

Absurdity in Ernest Hemingway's
The Sun Also Rises

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Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to capture and convey, through the use of different works of philosophy that encapsulate thoughts on the same idea, the motif of the absurdity of life in Ernest Hemingway's first novel *The Sun Also Rises*. The concept of the absurd will be, first and foremost, examined through absurdist criticism of the novel, using the philosophical thought of Albert Camus, Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and other philosophers who captured the essence of the absurd in their philosophy, all in order to represent this concept in Hemingway's novel and to show how it truly manifests itself upon some of the most important characters' psychology and their actions, portrayed throughout the three parts of the book. Mention will be made of the concept of "Lost generation" as it is the cornerstone to understanding, firstly, the characters' background and current psychological status and the effects that the war had on an entire generation, leading them to an unwilling search for meaning in what this essay strives to present as a meaningless life.

Keywords: absurdity, alcoholism, trauma, psychology, emasculation, resentment, meaninglessness

“You are all a lost generation.” Gertrude Stein’s statement regarding the generation that came of age during WWI was, truly, the spark that lit the fire of imagination in Ernest Hemingway’s mind and that of sudden revelation regarding his peers but also his own self, admitting that “for whatever is going to happen to this generation of which I am part has already happened” (xvi). Willingly or not, this reception of how the author’s generation suffered, because of the terrible conflict, managed to turn his novel *The Sun Also Rises*, not only in an elegy for the “loss of innocence, of religion, of our old comforting myths [...]” (qtd. on the novel’s back cover) but also in a deeply philosophical work that finds its philosophical roots ebbed in the psychology of its characters and the way they react on a daily basis, struggling with unsolved trauma of which they are mostly unaware. Because of the disastrous events of WWI, the generation that managed to return to life out of its ashes succumbed to a tragic way of existence, suffering from a mental illness, which we today call Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, disillusionment with their society’s values always in search of a bohemian style of life drowned in alcohol and trips, these being greatly connected to most of the flaws that the characters in the book have, alcoholism, rage, promiscuity. The novel centers around Jake Barnes, the character-narrator of the story, and the adventure that follows his meeting up with former war veterans and friends, now expatriates, who form an unlikely group set out to watch the Fiesta and the bullfights in Spain, among city-breaks, night-drinking, day-drinking, endless chatting and arguing. The endeavor reveals hidden and subversive lingering feelings of love/hate between the group’s members who, during their excursion, initially organized in hopes of their forgetting the stressful life of the city, begin to express their contempt towards each other and also to become rivals for the love of the flamboyant female figure of the group, Lady Brett Ashley. Initially perceived as a trite description of a few drunk former war veterans in search of a relaxing pastime,

the novel masterfully unveils the unconscious afflictions of each character; these afflictions are ultimately what drive the characters to combative behavior between each other and shatter the bonds of companionship. As in Albert Camus' philosophical essay *The Myth of Sisyphus*, the heroes are eternally forced in an endless loop of rolling the boulder up the mountain, in search of a concrete meaning of life only to find out that their efforts are utterly worthless. Camus states that "a man is always prey to his truths [...]" (*The Myth* 30); the truth of the characters and the entire "Lost Generation" is the fact that they were part of the war and now its effects still simmer deep inside the hearts of men/women. As we are about to see of Jake Barnes and Lady Brett Ashley who are evidently in love with each other, yet unable to form a communion, mainly because of the effects that the experience of war still exerts on them, yet Camus reinforces his idea of the man being chased by his truths by saying that man is also capable and entrusted to escape the affliction that constantly degrades his universe "[...] he should strive to escape the universe of which he is the creator" (*The Myth* 30).

The absurdity of life is seeking meaning in life by knowing that life is inherently meaningless, thus allowing man to chase something in order to give it meaning. Søren Kierkegaard proposes religion as one of the means of attaining meaning, that by constantly behaving in order to please a greater power outside of the human's absurd reality, man can find meaning; he termed this way of living based on the presupposition that an unearthly holy power awaits the soul after death as a "leap of faith." Camus counters Kierkegaard's solution for the absurd by saying that "He [Kierkegaard] makes of the absurd the criterion of the other world, whereas it is simply a residue of the experience of this world" (*The Myth* 36), naming such an existentialist approach to the absurd as "philosophical suicide" (*The Myth* 27), yet in Hemingway's novel, the loss of religion, the banishing of man because of it, are portrayed, firstly because of Jake Barnes' answer "I don't know" (99), to the question "Are you really a Catholic?" (99), secondly because of Robert Cohn's mistreatment by his peers only because he is Jewish, or the alien in the group of expatriates, being regarded

by Brett and the others as the symbolic stranger in the band of friends, also because he is not a war veteran.

