

Ernest Hemingway

The Sun Also Rises

Objectives

1. Summarize how Hemingway's novel trains readers how to read.
2. Identify Hemingway's blurring of explicit and implicit meaning.
3. Relate *The Sun Also Rises* to its historical context after World War I.
4. Describe instances of Hemingway's "iceberg" or "theory of omission" method of writing.
5. Analyze Hemingway's depictions and critiques of masculinity.
6. Identify the pilgrimage in the novel and propose a meaning for it.
7. Use close reading and implicit meanings to describe how money and alcohol function in the novel.

Reading Assignment

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Sun Also Rises*.

Commentary

[Hemingway](#) is a far more difficult author than the simplicity of his prose suggests. This is, in many respects, the greatest challenge and the greatest reward for reading Hemingway – he is both extremely easy and extremely difficult. The contrast lies between his clear and simple prose versus his unstated or implicit meanings. This leads many readers to assume they've "understood" Hemingway by simply reading him. Before we consider Hemingway in his social context, we must first recognize how he trains us to be more careful and more critical readers, and this will be the first section of this Unit.

The first chapter of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* trains his readers to take great care. This is because, despite Hemingway's clear and simple prose, his meanings are not clear and simple. For instance, Chapter 1 begins with what seems to be a very straightforward and clear introduction of our first-person narrator, Jake Barnes, and his friend Robert Cohn, as well as Cohn's girlfriend Frances. However, we close this chapter with deception from each of the three characters and their attempts to communicate in indirect or implicit ways that hide meaning from each other. Frances kicks Jake under the table when she wants him to stop suggesting a travel vacation but does not want Robert to know this (7), Robert says he wants to buy a newspaper when

he actually wants to have a private conversation with Jake that Frances cannot know about (7), and Jake reminds Cohn how to make his lies to Frances convincing by reminding him “You forgot to get your paper” (8). Although the language in this first chapter is direct and almost rudimentary, Hemingway is reminding the reader that deception and indirect communication play a large role in the lives of these characters (and therefore in the novel as well). The reader, thus, cannot trust the clear and plain prose of the novel, and we are encouraged to return to the opening anti-Semitic tone of the chapter with new skepticism and curiosity. If our characters lie, then we cannot fully trust what they say – this means we must read more carefully and watch for moments when words and actions contradict each other.

If these reminders were not enough, Hemingway then devotes an entire paragraph at the start of Chapter II to arguing a text can have a significant influence over a person’s life, even a deleterious effect:

He had been reading W.H. Hudson. That sounds like an innocent occupation, but Cohn had read and reread “The Purple Land.” “The Purple Land” is a very sinister book if read too late in life. It recounts splendid imaginary amorous adventures of a perfect English gentleman in an intensely romantic land, the scenery of which is very well described. For a man to take it at thirty-four as a guide-book to what life holds is about as safe as it would be for a man of the same age to enter Wall Street direct from a French convent.... Cohn, I believe, took every word of “The Purple Land” as literally as though it had been an R.G. Dun report.... It was all that was needed to set him off. (9–10)

The overt function of this passage is to warn readers against reading *this* novel (*The Sun Also Rises*) in the same way that Cohn reads Hudson’s *The Purple Land* (a real novel from 1885 that makes a colonial spectacle out of South America in order to titillate and excite the imperial British reading public). The reader, therefore, should approach Hemingway with suspicion and without a desire to emulate Hemingway’s characters – Hemingway is not offering a moral path through which one could live. Instead, he is offering a critique of his period.

In this manner, we as readers are primed to be aware of the difference between question and answer, such as when, in a Parisian bar, “Cohn looked at the bottles in bins around the wall. ‘This is a good place,’ he said” to which Jake responds “‘There’s a lot of liquor,’ I agreed” (11). While this simple and clear statement might not draw attention, Hemingway’s previous examples of complex language, suggestions, and implications leads the reader to notice “a good place” is in conflict with “a lot of liquor” (11). In other words, the two

characters are talking about very different things – for Cohn it is a place for friendship and for Jake it is a place for alcohol, and hence they mean different things even when they make similar statements.

If we become too willing to trust Hemingway, he reminds us that Cohn’s problems come from his unwise desire to trust a book: “He got the first idea out of a book, and I suppose the second came out of a book too” (12). If we still remain unconvinced, Hemingway proves to us that we cannot trust what our narrator, Jake, tells us

I put my hand on [Cohn’s] shoulder. He shook his head. “I can’t do it,” he said, and put his head deeper into his arms. “I can’t do it. Nothing will make me do it.”

“Robert,” I said, and shook him by the shoulder. He looked up.

He smiled and blinked.

“Did I talk out loud just then?”

