

The New Woman in *The Sun Also Rises*

Xiaoping Yu

College of Foreign Languages, Qingdao University of Science and Technology
Qingdao, 266061

Abstract

Hemingway is a famous American writer and a spokesman of the Lost Generation. His life attitude of the characters in the novels influenced the whole world. His first masterpiece *The Sun Also Rises* contributes a lot to the rise of feminism and make the world began to be familiar with a term: The New Woman through the portrayal of Brett. This paper is aimed to target the source and traits of The New Woman.

Keywords: The Lost Generation, The New Woman, Brett

1. General Introduction of Hemingway's Lifetime and His Works

Ernest Hemingway was born in Oak Park, Illinois, in 1899. And he began his writing career in the Kansas City in 1917. He went there and served as an eager and energetic reporter, and was later recruited as an ambulance driver working with the Red Cross and went to Europe. This led to the crucial event of his life. On July 8, 1918 he was severely wounded in the knee in Italy. He recovered in time and remained with the Italian army until the end of the war. His war experience proved so shattering and nightmarish that his life and writings were permanently affected. In a sense, through all his life, he lived under the influence, and continued to write about it in order to relive it and forget about it. Back to the United States, He stayed for a time in North Michigan, reading, writing, and fishing. Then he worked with a Chicago commercial journal. By an accidental opportunity, through the introduction letters of Sherwood Anderson, he got to know with Gertrud Stein and Ezra Pound. Under the guidance of Anderson on the style, Hemingway wrote his first novel, *The Torrents of Spring* (1926), which remains a fact that he did benefit not a little from his early years' schooling. And his first published book is *Three Stories and Ten Poems* (1923). Later, he settled down in Paris and worked on some short impressionist stories. In the same year, Hemingway published his first important novel *The Sun Also Rises*. Besides that, he also finished his famous books as follows, *Men Without Women* (Short Stories, 1927), *A Farewell to Arms* (Novel, 1929), *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories* (Short Stories, 1930), *Death in the Afternoon* (Novel, 1932), *Winner Take Nothing* (Short Stories, 1934), *Green Hills of Africa* (Novel, 1935), *To Have and Have Not* (Novel, 1937), *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (Novel, 1940), *Men at War* (Edited Anthology, 1942), *Across the River and into the Trees* (Novel, 1950), *The Old Man and the Sea* (Novel, 1952), etc. In Hemingway's lifetime, he had three failed marriages. As a result, his medical treatment to overcome his mental problems did not work and he found his memory had gone and he could not even write to appease himself in the last years of his lifetime. There was no other choice than to end his life. Therefore, Hemingway finally chose to kill himself on a log cabin in Ketchum, Idaho on a Sunday, July 2, 1961, and the world was shocked into the disconcerting awareness that, with his death, an era had come to an end.

The book *The Sun Also Rises* is Hemingway's first powerful novel, which makes him become one of the most famous voices of the "Lost Generation". The story is about a group of young Americans and English expatriates in Paris trying to enjoy their lives after the First World War. Jacob Barnes (known as Jake) is the narrator of the story and the hero. He is an American from Kansas City now living in Paris and working as writer/newspaper reporter. Jake is impotent after being wounded in the war, but he is deeply in love with a woman called Brett whose full name is Lady Brett Ashley, inheriting the title from her husband. Brett is seeking a divorce from her husband and it quickly becomes clear that she loves to tease men and have affairs with them, but incapable of having any real deep feeling for anyone. The story spans just a few weeks in the lives of Jake, Brett and a circle of friends. Hemingway makes his main character Jake always offers Brett, despite her rejection of him because he is impotent.

2. The New Woman

The term "New Woman" initially emerged as a figure in the 1890s who began going to college and infringing on male-dominated careers (Schneider 16). This, in turn, began generating masculine anxiety as "many men feared that women would take their jobs or would lower the wages by being willing to work for less" which caused men to cling to the domestic ideal" (Schneider 51). However, this New Woman was slightly different from the New Woman of the 1920s, who will here after be the focus of this paper. This later New Woman pushed past the example of the preceding generation by infringing on the masculine in her physical appearance as well as in her

level of education and career choice by combining masculine and feminine traits.

The portrayal of Brett in the novel functions to draw out the connection between Brett and this historical figure of the New Woman. The most important of these shared characteristics is the previously mentioned blending of the feminine and the masculine in both appearance and behaviors such as displays of power as seen in her role in relationships.

