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Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*: A study in thematic aspects

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Abstract--Ernest Miller Hemingway (1899-1961) a famous American Nobel laureate (1954), is considered the master of art and literature not only of American Literature but also of world literature. The famous novel *The Sun Also Rises* is one of Hemingway's major war novels that sets the flags for a generation that endured war and cultural disillusionment. In this novel Hemingway concentrates on the artificiality and desperation of the life bred by the First World War. It deals with the post-war disillusionment and moral disorder that left human being shattered. In its pervasive mood of cynicism and revolt with established values, the novel encompasses many themes starting from war to love and disillusionment from traditional values. The paper sets out to investigate major thematic aspects that are considered to the core of the novel *The Sun Also Rises*. It also tries to examine the effects of war on culture and people.

Keywords--War, life, disillusionment, moral values, culture.

1. Introduction

Ernest Hemingway is classified among the most important pioneers of the American literature in the modern era, whose writings topped as one of global literary works because of its simple style, easy ideas with reliable and accurate descriptive sentences, which make the reader able to imagine incarnate the hero while he was challenging and handle those adversities, he accompanied his epoch to contribute to flourishing the golden literature calling for freedom and progress. *The Sun Also Rises* is Hemingway's best war book. In a very real sense all of Hemingway's fiction is war fiction. A brilliant achievement in organizing post-war tensions, pressures, and situations, *The Sun Also Rises* offers a concentrated

picture of the 1920s. This novel is considered the first significant novel by Ernest Hemingway, published in 1926. The epigraphs of the novel, *The Sun Also Rises* were aimed by Hemingway at his own generation. He says so in its two epigraphs. One is from *Ecclesiastes*: "One generation pass the away and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth forever" (Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*). The other is Gertrude Stein's reechoed judgement: "You are all, a lost generation" (1). So the book's title, selected by Hemingway (at the recommendation of his publisher) is taken from *Ecclesiastes* 1:5: "*the sun also ariseth.*" Hemingway's original title for the work was *Fiesta*, which was used in the UK and Spanish edition of the novel.

2. Objectives

The present study has been confined to an examination of only the thematic aspect of Hemingway's work *The Sun Also Rises*. *The Sun Also Rises* is Hemingway's major war novel that set the flags for a generation. In this novel Hemingway concentrates on the artificiality and desperation of the life bred by the First World War. It deals with the post-war disillusionment and moral disorder. In its pervasive mood of cynicism and disillusionment with established values.

Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* displays how American and the British expatriates travel from Paris to the festival in Pampola to watch the running of the bulls and the bullfights. Jake Barnes, a protagonist of the novel, is unable to have sex because of his war wound. On the other hand, Lady Brett Ashley is presented as an expatriate American Journalist living in Paris and is having numerous love affairs with men. *The Sun Also Rises* is divided into three books. In book I, Hemingway talks about Jack and Robert Cohn and their illegitimate relationship with a prostitute. Book II deals with the story of Jack joined by Bill Gorton and the third book shows the characters in the aftermath of the fiesta. Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* presents a picture of emptiness through the empty barges.

The Sun Also Rises caught the mood of its times. It renders the definitive account of the war-oppressed sterile society. Its characters, with the possible exception of Romero who is not sick, physically or emotionally, suffer acutely because of the war. Jake Barnes is the worst affected by the war, being emasculated by a war wound. Hemingway, who also emerged scarred and wounded from the trenches of the Italian field in the First World War, transmuted his biographical experiences both thematically and artistically in to the texture of *The Sun Also Rises*. An excerpt from cultural history, *The Sun Also Rises* is a study of the post-war predicament and atmosphere. By depicting life in the post-war period it sets forth the manners of the twenties. In the words of Arthur Mizener, "*The Sun Also Rises* is the supreme realistic image of the romantic attitude toward private experience as it existed in the twenties, perhaps the last period of American society in which the private life was still lived in the public world." It presents the life of the disillusioned and dissolute expatriates living in the cafes of Paris on the left Bank of the Seine. There were small inexpensive hotels inhabited by a large number of American expatriates. A swarm of artists, play-boys, intellectuals, would-be psychotics, neurotics, homo-sexuals, and fakes gathered at the left Bank of the Seine. Hemingway wrote about these American expatriates: "They are nearly all loafers expending the energy that an artist puts into his creative work in talking