“Something. But it wasn’t clear.” (13)

In the final line of this quoted passage, Jake could obviously not tell us what Cohn says if “it wasn’t clear” (13). This tells the careful reader that Jake is casually lying to Cohn, just as Jake may be casually lying to his readers. We have a deeply untrustworthy narrative voice in *The Sun Also Rises*.

The questions we must pose ourselves as readers, then, is what does this chapter do to set up the novel and our own reading habits for Hemingway’s prose? After reading the first few chapters, how are we being “prepared” for reading the rest of the novel? Does it train us to read in any particular way? If so, how would we read differently?

Perhaps the best example of our “training” as readers appears at the beginning of Chapter III. Jake has caught the eye of a prostitute in Paris, although the novel never identifies her as such (14). She sits with him while they drink Pernod (a typically French alcoholic drink that tastes of aniseed and turns milky with water), and the problems of the novel are first presented in an indirect manner while we are goaded to read more carefully.

Jake begins by asking her “are you going to buy me dinner” (14), which shows he is not saying what he means – it is a joke because he is asking if she wants him to buy *her* dinner. This is immediately followed by Jake’s observation that “She grinned and I saw why she made a point of not laughing. With her mouth closed she was a rather pretty girl” (14). This avoids actually stating that she has rotten teeth yet indirectly communicates the same information – if we read carefully, the indirect information about when she is pretty (when he mouth is closed...) tells us all about when she is not. However, these “lies” or communications through irony or indirect statements are further complicated by Jake telling the truth in a way that the girl does not believe – when she asks about the clocks on the building for the

New York *Herald* newspaper, he tells her “They show the hour all over America’,” and she does not believe him (15). So, our characters understand each other by lying and fail to understand each other when they tell the truth, all within a single paragraph. If, as readers, we pay attention to these problems, then we will adjust our reading habits.

This finally leads to the major unstated problem when Jake tells us “She cuddled up against me and I put my arm around her. She looked up to be kissed... and I put her hand away” (15) – the explanation for this surprise is her question “You sick?” and his answer “Yes.” (15). The nature of Jake’s “sickness” is never explicitly stated in the novel, but by implication we understand that Jake was wounded in Italy in the [First World War](#) (16) in a way that has left him either impotent or castrated.

This is a strongly felt “gap” or absence in the text. We realize that Jake is “sick,” but we also realize that we are not being specifically told why. By emphasizing this early in the novel, Hemingway makes his reader recognize the untrustworthy nature of his narrator and the confusion that very clear writing can create. However, this is only one problem for us as readers. At the same time as Jake’s problem is presented to us, some of his symbolic “solutions” are also explained, though they are explained equally indirectly. In the same passage as Jake tells us about the girl’s teeth and his own injury, he also begins a repeated and nearly compulsive behavior that continues across the rest of the book – he “buys” her dinner while he “paid” for their drinks with a person whose company he is “paying” for.

The role of money and “paying” in the novel will become increasingly urgent as we read on.

The Iceberg

Hemingway used what he called the “iceberg” technique or his “theory of omission,” which is a stylistic device in which the emotional centre or crux of the narrative is missing, yet “the omitted parts of the tale may generate the core feeling of the text” (Stoneback 4). Like an iceberg, this means that only a tiny tip of the “iceberg” (the emotional substance of the story) is visible to readers who nonetheless realize that the large body of the iceberg is invisible below the water level (ie: the emotional weight of the story is below the surface or is implicit rather than explicit). Readers may think of this in particularly difficult emotional conversations in real life, outside of the text – how often do we avoid speaking directly of something that is emotionally important, even while discussing it with other people who understand the topic? By introducing his readers to characters who are discussing such emotionally intense materials, Hemingway guides us to read more attentively and carefully, even while he is careful to craft his prose in a manner that is extremely precise and clear.

This technique is very common in Hemingway's works. His story "Hills Like White Elephants" consists of a discussion between two lovers who are contemplating an abortion, yet the topic is never explicitly broached – instead, their indirect conversation and the landscape described in the story tell the reader about their emotional challenges and decisions. Jake's war wound is another such "iceberg." There are many other such moments in his novels and short stories.

Social Context

During the First World War, Hemingway (1899–1961) served in the Red Cross as an ambulance driver in Italy. He was badly wounded in the Italian front lines and had shrapnel wounds in both legs, which left him in hospital for six months, although he was not permanently injured from these wounds. After the war, in 1921, he began serving *The Toronto Star* (newspaper) as the foreign correspondent for Paris. There he met [Sylvia Beach](#), [Ezra Pound](#), [Gertrude Stein](#), [Pablo Picasso](#), and many other modernists.

This time period after the First World War was also marked by unstable exchange rates, which often gave the American dollar a great advantage in Europe – a casually working American who had a modest but reliable salary in American dollars could live quite well in France. Many American writers took advantage of this, and the "Americans in Paris" moment arrived. Many writers from Canada and the USA moved to Paris or London to take advantage of exchange rates, and Hemingway among them.

