

DOI: 10.2478/rjes-2014-0008

THE GEOGRAPHY OF SELF-REPRESENTATION: ORIENTALISM IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S *THE SUN ALSO RISES*

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Abstract: *This paper will deal with the problematics of cultural self-representation in Ernest Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises. I shall approach this theme by applying concepts from Edward Said's Orientalism and Jean Baudrillard's America to Hemingway's novel and discussing the limitations of such theories which – it will be argued – oversimplify the issue by reducing it to an opposition between 'Self' and 'Otherness'.*

Keywords: *America; cultural representation; Hemingway; Otherness; Orientalism*

1. Introduction

Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* is a novel about a group of American and British expatriates and their struggle to deal with the culture of continental Europe, which they perceive as both fascinating and repulsive. The characters are based in Paris, but decide to travel to Pamplona for the Festival of San Fermin and watch the Running of the Bulls. Inevitably, their immersion into this new and unknown culture, changes the way they perceive the world and themselves, as shown by the following quotation:

You're an expatriate. You've lost touch with the soil. You get precious. Fake European standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your time talking, not working. You are an expatriate, see? You hang around cafes. (Hemingway 1995:74)

According to a popular French saying, "Africa starts at the Pyrenees" (Kaminsky 2008: 21). According to a similar but slightly more exaggerated British saying, Africa "begins at Calais" (cf. Partridge 1992: 356). Ernest Hemingway's (1995) *The Sun Also Rises* can be interpreted as a tale of dislocation in which prolonged contact with what is perceived as cultural Otherness by a group of British and American expatriates triggers a process which, in Freudian terms, could be characterised as the surfacing of the repressed subconscious. In this paper I shall discuss the problematics of self-representation in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* by applying concepts from Edward Said's (1979) *Orientalism*, Jean Baudrillard's (1988) *America*, Peter Brook's (1998) *Reading for the Plot*, and Kristeva's (1982) *Strangers to Ourselves*, to Hemingway's novel.

I shall argue that the novel deals with a sense of deepening dislocation and that each stage of the geographical dislocation undergone – either collectively or individually – by the characters corresponds to a different degree of psychological tension and turmoil experienced individually by each member of the group. I shall further argue that, as the characters become increasingly immersed in a culture which they perceive as being exotic and focused mainly on

physicality, their fears, frustrations, prejudices, and traumas become increasingly visible. In other words, it is everything that is strange – and therefore Oriental – within each character that emerges and becomes impossible to repress. Finally, it will be argued that the journey to Spain is actually a journey within the Self which is part of an ongoing process of self-discovery.

2. Fascination and Repulsion

In his article “Whiteness and the Rejected Other in ‘*The Sun Also Rises*’” Daniel S. Traber (2012) discusses the way in which Jake’s character is influenced by his relationship with Robert Cohn, a relationship which is highly contradictory, in the sense that it involves both rejection and identification. He argues that Jake’s portrayal as a complex character can help the reader to understand Hemingway’s own approach to the theme of Otherness throughout his novels. He argues that:

Hemingway’s evaluation and treatment of forms of otherness according to a rejected notion of centred whiteness reveals a complicated critical politics existing simultaneously with prejudice. Jake’s convoluted identity quest allows us to see how marginality is deployed by Hemingway, and Jake’s refusal of particular othered identities exposes something other than a facile bigotry. (Traber 2012:124)

He argues that although Jake is certainly depicted as a prejudiced character, his responses whenever he encounters an instance of Otherness are ambiguous, and so is his relationship with Cohn:

Hemingway ensures that any analysis of Jake is slippery because so many of his statements about Cohn are contradictory as articulations of either inclusion or exclusion. Jake says he likes Cohn (he even includes him in his prayers at the cathedral in Pamplona [97]), but will later claim to dislike him; he feels sorry for Cohn and then deliberately withholds sympathy; he feminizes Cohn as highly emotional and childish, yet has this unmasculine man physically conquer the novel’s two code heroes by knocking Jake out and pummeling Pedro Romero into a bloody mess. (Traber 2012:129)

Furthermore, the relationship between Jake and Robert as a relationship between centre and margin is not as clear-cut as it might seem at a first glance: Jake is a Catholic – and thus himself the target of religious discrimination – whereas Robert comes from a highly privileged family. Traber also argues that – surprisingly enough – Jake’s final rejection of Cohn does not occur as a consequence of the latter’s Otherness, but rather as a consequence of his failure to embody it. To be more specific, Cohn’s belonging to the American upper-class subdues his marginality: he is simply not strange enough for Jake to regard as “a source of otherness” (Traber 2012:130). Traber’s interpretation of *The Sun Also Rises* draws attention to the fact that the relationship between Self and Other as cultural representation highly depends on circumstantial and individual factors. In order to understand the complex dynamics of representations, one can analyse Jean Baudrillard’s *America*.

