies find that PTSD puts women at a significantly higher risk for co-occurring substance abuse disorders compared to their non-traumatized cohort” (Asberg & Renk, 800). Adults with a history of childhood abuse or domestic violence “employ a range of cognitive and behavioral coping strategies” (Asberg & Renk, 800). The use of alcohol and illegal drugs, which is another form of avoidance coping, is commonly used by individuals with a history of abuse (Asberg & Renk, 801).

Brett is “a drunk with a tendency towards promiscuity” (Frohock, 27) and was even based on a female, Duff Twyson, who had a drug habit herself. She attempts to fill the void in her life with drink and sex (Bloom, *Guides*, 14). Almost all of the men she is involved with are also alcoholics. Mike is almost always drunk and even after having a relationship with Romero, she returns to Mike the alcoholic because “that is what she is used to” (Bloom, *Guides*, 13). All of these individuals have low self esteem, high levels of hostility and impulsivity (Wand, 116). Alcoholics desire control and seek refuge in broken relationships. It can also be surmised that Brett’s drinking was “essentially of that time and that place and not necessarily a permanent trait of her character” (Bloom 90).

Brett often feels distressed about her alcoholic tendencies, saying “I can’t stay tight all the time” (Hemingway, 187) but she seems to always revert back to it when facing a problem. At the very end of the novel, she reveals to the reader her complete knowledge of the consequences of her behavior and her destructive coping mechanisms through her conversation with her most trusted friend, Jake:

B: Don’t get drunk, Jake, she said. “You don’t have to.”

J: How do you know?

B: "Don't," she said. "You'll be alright".

Along with alcoholism comes the process of dissociation. In fact, "there is a growing body of research that has explored the role of substance use as a risk factor associated with the cycle of violence" (Daisy and Hien, 99). Here we come back to a very critical idea that Brett is constantly in a cycle of violence against herself and against her mates. Her behavior destroys her and those around her, and this cycle creates dissociative symptoms, which harm her.

Dissociation, in fact, "may further differentiate those who are unable to break the cycle of violence, since dissociative symptoms are sometimes present among substance abusers and perpetrators of interpersonal trauma" (Daisy and Hien, 99).

Of course, after engaging in such an abusive lifestyle for many years, these individuals begin to devalue themselves even more and begin to behave in cycles; cycles like alcohol-sex-guilt, which is so common in *The Sun Also Rises*. The act of engaging in deviant sexual, and perhaps, destructive behaviors often leads to a phenomenon referred to as "dissociation". Dissociation is a particularly unhealthy coping mechanism created in response to "severe trauma, serving to provide some degree of acute insulation against overwhelming stressors" (Kluft, 167).

In a study done by Richard P. Kluft, it was determined that dissociation "produces an alteration in the person's consciousness" in which "thoughts, feelings, and memories are not integrated into the individual's awareness" (167). Unfortunately, "dissociation occurs most commonly in connection with severe trauma" (Kluft, 167). There is evidence of this from Brett's behavior. She states, "I don't want to go through that hell again" (Hemingway, 34).

B: Please don't touch me.

J: What's the matter?

B: I can't stand it.

We see elements of her past coming up constantly from the past. Jake states, “ During the war. Her own true love had just kicked off with the dysentery” (Hemingway, 46). So the only person, besides Jake, whom she really loved, passed away, leaving her victim to her first husband, Lord Ashley.

As Richard P. Kluff noted, an individual who goes through the process of dissociation does so in order to escape reality or an “intolerable affective burden” (p.171), but this unfortunately leads to revictimization. The victim essentially feels numb to any further pain. Interestingly enough, at the conclusion of the study, the patients assessed “entered exploitive relationships” with the therapists involved and were unable to protect themselves from further victimization (p.171).

The question becomes, why does Brett engage in sexual activity with whomever she pleases? Does she *really* gain any satisfaction from her actions? She has a deep history of abuse, which seems to motivate her to almost seek out abusive or damaging relationships. Based on the little things she says, the reader can see that she has endured abuse by the hands of men. “It’s a good hand, Brett said, ‘I think he’ll live a long time”, (Hemingway, 189). Brett addressed this comment directly to Romero; seemingly a harmless remark, such a remark could be taken as meaning that the dominant always survives longer. “Funny’, Brett said. “How one doesn’t mind the blood” (Hemingway, 215). When you enjoy something in the purest, simplest manner, one does not take into consideration that the situation is actually abusive.