The Sun Also Rises was first published in 1926, one year after [F. Scott Fitzgerald](#)'s *The Great Gatsby*. Fitzgerald and Hemingway were good friends, though Hemingway also competed with Fitzgerald, and both of their books are deeply concerned with the American Dream. They were also both responding to the preceding generation of American authors who had become famous in the modernist movement, in particular [T.S. Eliot](#) and Ezra Pound, as well as the Irish writer [James Joyce](#). Hemingway, despite his very clear prose, was also closely tied to the extraordinarily experimental writer Gertrude Stein.

Religious Pilgrimage & Jake's Stations of the Cross

Coded in the locations and narrative of the novel is another of Hemingway's "answers" to the problems his characters face. The scholar and folk musician H.R. Stoneback first brought the theme of religious pilgrimage in the novel to scholars' attention in his article "From the rue Saint-Jacques to the Pass of Roland to the 'Unfinished Church on the Edge of the Cliff'" in 1986. This proved to be a remarkable surprise to Hemingway readers, most of whom knew of Hemingway's Catholicism but had not recognized the importance of the religious pilgrimage to Spain in the novel. It was obvious to all

readers that Jake prayed in Catholic churches in both Paris and Pamplona, but the importance of his travels as a religious pilgrimage had remained unnoticed. A pilgrimage is a journey that fulfills an important spiritual or religious obligation, and it has played a major role in English literature for centuries. It is a part of the quest narratives of Medieval literature and creates the narrative form for Geoffrey Chaucer's poem *The Canterbury Tales* (from the late 14th century) which consists of a series of stories (or tales) told by pilgrims on their way to the Canterbury Cathedral.

Jake highlights his summer journeys to Spain by saying "I go to Spain in the summertime" (10), which he does every year. This annual journey for the bullfights and fishing expedition become the narrative crux of the novel.

The typical Catholic pilgrimage, identified by Stoneback, would be to Santiago in what is called "The Way of St. James" or El Camino de Santiago in Spanish, which is also known as the Chemins de Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle in French. It was one of the most important Medieval pilgrimage routes, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and has been in continual use for more than 1,000 years. As a practicing Catholic, Hemingway is unlikely to have done this by coincidence or accident – it was a choice.

As Stoneback argues, Pamplona is one of the "stations" in the pilgrimage journey, and although Jake does not complete his pilgrimage to Santiago, this event does symbolically take place in his late novella *The Old Man and the Sea*. Jake's pilgrimage occurs in the novel after his prayer in Paris (86) and continues through his travels in Spain. Stoneback draws our attention to the very clear yet very confusing discussion of Saint Jacques Street in Paris. The connection of this place to the themes of the novel (drinking, Jake's love for Brett, and healing) is implicit:

"Want to have a drink?" [Jake asked]

"No," said Bill. "I don't need it."

We turned to the right off the Place Contrescarpe, walking along smooth narrow streets with high old houses on both sides. Some of the houses jutted out toward the street. Others were cut back. We came onto the Rue du Pot de Fer and followed it along until it brought us to the rigid north and south of the Rue Saint Jacques and then walked south, past Val de Grace, set back behind the courtyard and the iron fence, to the Boulevard du Port Royal. (70)

The illustrative passage, for Stoneback, is "the rigid north and south of the Rue Saint Jacques" (70), which he noticed while living on the street. The Rue Saint Jacques does not run North and South, and it is a typically Medieval street in that it does not run in a straight line – it is

convoluted and curving. Given Hemingway's normal accuracy and precision, this peculiarity led him to then notice in the same passage that "Val-de-Grâce" was a hospital for wounded soldiers built in 1645 dedicated to the Virgin Mary (Jake is a wounded soldier). Hence, the "Rue Saint Jacques" becomes the way of Saint Jacques or the Pilgrimage of Saint James, the pilgrimage from Paris to Santiago for Catholic believers. We are also then reminded that our narrator is "Jake" – the name is etymologically the same for Jacob, James, and Jacques. Hence, Jake is on the Street of Saint "Jake," walking the pilgrimage path of Saint "Jake" (El Camino de Santiago or Chemins de Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle) as he travels to Spain with his friends.

Stoneback then goes on to tie the cut portions of the novel, which can still be read in manuscripts, to the various pilgrimage themes in the novel, as well as a variety of other materials. The problem for us as readers is how to consider the novel as a religious pilgrimage seeking healing and salvation – the fact that Jake does not complete his trip to Santiago and does not see the monastery along the way seems to suggest he is a failed pilgrim. However, by reading the story, we are brought into the pilgrimage, perhaps with the task of completing it.