In *America* Jean Baudrillard (1988) describes the New World as an intriguing yet somewhat charming world of contrasts. Baudrillard is both fascinated and appalled by the paradox which is America and his French/European prejudices clearly pervade his description of America and of Americans. The concept can be reversed and applied to *The Sun Also Rises* by arguing that continental Europe causes the American expatriate to experience the same reaction of awe and repulsion that America causes the European traveller to experience.

The description of the Spanish landscape as something strange and fascinating is rather similar to Baudrillard’s description of the American landscape. In *America* Baudrillard describes his journey through Porterville, California:

The journey here through forests of orange trees, their leaves a deep, geometric green, laid out neatly on wild hillsides that are carpeted with undulating grass like animal fur and resemble the hills of Tuscany. A driveway lined by fifty palm trees, all the same height and absolutely symmetrical, leads up to a planter's house that is minuscule by comparison. (Baudrillard 1988:64)

Baudrillard manages to provide such a detailed description of the setting because he is unfamiliar with it and thus he can notice details which an American might fail to notice due to the fact that such views are part of his/her daily experience. Hemingway's description of the Spanish landscape is similar:

The road went along the summit of the Col and then dropped down, and the driver had to honk, and slow up, and turn out to avoid running into two donkeys that were sleeping in the road. We came down out of the mountains and through an oak forest, and there were white cattle grazing in the forest. Down below there were grassy plains and clear streams, and then we crossed a stream and went through a gloomy little village, and started to climb again. We climbed up and up and crossed another high Col and turned along it, and the road ran down to the right, and we saw a whole new range of mountains off to the south, all brown and baked-looking and furrowed in strange shapes. (Hemingway 1995:49)

However, it is in Hemingway's account of the bull-fight that the sense of fascination combined with repulsion mentioned above is most visible. To Hemingway – and to his characters –, Spain is the same paradox that America is to Baudrillard.

3. Orientalism

In his book *Orientalism* Edward Said (1979) argued that our perception of the world is marked by an opposition between the East and the West, an opposition which originated in the way in which Westerners have always portrayed Easterners. He believes that the Orient and "the Oriental" are regarded as primitive, uncivilised, and dangerous, and that they ultimately embody the idea of "Otherness". Said's concept of "Orientalism" can be extended and applied to Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* by analysing the way in which the French, the Spanish, and arguably the other members of the group are portrayed as Oriental.

It is important to point out the fact that the concept of Orientalism is not restricted to the idea of a geographical opposition between East and West. Orientalism is an approach to the world and to one's own identity, an approach which is based on a complex perspective made up of a series of political and cultural constructs pertaining to the Orient and the way in which they are viewed by Westerners. In other words, Orientalism is a system of representation in which the cultural self is defined by means of its opposite. Therefore, Orientalism can be regarded as a post-structuralist concept based on the idea that the value of a sign depends solely on its position within a system and on its relationship to the other signs. Therefore, the sign cannot be defined on the basis of any internal or self-referring content, but only through the other signs to which it relates.

In *The Sun Also Rises* the characters fail to define themselves in terms of their personalities; their way of behaving is the mere result of their placement within a system which is able to provide them with something that is foreign and strange to them as Westerners. At the beginning of the novel, there seems to be a sense of unity among the members of the group. At this stage, the expatriate group can be regarded as a collective character standing for the image of the Occidental, while Paris is perceived as a strange Oriental place. However, even at this early stage, tension seems to build up: Cohn yearns for an exotic experience and wishes to travel to South America, and later on falls in love with Brett; Jake on the other hand becomes increasingly frustrated because he knows that his relationship with Brett can never be physical due to his impotence.

As shown above, when approached from an Orientalist perspective, the concept of Self in *The Sun Also Rises* cannot exist without the concept of Other. Self-representation thus becomes negative definition, and the problematics of identity is reduced to a series of binary oppositions. The Westerner does not need the image of the Oriental in order to define himself; he needs the Oriental in order to exist. However, regarding Hemingway's characters as mere cultural constructions seems a rather reductive approach, as the drama experienced by the characters is also related to the repression and, later on, rediscovery of those primal drives that eschew any kind of cultural boundaries.