Robert Cohn is the starting point of the novel as the first paragraph of it is exclusively about him and his life. Though he is, throughout the novel, the most quixotic type of character due to his code of values and strong passion for Brett which turns into a restless pursuit of her love, Cohn being completely infatuated like most male characters in the novel, his mind ultimately gets crushed because their affair meant nothing more but an earthly pleasure for Brett, which, in turn, for him proved to be almost a wedding service "The more one loves the stronger the absurd grows" (Camus, *The Myth* 67). Henceforth, Robert Cohn's being is completely trapped in an absurd loop of getting Lady Brett to love him, which led to aggressive behavior and resentment from his peers. Nevertheless, in the second chapter of the book, Robert Cohn is the one to initiate the great adventure that is to follow by simply admitting to his own absurdity and that until this point he did not feel contempt with his life: "I can't stand to think my life is going so fast and I'm not really living it" (9). Though a mediocre author, Robert Cohn also tries his hand at writing, which from an absurdist/existentialist point of view is one of the ways of finding worth in a life that is meaningless, as Nietzsche puts it "Art and nothing but art, we have art in order not to die from the truth" (qtd. in Seidler 415). Robert Cohn's cruel reality is that he is constantly frowned upon by his peers for being a Jew and for being a weak-willed man as he is constantly controlled by his mother, wife and lover, Lady Brett turning him into her personal squire of sorts. The psychological/behavioral changes seen in Robert Cohn are results of this constant harassment from his group of expatriates and the fact that he cannot fulfill any of his goals, regarding Brett or any other aspect of his life. Robert Cohn's 'romantic' way of living is what makes him truly absurd in relation to the other characters of the novel, as he is trapped in a world where love is usually a result of boredom, and it is much more plausible than being trapped by emotional consequences, though Robert Cohn is hemmed in a self-made universe where love is still seen as pure and required for

man's well-being, from which he is unable to escape, being more of a man-child (he bursts into crying more than once) that sometimes cannot control his aggressive urges. His sudden exeunt proves that he was finally unable to cope with the fact that Lady Brett, whom he thought womanly and adequate, is actually promiscuous when he finds out about her affair with Romero, thus his alien existence finds no soothing in this nihilistic environment.

Jake Barnes, on the other hand, is presented as the stoic side of Robert Cohn, the boxer being his exact opposite. The narrator and protagonist of the novel, Jake Barnes is the absurd hero that ultimately cannot understand his situation and admits defeat in front of a cold/dejected universe that is his life. Jake is constantly psychologically affected by the war, as he is the emasculated character that cannot communicate nor consummate his burning feelings for Brett Ashley. Throughout the story, Jake is in love with her, yet they cannot form a bond as this effect on Jake's masculinity hinders his ability to truly convey feelings and to act upon them. He is portrayed as a workaholic and also a heavy drinker, these being two of the ways in which the protagonist unwittingly finds meaning in his life, the disillusionment caused by the war pushes him towards alcoholic tendencies, though no more than Mike Campbell, who is truly the one absolute drunkard in the story. Because of his inability to act upon love, he finds pleasure in a non-dramatic way of living, drinking, working, and going fishing, which ultimately proves to be a retreat from the bustle of the crowded cities. Jake can be seen leisurely spending his time going to the beach, his actions being carefully narrated in great detail. If it were not for Brett's message, he probably would have gone on with that style of life endlessly, as he is unable to escape the universe of constantly "rolling the boulder" thus being captured in his wake-up-work-drink-rest-sleep-repeat routine. This characteristic of Jake, that he finds solace in his usual routine is what Camus stated in his famous line "one must imagine Sisyphus happy" (*The Myth* 119), because no matter of how endless the process is, one can be happy with it going on forever as it is a way of not accepting the absurd, thus fighting against it, finding meaning in life, despite it being

somewhat destructive and pointless as it indirectly becomes a day-to-day reprieve from the inherent lack of meaning of life. Jake Barnes truly follows Hemingway's code for his hero as he is truly a man of work/action and enjoys the small things in life, which, ultimately, are ways of escaping the truth that life is inherently meaningless and ends in death, which in turn, because of his continued enjoyment of small things turns him into an absurd hero, like Sisyphus, who was portrayed by Camus happy in his endless struggle.