about what they are going to do and condemning the work of all artists who have gained any degree of recognition.” Bill Gorton in *The Sun Also Rises* also satirize the wastrel kind of expatriate: 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. *The Sun Also Rises* is thus also the story of rootless and homeless expatriates, Americans who move from hotel room to hotel room around Europe. Jake, Brett, Cohn and Milk are far from their homes for different reasons, especially because they are misfits in their own societies. Jake and his friends are rootless characters who drift about Europe, restless, bored, without any real occupation. Superficially their lives are seems to be in a gay social whirl- a continuous round of parties, dinners and pleasure trips. Yet it does not take long to sense the desperation that underlies their pleasure- seeking. These characters are an extremely small minority of the people who survived the First World War, but they portray in an alien setting the problems of those whose lives have been permanently unsettled by the experiences of war. While Hemingway does not belabour the point, none of his characters, with the exception of Pedro Romero, are completely normal because of what has happened to them in the crucible of war. In their heavy drinking, their reckless spending, and their promiscuity they are trying to forget their own pain, or to find happiness that persistently eludes them. *The Sun Also Rises* is essentially the story of sick people, not necessarily physically sick, although Jake Barnes, the narrator protagonist, is definitely a cripple. There is hardly a character in the book that is not thwarted. Here, everybody is sick, observes Georgette, the prostitute whom Jake Barnes had picked up for company’s sake. Drink, sex, and sports like fishing and bull-fighting are opiates at least because they are a temporary means of escape from inner turmoil. They drink, dance and merry, and are happy to all appearances, but in reality they are extremely unhappy in their hearts for some reason or other. Their lot was one of unrelieved misery, in spite of their surface gaiety. They drifted, drank, dissipated, and disappeared. It was an irresponsible Bohemian life.

3. Major Themes in *The Sun Also Rises*

- **The Lost Generation:** *The Sun Also Rises* uses the major theme of the lost generation borrowed from Gertrude Stein’s phrase. Jake Barnes shows it through his personal dilemma that he has become the victim of WWI and cannot fulfill his emotional and physical needs. Family and friends have lost importance for him; also religion could not provide him any solace. Whether they go to fiesta or Pamplona, it is all the same for him as well as Robert Cohn, while Brett is constantly on the flight from one man to another, finding love and relationship which are hard to come by. The epigraphic beginning of the novel shows this generation as the lost generation.
- **Impotent Patriarchy:** Instead of portraying muscular males, the author has preferred to demonstrate impotent and fangless patriarchy in the physical traits of Jake Barnes and Robert Cohn. Jake not only embodies emasculation but also shows impotence and helplessness when it comes to

showing love to others. Sexuality is deeply ingrained in love that Jake shows but does not flow. The abusive attitude of femininity toward and abuse also emerges through Cohn who has borne it patiently at the hands of Brett. When the homosexuals arrange a dance with Brett, they also issue threats to Jake, mocking his impotence. His praise for Romero, perhaps, points to his latent desire for having manly power to show heroics he cannot in this situation. However, Romero is too feminine to demonstrate the author's heroic codes. Yet, Jake remains graceful a hero though his powerless patriarchal demonstration has rather stifled his image.

- **Sexuality and Bull-fighting:** Despite his being terse and concise, the author intermingles different thematic strands. He has placed parallel themes of sexuality and bullfighting in a way that whereas Brett seems sexually attractive, she also likes Romero, a great bullfighter. However, her attraction toward Romero also jeopardizes her commitment to Jake. Although Jake seems a bull eluded by Brett, yet there is a difference between bull-fighting and leading a successful and mature life.
- **Aimlessness:** The theme of aimlessness in life is evident from the meeting of Jake and Brett as they cannot marry. Jake's impotence caused by war and Brett's commitment to him bind them together but yet doesn't fulfill their lives. They are to live with each other through escapist activities. Their escapades to Spain, their drinking and dancing activities, their commitment to hook Romero for Brett are activities having no real aim or goal. These are typical activities of this generation they are engaged in to pass their time.
- **Power of Sexuality:** The novel shows the theme of the power of sexuality through the character of Brett, who loves and commits herself to Jake yet she cannot stay with him forever because of his impotence. On the other hand, she also cannot marry anybody else as she has committed herself to Jake. Therefore, despite leading a liberal life of having sexual relations with others, her sexuality does not allow her to break her commitment and involve herself with somebody else.
- **Destructiveness of War:** The novel, though, does not show scenes from the war, it shows the impacts of the destruction of this madness on men and women alike. Jake, who has participated in the war, has lost his sexual power. That is why his feelings toward others have changed as he is unable to make love to Brett whose dissatisfaction leads almost all of them to enjoy life in trivial activities without engaging in real-life struggle.
- **Love:** The Sun Also Rises shows the thematic strand of love through the character of Brett and Jake. She loves Jake yet she cannot stay without sex, which leads her to leave for Spain to watch bullfighting and form relations