2.1 physical appearance

Brett shows her physical presence to be a similar fusion as Hemingway describes her both as a bit of a boy with “her hair!-brushed back like boys” and as a woman with curves like “hull of a racing yacht” (Hemingway 30). Here, it is Brett’s hair that most clearly evokes the masculine, especially considering the proximity of this period to the preceding Victorian era where long hair was the symbol for woman. The novel itself is then aware of the importance of Brett’s haircut as a symbol of the New Woman taking on masculine qualities through its note that “She [Brett] started all that” (Hemingway 30). This idea that Brett started the trend of short hair positions Brett as not simply a symbol of the New Woman, but rather as an influential symbol within the realm of the novel. This masculine physical trait is then coupled with the feminine physical trait of curves being like those of “the hull of a racing yacht,” which Jake shows a particular appreciation for through his note that “you missed none of it with that wool jersey” (Hemingway 30). This second note highlights the importance of Brett’s feminine physical traits just as the note about Brett originating the style of her hair emphasizes the masculine traits. Thus, the way in which both the masculine and feminine aspects of Brett’s physical appearance are emphasized, reveals the overall importance of the way in which Brett, like the New Woman, is androgynous in many ways. Brett’s connection to the historical figure of the New Woman is clearly drawn out in *The Sun Also Rises*. By highlighting her androgynous physical appearance and intrusion into patriarchal society, the text connects Brett to the New Woman and the masculine anxiety and societal attempts at containment that accompany this figure.

2.2 behavior

In addition to these aspects of Brett’s physical appearance, there are also elements of Brett’s behavior that further make her a symbol of the New Woman by inserting her into typically masculine spheres.

2.2.1 challenge

As Smith-Rosenberg notes, “The New Woman challenged existing gender relations and the distribution of power” (243). Therefore, the New Woman was not only androgynous, but she also challenged patriarchy. In a similar way, Brett most notably asserts herself in a masculine sphere through her behavior at the bullfights. The first manifestation of Brett’s ability to assert herself in the sphere of the bullfights occurs before the first actual fight when the bulls are being brought into the corrals. Brett stands with Jake to watch the bulls come in, and Jake shows his concern for Brett’s ability to cope with the bulls going the steers by telling her, “Don’t look” (Hemingway 145). However, Brett continues watching, fascinated, which forces Jake to state, “Fine, if it doesn’t buck you!” (Hemingway 145). Jake’s perception of Brett as being incapable of tolerating the violence of the fights is completely overturned as Brett enthusiastically watches the charge and even notices the way in which the bull uses his horns like a boxer, just as Jake has been pointing out.

Just as Jake doubts Brett’s suitability for the masculine realm of the bullfight, so do the other male characters and even Brett herself, with the same results. Thus, prior to the first bullfight, Mike thinks that “Brett had best sit high up for her first time” (Hemingway 165) as a means of physically distancing her from the arena. Even Brett herself expresses similar concern, telling Jake that “I’m a little nervous about it...I’m worried whether I’ll be able to go through with it all right” (Hemingway 166). All of this talk before the fight reflects the belief that Brett, as a woman, will struggle to handle the graphic nature of the bullfights more than any of the other characters will. However, Brett surprises everyone by being completely unfazed by the fights. As she tells Jake, “I didn’t feel badly at all” (Hemingway 169). Delbert Wylder makes this connection between Brett’s behavior and that of the New Woman even more explicitly by stating that “[Brett] is obviously, the New Woman or the twentieth century woman”, breaking from the stricture of Victorianism as much as most of the expatriated males in the novel. In all of these examples, Brett asserts herself in a primarily male arena, which further connects her to the historical figure of the New Woman who also asserted herself in primarily male fields.

From these connections to the historical figure of the New Woman, the opportunity for masculine anxiety to attach itself to Brett arises. In the 1920s, the figure of the New Woman inspired a fair amount of anxiety in patriarchal society because of the New Woman’s tendency towards androgyny and her movement into previously male-dominated careers. This anxiety in terms of androgyny was manifested in the concerns of physicians about

this new emerging class of women: British and American physician and scientists insisted that unmarried career women and political activists constituted an intermediate sex. They violated normal gender categories! They were Mannis Lesbians, the embodiment of social disorder (Smith-Rosenberg 265). In this passage, it is particularly telling that physicians and scientists identified the New Woman as the embodiment of social disorder, revealing the extent of anxiety felt about this figure. In other words, the emergence of a figure that refused to remain confined by the previously prescribed female gender roles was so threatening that educated medical professionals sought to neutralize this threat by identifying these women as the source of social disorder.