It can be argued that, as soon as the characters get to Spain, the boundaries between Oriental and Occidental become blurred, as each character starts looking for signs of "Otherness" in everyone else. As they become immersed in what is perceived as an exotic culture, they all discover their own Oriental side. For example, Cohn's obsession with Brett becomes overwhelming, turning him into an irrational man who acts solely on instinct. Despite being repeatedly rejected by Brett, he pursues her with determination. Cohn himself is perceived in terms of his Jewishness – and implicitly as an Oriental – by Mike and even by Jake. While in Spain, Brett also gives into her passion for Pedro Romero and forgets about her engagement to Mike and her love for Jake.

4. The Stranger Within

This rediscovery of passions and instincts, which can be regarded as the rediscovery of the "Oriental within", can be linked to Julia Kristeva's (1982) theory of *l'étranger*, as expounded in her book *Strangers to Ourselves*. Kristeva adds a psychoanalytical dimension to the post-structuralist approach to identity. While in Said's (1979) theory of identity, the Other is always extrinsic to the Self, in Kristeva's view the Other is actually part of the Self. Kristeva argues that:

The image of hatred and of the other, a foreigner is neither a romantic victim of our clannish ignorance, nor the intruder responsible for the ills of the polis. Neither the apocalypse on the move nor the instant adversary to be eliminated for the sake of appeasing the group. Strangely, the foreigner lives within us: he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode, the time in which understanding and affinity founder. (Kristeva 1982:6)

The representation of the Spanish as Oriental is therefore part of a wider process of self-representation. While noticing the strangeness of the Spanish, the characters are actually confronted with the uneasiness of rediscovering those parts of themselves which they perceive as strange and possibly shameful, and which have consequently been buried deep within the subconsciousness. The resurfacing of those primal impulses triggers the illusion of an extrinsic "foreigner". To be more specific, it is when the characters fail to make sense of what is going on within the Self that they project the supposedly reprehensible aspects of it outwards and generate the image of the despicable foreigner.

5. Searching for Meaning

In his book *Reading for the Plot* Peter Brooks (1998) argued that Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is a "detective story gone modernist" (Brooks 1998:238), in the sense that it deals with the uncovering of narratives. Unlike the traditional detective story, whose narrative deals with discovering facts and uncovering criminals, *Heart of Darkness* deals with uncovering planes of narrative, and recovering relationships. The intricate narrative structure of *Heart of Darkness* is in fact based on a series of repetitions and re-tracings of steps which had already been taken. As the narrative layers unfold, and the plot seems to develop, the

reader notices that this development is merely a repetition. To be more specific, Marlow's journey in search for Kurtz is in fact Kurtz's journey. Marlow does not discover anything, but merely uncovers Kurtz's journey, and recovers something that he had lost. Therefore, Marlow's journey into "the heart of darkness" is in fact a journey in search for "lossness".

Peter Brooks also argued that there is no governing order in the narrative, and that the plot seems to be "a repeated 'trying out' of orders" (Brooks 1998:242). Despite the fact that an ultimate order is not achieved, this repeated quest for order – which echoes Marlow's journey in that it seeks to restore something that had been lost by retracing previous layers of narrative order – is in fact a quest for meaning:

Yet the orders tried out in *Heart of Darkness* may in their very tenuousness be necessary to the process of striving toward meaning: as if to say that the plotting of the stories remains necessary even where we have ceased to believe in the plots we use. Certain minimum canons of readability remain necessary if we are able to discern the locus of the necessarily unreadable. (Brooks 1998:242)

It is the same journey in search of "lossness" that we encounter in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. When the characters travel to Spain, they merely uncover their own frustrations, impulses, and relationships to both themselves and to the other members of the expatriate group. For example, Brett's affair with Pedro Romero can be interpreted as an attempt to uncover her frustrations related to the impossibility of having any kind of physical relationship with Jake.

6. Conclusion

The way in which the characters in *The Sun Also Rises* perceive themselves and everyone else shows that defining the relationship between Self and Other is a rather complex task. As shown in this essay, the Orientalist approach to this problem places both Self and Other within a system of representation based on oppositions, thus denying the Self any real essence, and implying that the relationship between the two is prone to constant change. However, the relationship between the two concepts is not merely one of external opposition; the Self's perception of the Other is shaped by the Self's essence (the essence includes drives, and instincts), and not by its position within a system. The Self is a complex entity which is capable of reflection upon itself. It is this self-reflexive capacity that makes Brett and Jake's love possible.

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