Jake writes, “I could feel her crying as I held her close. ‘ He’s so damned nice and he’s so awful. He’s my sort of thing” (Hemingway, 247). Brett has been part of an abusive cycle of domestic and sexual exploitation for most of her life. She is “emotionally stunted by reference to her unfortunate marriages (Bloom, *Guides*, 14-15). “My God, said Brett, ‘the things a woman

goes through” stated Brett (Hemingway 188). Brett Ashley herself has experienced two loveless marriages in which “her love life was a kind of war casualty in itself” (Bloom, *Guides*, 12-13). She was an assistant nurse during the war when her true love died, notably scarring her for the rest of the novel.

Her behavior was reduced into a cycle of “alcoholism and a series of casual sex relationships” (Bardacke, 13). In fact, Brett lives “on money from an earlier, abusive relationship and is no good at being alone” or practicing independence in any way she can (Bloom, 16-18). Hemingway continues to demonstrate the cycle of abuse, which continues to influence Brett’s life. She is continually drinking to cover her past experiences and to handle the present, and is continually in and out of intimate relationships with men. “The problem for Brett is that she needs the companionship of a man” (Bloom, *Guides*, 25). This cycle of deviant behavior and abuse could possibly show Brett in two ways: a woman who is portrayed as a prostitute-like figure, or a woman who has accepted her fate and lives life independent of emotion.

Brett states, “ I only know what I have seen” (Bloom, *Guides*, 31). Bearing in her heart the abusive relationships that she has encountered and dealing with the consequences of her actions, along with being confronted by the fact that she is miserable with or without Jacob Barnes, she resorts to even more destructive but very human-like behavior. Many things she says in the novel echo this pattern of abuse in her life. She states, “you don’t get something for nothing” (Hemingway 37).

Brett is often described as “a Circe-like destroyer of men” turning men into swine (Bloom, *Guides*, 44). Brett directly states, “we all have our careers”. She, despite her frivolous and often unplanned actions, remains the “symbol of the emancipated woman” (Bloom, *Guides*, 33). Interestingly enough, “the men in her life serve her in much the same manner as religious

prostitutes served Aphrodite. First they worship at her shrine, then they prostitute themselves” (Bloom, *Guides*, 45). Even though she is often portrayed as a manipulator, does this truly give her fulfillment? The reader has to take into account that if *The Sun Also Rises* gives off the sense that Brett gains satisfaction from her actions, it is only through a “man’s view of female fulfillment” (Bloom, *Guides*, 33). In the beginning of the novel, she is completely trapped within a “subordination-domination pattern” (Bloom, *Guides*, 33). Seen as “the great American bitch”, “unmated she is incomplete” (Bloom, *Guides*, 34). This is typical of the time she is living in, where women were defined by their relationships with men.

Brett and the new woman in general “rejected traditional feminine ideals of purity”. She really tried “to save men through her sexuality” (Martin, 68). Again, we must go back to the two prominent views of Brett: an idealized woman who people see as a prize if obtained or, as an autonomous woman who attempts to make her own decisions (Martin, 71). Mike constantly calls Brett “pretty” and many of the characters are simply infatuated with her physical appearance. This degrades her to a prostitute-like figure created only for the pleasure of men: “she is sort of what they have instead of God” (Baskett, 105). On the other hand, we can choose, by basing her actions on the evidence from the novel, to believe that Brett is comfortable with her actions. She sees it as a career, a way of life.

This does not mean, however, that she sees this way of life as the *right* or *moral* way of life. Several times in the novel, Brett makes references to her awareness of the consequences of her actions. Hemingway writes, “I know that what is moral is what you feel good after and what is immoral is what you feel bad after” (Bloom, *Guides*, 12). Does this suggest that Hemingway is trying to make Brett’s actions immoral? What Hemingway sought to do was “to seize and project for the reader what he has often called ‘the way it was’ and to describe the sense of place, the

sense of fact, and the sense of scene” in the novel (Bloom, *Guides*, 51). In fact, most of the characters in *The Sun Also Rises* are morally wounded. The novel is a “study of moral failure” which is not a question of what kind of mothers flappers will make or where bobbed hair is leading us, but rather it is about something that is already finished (Reynolds, 45).