At the end of the book, Jake Barnes is seen next to Brett Ashley, in a moment where love can truly be achieved, yet the protagonist gets denied that satisfaction both because of his psychological inability to speak his mind effectively and Brett's inability of committing to love: "Oh, Jake, [...], we could have had such a damned good time together" (198), to which Jake responds dejectedly and content with the fact that his purposeless pursuit of love is finally over and that life can start over again in a new fashion "'Yes,' I said. 'Isn't it pretty to think so?'" (198), this final acceptance of the lack of meaning can be closely related to Camus' ending of *The Stranger* when Meursault finally admits being happy with the lack of meaning and interest on part of the universe in the human condition:

And I, too, felt ready to start life all over again. It was as if that great rush of anger had washed me clean, emptied me of hope, and, gazing up at the dark sky spangled with its signs and stars, for the first time, the first, I laid my heart open to the benign indifference of the universe. To feel it so like myself, indeed, so brotherly, made me realize that I'd been happy, and that I was happy still. (64-65)

Lady Brett Ashley can be seen as an absurd chaser of meaning by means of liaisons because of lost true love during the war. Her trauma is deeply rooted in what used to be her perfect connection with a person which ended terribly and now left her to search for meaning in other ways, such as drinking, dancing, smoking, partying and being promiscuous, easily falling in love with the young toreador Romero, whose name hints at Shakespeare's

Romeo. Though one of the most flamboyant characters of the novel, Brett is trapped in her endless search for love/meaning, to which she finally surrenders admitting “I do feel such a bitch” to Jake, who out of sincere, yet unrequited love, does not agree with her, but she makes of her condition the only thing that constantly fuels the absurdity of her life, and finally she admits that being knowledgeable of it and fighting it holds the position of God in one’s life “You know it makes one feel rather good deciding not to be a bitch. [...] It’s sort of what we have instead of God” (197). This sudden revelation came after her departure from Romero, who was a very picky lover, as he made her cut her hair and other things in order for him not to feel ashamed with her in front of his family, which Brett declined, finally putting an end to her amorous liaison, admitting to the absurd, yet it is unknown if it will repeat, as her destiny concludes with this triumphant victory against what seemed to her to be promiscuity. At the end of the book Brett manages to escape the endless cycle, yet she does not manage to acquire true love again, proof of the fact that her truth (war trauma) is indeed endless. As opposed to Jake, Brett Ashley does not elude the Absurd, as Camus put it in his philosophical thought, eluding the absurd would result in the inability to confront it thus rendering it inescapable.

“Life has no intrinsic worth, but is kept in motion merely by desire and illusion” (Schopenhauer 1918) is the perfect description of the characters’ journey as it is, truly, absurdism in motion. Every action that takes place, can be described from an absurdist/existentialist point of view as an irregular search for meaning. Beginning with the city break that the protagonists have undergone through Paris, which is alcohol filled, resulting in what Arthur Schopenhauer called “desire.” Everything that the characters do during this journey through Paris is a constant search for pleasure, pertaining to the idea of distancing oneself from the usual routine. During this first part of the novel, the protagonists can be seen drinking heavily, aimlessly wandering through the town at night, and their constant loitering and drinking can be interpreted as an unconscious lingering psychological effect of the war. The Lost

Generation is constantly disillusioned with what they are supposed to do in contrast with what they are actually doing. In the novel, this first part is the starting point of projection of the characters' behaviour and their different personalities revealed by their many chats in pubs, one example being Robert Cohn's combative response to comments about Brett "You asked me what I knew about Brett Ashley. [...] I didn't ask you to insult her" (32), him being once again a defender of her honour as per the chivalric code that he follows absurdly. "Understanding the world for a man is reducing it to the human and stamping it with his seal" (Camus, *The Myth* 15-16) perfectly describes the world of the characters during this first part of the novel as they 'stamp' the world in which they were placed, in which they unknowingly suffer, with what is 'human,' that is pleasure, which fills the void that the War had left so hollow, yet only for this time being and ultimately this effort proves futile and only leads to a plethora of other conflicts, this part is the boiling point of the hate that would, later on, be pointed towards Robert Cohn.