with Romero. However, she also cannot stay with Romero or any other man due to her love for Jake.

- **Nature and Regeneration:** The novel uses the theme of nature and regeneration through Jake and Brett as well as their friend Bill with whom Jake goes fishing. Their visit to San Sebastian, Jake's bathing in the war, and their drinking and fiesta enjoyment all point to their efforts to regenerate after the destructiveness of WWI.
- **Dissatisfaction:** The character of Lady Brett Ashley shows dissatisfaction with life. She loves Jake but she also loves intimacy whereas WWI's battle wounds made Jake impotent. Her obsession with both renders both of them dissatisfied with each other as well as of life, the reason that they visit bars, enjoy fiesta and visit Pamplona to watch bullfighting.

4. Conclusions

On the surface the novel is a love story between the protagonist Jake Barnes—a man whose war wound has made him impotent—and the promiscuous divorcée Lady Brett Ashley. Brett's affair with Robert Cohn causes Jake to be upset and break off his friendship with Cohn; her seduction of the 19-year-old matador Romero causes Jake to lose his good reputation among the Spaniards in Pamplona. The novel is a roman à clef; the characters are based on real people and the action is based on real events. In the novel, Hemingway presents his notion that the "Lost Generation", considered to have been decadent, dissolute and irretrievably damaged by World War I, was resilient and strong. Additionally, Hemingway investigates the themes of love, death, renewal in nature, and the nature of masculinity.

The Sun Also Rises is, in the words of its author Ernest Hemingway, a “damn tragedy,” of “the slice-of life” kind. The characters, many of them are neurotics and their world is that of desperate gaiety and the atmosphere is gloomy, filled with futility and lostness. There is a total denial of values and in this mood of nihilism and utter gloom there is a will to survive and ultimately to prevail.

The Sun Also Rises is not a cheap exploitation of post-war interest in immoralities, but a perceptive portrayal of the human condition within the rigorous limits of circumstance, which the post-war world had imposed. It reveals the men and women who lived in this closed, secular world isolated from tradition for what they genuinely were; above all it shows them working painfully for an adjustment, with all the problems of adjustment increased and intensified.

Hemingway saw the human condition in starkly honest post-war terms. He angrily brushed aside conventional palliatives, dismissed the shams of literary explanation, and obstinately risked what seemed absurdities and obscenities to reach the naked, raw, quivering core of human fear and hysteria. His overpowering honesty produced a work of art that is at the same time a literal ordering of a historical emotional experience. As a result his major characters,

Brett and Jake, are often pathetic creatures. This novel portrays a whole generation damaged in the disaster of war. Each one of the characters dies several times; he learns how to live with some of his troubles, how to overcome the others. We see the characters of the novel express their bitterness, their feeling of disenchantment, with calculated bravado. They act like people who have not fully grown up and who lack the self-awareness to realize this. They possess no desire to grow up. There is something they always try to escape from. It is the past and they try not to talk or think about it. They live for the present, constantly searching for new and fresh sensation.

Hemingway's style is simple and his prose is easily recognized For the most part it is colloquial! Characterized chiefly by a conscientious simplicity of diction and sentence structure. The words which he uses are short and curiously fresh. When we read this novel we feel that Hemingway has listened almost painfully to his characters to get the flavor of their speech, their own particular rhythms, and their methods of expressiveness. In his writing, he is a reporter that writes his story with a minimum of words. For example, in describing the famous scenes in the bull-fight ring, he never stops to outline a panorama but keeps the description, like matador, close to the bull. All though the novel, events are described strictly in the sequence in which they occurred; no mind reorders or analyses them, and perception comes to the reader unmixed with the comment from author. The simplicity of such description shows Hemingway's wonderful art in writing.

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