Brett expresses a desire to “get clean” many times in the novel, always needing to “get a bath” (Hemingway, 163). She says, “ I hate him too... I hate his damned suffering” (Hemingway, 186). Something inside of her churns at the sight of human suffering, after which she ends up coping with her behavior through an external locus of control mentality. With this particular mentality, a person blames all of their actions on an outside force other than themselves. She says, “ I can’t help it. I’ve never been able to help anything” (Hemingway, 187).

Chapter 3

Conclusion

In conclusion, Ernest Hemingway presents her as a tragic hero, who constantly is faced with coping with her sexuality, along with battling the norms of an emerging modern, but still Victorian, society. She is completely aware of the consequences of her actions, while still hurting from previous experiences. She is a product of her past, as we all are. It is her past that leaves her broken and vulnerable to destructive coping mechanisms. The key to understanding Brett's behavior is to understand the difference between nymphomania and sexual addiction. Because Brett's behavior is coupled with alcohol consumption, and defined by associations with violent alcoholics, it is for this purpose she is better defined as a sex addict.

Even before the novel was written, the writer has already created a story. *The Sun Also Rises* can be seen as an interpretation of Hemingway's life in which he sought to show "the importance of love and the certainty of pain and death" (Bloom, *Guides*, 15). Hemingway died on July 2nd, 1961 by taking his own life. According to an article written on his mental state prior to his death, Yalom et.al wrote that "there is no doubt that he was an extremely troubled man" and that "his novels emerged out of lived experience" (2-3). Hemingway invested "inordinate psychic energy into fulfilling an idealized image" (Yalom, 3) he had always created for himself, and Brett Ashley, in a sense was that idealized image. This idealized image was designed as a coping mechanism in the first place, one that was "designed to cope with a primitive sense of badness, inadequacy, or unavailability" (Yalom, 4).

Alcoholism, destructive coping mechanisms, and deviant behavior permeate *The Sun Also Rises*. What is most interesting is that Hemingway portrayed Brett Ashley in a way that leaves the reader to make her own decisions about her character. The significance of Brett's name is worthy of notice as well; it is German for a "plank" that is very elastic. Being a woman with many partners, she is also "nailed" by many. Why does Hemingway give her so little to say throughout the novel? Perhaps it is for the purpose of leaving the reader to make their own conclusions about her fate, or rather, it "prevents the reader from actually knowing Brett as a person and her motivation" (Bloom, *Guides*, 50). In regards to dissociation, the primary gain of Brett is to "diminuate some sort of dysphoria or the exclusion of some sort of information that was perceived as overwhelming" (Kluft, 168). And so, we see the pattern that Brett, and many victims of abuse tend to be trapped in. She experiences a "shattering of the cohesion of one's life experiences and one's sense of self" (Kluft, 168).

After being engaged to Mike, she engaged in several sexual acts of which he was aware. Even Jake serves as a pimp-like figure that arranges meetings between her and Romero. She, like many prostitutes, has no other alternative to find meaning in a male-dominated society. Her looks get her what she wants; however, she does not seek happiness, but freedom. Hemingway left out much of Brett's history to allow the mind to wander about who this woman is. Some would say she was a perversion of femininity, but the point Hemingway tries to push is that she is a deeply troubled individual. Hemingway gives her story a voice without writing almost anything about her.

Finally, the importance behind Brett's life lies in the fact that many women in her position suffer in the same way. As Hemingway scholar Linda Patterson-Miller pointed out in her essay entitled, *Brett Ashley: The Beauty of It All*, "whether labeling her a drunkard, a

nymphomaniac, or a modern day Circe who turns men into swine, these interpretations ignore the many sides of Brett's character" (170). Women faced with no alternatives in a male-dominated society turn to destructive coping mechanisms to help them mask their problems. Hemingway did not try to create a negative image of Brett, but we are instead called to sympathize with her and develop a stronger sense of humanity when facing people in similar situations. Through his writing, and even absent details about her life, we see that Brett is a multifaceted character; it is up to the reader to find meaning in the novel, and Brett's life gives the reader a profound ability to evaluate various social institutions.

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