The fishing trip is one of the most important aspects of the book, as it concerns the protagonist Jake Barnes, deeply hurt by the war, who is searching for a safe retreat that might soothe his thoughts, as he is most in pain when left alone with his impressions. He is accompanied on this safe retreat by his friend Bill Gorton, who is unscarred by the war, thus his lively and jokingly mannerism and view of life, and his being unburdened by neurosis, make him the best companion for this trip; also, as he is the only character of the book not to feel compelled by Brett's beauty, such a character might provide an antidote for Jake Barnes' condition, but it does not. In terms of philosophical thought, of Camus and even Kierkegaard, this type of safe retreat can be easily seen as 'escaping existence' or basically 'suicide,' metaphorically speaking, as this is the most serene part of the book in which the characters truly get to feel themselves commune with nature, especially after meeting Harris, another war-stricken character that admits to Jake "I've not had much fun since the war" (103), the mood of the scene is greatly more optimistic and dismissive of any

war wound left, mainly because of the absence of Brett. Another important aspect is that the relationship between Jake and Bill remains unchanged following the events of the book; it is the only one that did not sustain any considerable damage, this fishing trip being somewhat also a retreat from the absurd while unconsciously amounting to it. In this part, Bill also jokes around talking in a pastoral tone, revealing to the reader the fact that Jake does not cope with religion, admitting that he cannot decide whether he is a Catholic or not. Fishing is also what Jake Barnes prefers doing most, thus pointing toward Schopenhauer's idea that life is only powered by desires and pleasures; this kind of safe retreat also finds its way into the absurd as it does not fight it, but merely fuels it since freedom cannot be achieved beyond what the absurdity of existence permits.

The Fiesta is the main point of the entire novel as it can be closely connected and compared to the War itself. Again, it represents a 'battleground' of constant shouting and running and sometimes dying. This part of the book truly admits to the idea that people can never escape their current afflicting realities, and always return, unconsciously, to the harsh truth of their life in their attempt to overcome it "One always finds one's burden again" (Camus, *The Myth* 119). "For believe me: the secret for harvesting from existence the greatest fruitfulness and the greatest enjoyment is-to live dangerously!" (Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* 228), the state of adrenaline and exuberance of liveliness is what makes life fruitful. The Fiesta/Bull Fights are nothing more but a way of finding pleasure in dangerous activities, sometimes brutal, pertaining to the human's aggressive nature, the destructive instinct that is inherent (death drive in psychoanalytic terms). Hemingway himself saw the bullfights as man's struggle against death/way to avoid death which, in an inherently meaningless and pointed-toward-death-life is impossible, but can indeed prove to be one of the ways in which man is indebted to himself to find meaning in life. During this final and most intense part of the story most of the characters' inner truths are revealed, Robert Cohn's aggressive

temper, Jake Barnes' alcohol addiction, work addiction, emasculation, and Brett Ashley's promiscuity.

"Life must be understood backwards [...] but must be lived forwards" (Kierkegaard qtd. in Moore 263), for only by knowing the background of the characters could one truly observe their behavior in detail related to whatever trauma they suffer from. *The Sun Also Rises* is indeed a roman a clef (with a key) as it is concerned with real-life aspects, the fiesta, the war, Paris, formerly about real-life people, later changed into fictitious ones, that truly gives us a fruitful canvas of endless psychological/philosophical discovery regarding the people of "The Lost Generation." The opening epigraph, from the Book of Ecclesiastes, which Harold Bloom calls the most nihilistic book (*Bloom's Guides* 2) of The Bible, truly sets the mood not only for the passing of generations but also for the way in which present generations can deal with present afflictions: "One of the most poignant of all American elegies, it affirms the virtues of giving a style to despair and of enduring the loss of love with something like a tragic dignity" (*Bloom's Modern* 2).

Ultimately, based on the analysis conducted on the few characters, and the three parts of the novel in which the inner, unwilling motives of the characters in regard to the absurd and the lack of meaning of life are presented, it is safe to say that these three characters of *The Sun Also Rises* are indeed in a constant search for meaning, each character having their own afflictions, reasons and ways of dealing with the absurd while also being aware of it (Cohn, Brett), while all the while Jake Barnes is presented as the true absurd hero bent on life, yet ignorant of its absurdity.

Therefore, the absurdity of life in Hemingway's novel *The Sun Also Rises* divides itself into two parts, firstly the psychological trauma inflicted upon the characters by the war or by their peers, and, secondly, the futile pursuit of love revolving around Lady Brett Ashley. Both of these aspects can be compared to characteristics of the theatre of the absurd, ex. *Waiting for Godot* by Samuel Beckett, in which the entire action revolves around a character that, supposedly, does not exist. Likewise, the motives

and actions of the three characters mentioned above are just fruitless incentives for a failed pursuit of meaning in life through adventure and ultimately unrequited love. To end this essay on a positive note, since the characters fail to achieve love, at the end of the day “it is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.”

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