Rosenberg identifies this gender role blending as a trait of the New Woman saying that the New Woman violated normal gender categories and fused the female and the male. (Smith-Rosenberg 265).

2.2.2 power

The fact that Brett Ashley has power over the men in *The Sun Also Rises* is something that contributes to the anxiety about her in the text. In fact, criticism that focuses on Brett as a “bitch” focuses primarily on the ways in which she dominates the various male characters. Thus, it is generally accepted that the nature of Brett’s power is in her ability to control her relationships with the men that she interacts with. To be more specific though, Brett’s power is manifested in her ability to both initiate and terminate her affairs. Throughout the novel, Brett selects the men with whom she desires to have a sexual relationship and then pursues them only to later forcibly end the affair. This pattern, with some variations, is seen in her interactions with both Romero and Cohn in a more obvious way and with Jake and Michael in a less direct fashion.

The best example of Brett’s ability to function as both the initiator and terminator of her relationships can be seen in her interactions with Pedro Romero. In this affair, Brett holds the role of the initiator of the relationship by commissioning Jake to help her find Romero so that she can begin an affair with him. Her intent in finding Romero is clear in that before telling Jake that they should go and find him, Brett says, “I’m mad about the Romero boy. I’m in love with him, I think” (Hemingway 187). Therefore, it is clear that Brett intends to begin a sexual relationship with Romero. Brett’s role as the terminator of her relationship with Romero is revealed in the fact that she ends the affair by making Romero leave her in Madrid: “He [Romero] only left yesterday, I made him go!” (Hemingway 245, emphasis added). Here Brett is revealed as the one who is controlling the end of the relationship in that she is forcing Romero to leave her.

Additionally, the fact that Brett makes Romero leave shows that Brett is completely in control of the terms upon which the relationship ends; this is evidenced by the fact that she can persuade Romero to leave instead of just leaving herself. All of these different displays of Brett’s power in relationships reveal that Brett finds her primary source of freedom in her complete autonomy in her affairs.

It is worth noting that while Brett dictates the terms of her relationships and thus has autonomy over her partners, she herself becomes trapped by her own initiation/termination cycle. For example, the same moment that Brett is controlling the beginning of her relationship with Romero by intentionally seeking him out, she is also denying her autonomy. This can be seen when Jake tells her that she “ought to stop it”, and she replies by saying, “How can I stop it? I can’t stop things”. (Hemingway 187)

This disavowal of her own authority does not alter the fact that Brett is still controlling the terms upon which her relationship with Romero begins. It is Brett who is still pursuing Romero and employing Jake to help her, and it is Brett who will ultimately make Romero leave her. Instead, it reveals the manner in which the novel begins to confine Brett within her sexual freedom by having her doubt her own control and thus feel merely the victim of her relationship problems. Therefore, Brett is still controlling the terms upon which the affair begins despite her protesting that she is not, in fact, in control because she can control the terms of the relationship even as it compels her to initiate it.

The fact that Brett’s power originates her ability to control her relationships with men, which, in turn feeds into her ultimate punishment, as can be seen in this final scenario with Mike, relates back to Brett’s connection to the New Woman. Like the culturally constructed New Woman, Brett’s power comes across as threatening to men. By controlling the terms of her relationships, Brett becomes dominant over the men that she has relationships with which threatens the patriarchal order.

3. Conclusion

Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* was originally published in 1926, a time at which the historical figure of the New Woman was gaining a lot of notice. The New Woman was a historical figure that became prominent in the public eye as she began to redefine gender roles, go to college, and start working in the male world. The presence of this historical New Woman then generated a certain amount of masculine anxiety as women began to

take over typically masculine gender roles and spheres (Schneider 16).

Based upon this prevalence both of the New Woman and of masculine anxiety, it is not surprising that these topics become thematically important in *The Sun Also Rises*. In terms of the presence of the New Woman, Brett emerges as an embodiment of this historical figure in the novel. Correspondingly, Brett inspires a similar type of anxiety, which seemingly sets up the opportunity for masculine anxiety to contribute to containment. Essentially, Brett's identification with the New Woman creates a circumstance in which the expected conclusion of *The Sun Also Rises* would involve Brett's punishment, however, this connection ultimately functions as a means of exploring issues of masculine anxiety and the containment of women without condoning either.

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