Gender & Identity

Hemingway's constructions of gender have undergone significant critical reappraisals over time. During his lifetime, Hemingway was regarded as a stereotypically masculine writer – he went on big game safaris, could box, and was popularly associated with all things "manly." This shaped how people understood his novels, and they were generally seen as ultra-masculine performances of heteronormative masculinity. However, after Hemingway's death, his unfinished novels and his manuscript drafts for his published novels became available – his posthumously published works revealed a very different writer. *The Garden of Eden*, a novel first published in 1986, twenty-five years after Hemingway's death, reveals his ongoing interests in ambiguous gender roles and androgynous characters. This overt experimentation with confused or uncertain gendered identities then led critics to reconsider how gender works in Hemingway's earlier novels, such as *The Sun Also Rises*.

A simple yet difficult to notice component of gender in *The Sun Also Rises* is the parallel Hemingway creates between Brett and Romero – both are described using the same terms, despite their differences of gender. Brett is described as an object of desire by Cohn and Jake in the same terms that Jake and Montoya use to describe Romero as a bullfighter:

“There’s a certain quality about her, a certain *fineness*. She seems to be absolutely *fine* and *straight*.”
[says Cohn]

“She’s very nice.” [responds Jake] (35)

The parallel appears when Jake and Montoya visit Romero as he prepares for the bullfight:

He was standing, *straight* and handsome and altogether by himself, alone in the room with the hangers-on as we shut the door.

“He’s a *fine* boy, don’t you think so?” Montoya asked.

“He’s a good-looking kid,” I said. (144)

The implication is both that Brett is masculine but also that the qualities that make her attractive to Jake are the same qualities that make him admire the bullfighters.

Similar concerns over gender appear when the bulls are discussed in relation to steers (118, 124–126). Steers are castrated bulls, which reminds the reader of Jake’s injury but also becomes a way of discrediting Cohn.

We might also consider Lady Brett Ashley, in particular the ambiguity emphasized by her name: *Lady* Brett (female and male). Now that we are trained by Hemingway as readers, how do we approach Brett’s first major appearance in the novel? What themes emerge, and how do we deal with them?

Gender ambiguity is also made noticeable when Brett (apart from simply her masculine name) takes on male clothing and includes herself in the term “chap,” which normally refers only to men (20, 30, 52, & 145).

Another major question is how Jake’s chequebook becomes a surrogate form of masculinity to make up for his injury.

A good exercise for understanding how Hemingway overlaps these various themes is to read, very closely, the opening few pages of Chapter IV in Book I (24–27). Payment, gender, and the “iceberg” are present in nearly every sentence on these pages, and we are made, as readers, aware of the extent of the challenges facing Jake and Brett.

Understanding Hemingway Through Close Readings

Now that we have a method for close reading established, how do we make sense of the “iceberg” under the themes we’ve previously noted?

Money

Consider just how often the book mentions money, paying, or the cost of something. For instance, across Book I, who pays for everything? Invariably, it is Jake... Specific passages should catch our attention, such as money and the “exchange of values” (65–66), Mike’s jealousy over someone buying a hat for Brett in contrast to his own bankruptcy (71–2), and Jake’s prayer in Pamplona for money (86–87), and the nearly obsessive repetitions of getting one’s money’s worth or the price of various things.

The strongest comparison appears between pages 65–66 and 130–131. The “exchange of values” and “learning to get your money’s worth” (131) coincide with discussions of gender, alcoholism, and other major themes. The symbolic function of the “bill” in this scene (130–131) is important to the novel as a whole and will likely revise how you understand money functioning across the book. The scene can also be compared to the closing of the novel, in which the same “valuable qualities” and “exchange of values” again recur (206).

In the same theme, you might consider how bankruptcy, money, and paying function across the novel as a whole. What problems does money symbolically solve? How?

Alcohol

Although Hemingway is often seen as an alcoholic writer, the symbolic function of alcohol in his early novels is a matter of much debate. For instance, as you read *The Sun Also Rises*, you may be surprised by the enormous amount of alcohol that the characters consume as well as the portion of their lives that they spend drunk or “tight” in the slang of the period. Nevertheless, is alcohol also a symbol in this novel, like “paying” or money can be? For instance, what does it mean when Brett says “I can’t just stay tight all the time.” (162)? She’s referring to her own alcoholism, but it’s also an admission of the emotional crisis that is unstated in the dialogue that precedes it on the page (161–162).

Questions for Self-Review

1. What do money and alcohol *mean* in Hemingway’s novel?
2. How do race and gender function in *The Sun Also Rises*? Is Hemingway sincere or ironic when he discusses gender and race?
3. Is Hemingway portraying a “good” image of the American Dream?
4. Apart from the plot of the romantic relationship between Jake and Brett, what is the importance of Jake’s injury to the novel?

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