

ROBERT COHN IN THE SUN ALSO RISES:

A FAILURE OF VISION

A Thesis

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## ABSTRACT

Robert Cohn in The Sun Also Rises is Hemingway's fullest treatment of the "messy" person, the person who surrenders to his illusions. Cohn's difference from Jake Barnes and his expatriate friends is one of the central points of the novel. Through contrast with Cohn, the qualities of the "initiates" are brought into sharper relief.

Cohn's abject failure as a human being is basically a failure of vision. His refusal to conform in this "society" of expatriates does not indicate the strength of his individuality but, rather, his weakness and his lack of insight.

For those who would condemn the promiscuity, drunkenness, self-indulgence, and seemingly empty cynicism of Jake and his fellow exiles, Cohn offers an alternative. Egocentricity insulates him from the emotional shock the others experience as the aftermath of World War I. Cohn fails to recognize, as they do, the erosion of traditional values and institutions or the necessity for self-discipline in a world where man's life is meaningless beyond the transient order the individual can impose.

Cohn's romantic idealization of Brett Ashley is only symptomatic of the larger gap in his awareness. The same factors that lead him to pursue Brett also blind him to the values that Hemingway affirms within the novel.

## INTRODUCTION

After several decades of condemnation, Robert Cohn in The Sun Also Rises has begun to draw his share of defenders. Borrowing a phrase from Mark Twain, Arthur L. Scott suggests that "almost every critic" of Hemingway's work has looked Cohn over "'like as if he was hunting for a place on him that he could despise the most.'"<sup>1</sup> Scott attributes Cohn's "curious unpopularity" among readers and critics to an overly emotional reaction to the story and to the temptation to find a "tidy explanation of the book's theme" in Cohn's obvious differences from the other characters.<sup>2</sup> Scott's assertion that "Cohn should be respected rather than despised for not conforming" has sparked a number of other spirited arguments in Cohn's defense.<sup>3</sup>

Robert O. Stephens finds that the Quixotic motif plays an important part in the novel's structure, and he concludes that Cohn's illusions are essentially valuable.<sup>4</sup> Paul Lauter shares with Stephens and Scott the view that Cohn represents the "innocent outsider struggling to achieve his ideal in an alien social world."<sup>5</sup> He relates Cohn to Fitzgerald's Gatsby in his attempt to impose "on a sick and wasting world his individual order, an order

founded. . . on 'his Platonic conception of himself.'"<sup>6</sup>  
 Finally, he questions whether Cohn's "passive 'niceness'" cannot be "the way of salvation, the way, to borrow Emerson's phrase, of 'advancing on Chaos and the Dark.'"<sup>7</sup> Michael J. Hoffman discusses Cohn's significance in relation to the development of the modern Jewish character in literature. Like Lauter, he suggests that Cohn is annoying to the other expatriates chiefly because he forces them to think.<sup>8</sup> For Hoffman, Cohn, by speaking of death to Jake in an early conversation, "has asked the forbidden metaphysical question"--forbidden because, by Hemingway's code,

One is to live one's life with the fact of death as an unspoken assumption, but to focus consciousness on this, to reduce it from the magic of silence to the banality of words is to focus too much conscious attention on the self. The self is taboo.<sup>9</sup>

As Hoffman does above, each of these discussions, in attempting to vindicate Cohn, finds it necessary to limit or distort "the code" as Hemingway presents it in this novel. Scott suggests, "The code demands that amorous diversions be casual and brief."<sup>10</sup> For Stephens, the code demands only "undemonstrative suffering."<sup>11</sup> Lauter refers to "a tight-lipped code with which to face, and an absinthe fog in which to forget, the depredations of reality," although he grants that Hemingway's theme goes, ultimately, beyond this.<sup>12</sup> Hoffman describes the code as "preeminently a public thing, a social maneuver, needing other people to bring it off. It needs lots of light and lots of noise."<sup>13</sup>

Thus, all of these critics deny that the "initiates" have anything of value to offer in the place of Cohn's romantic illusions.

This study attempts to look Cohn over once more and to find the "place on him" that most deserves contempt. Robert Penn Warren, one of Hemingway's earliest major critics, writes of the "messy people, the people who surrender to the flow and illusion of things."<sup>14</sup> This description, more than Don Quixote's armor or Jay Gatsby's pink suit, seems appropriate to Cohn. The how and the why of Cohn's messiness are the focus of this discussion. In condemning Cohn, this study will try to show that Hemingway does, in fact, offer values that are preferable, within the scope of the novel, to the factors that govern Cohn's behavior.

## I

Cohn is the central figure of the first two chapters, and he is given a more detailed biography than any other character in the novel.<sup>15</sup> Jake begins his narration with an account of Cohn's experiences in college, in romance, and in his chosen career.

He cared nothing for boxing, in fact he disliked it, but he learned it painfully and thoroughly to counteract the feeling of inferiority and shyness he had felt on being treated as a Jew at Princeton.<sup>16</sup>

"A nice boy, a friendly boy, and very shy," belonging to "one of the richest Jewish families in New York, and . . . one of the oldest" (p. 4), Cohn was embittered by this first taste of social prejudice. Through boxing he found

a certain inner comfort in knowing he could knock down anybody who was snooty to him, although, being very shy and a thoroughly nice boy, he never fought except in the gym (p. 3).

After college, Cohn's experiences with women, money, and a literary career prove equally unsatisfying. Married five years to "the first girl who was nice to him," Cohn

lost most of the fifty thousand dollars his father had left him. . . hardened into a rather unattractive mould under domestic unhappiness with a rich wife; and just when he had made up his mind to leave his wife she left him and went off with a miniature-painter (p. 4).

Divorced, Cohn "fell among literary people" (p. 4) as

another might fall among thieves, became sole editor and supporter of "a review of the Arts," and, having "discovered he liked the authority of editing. . . was sorry when the magazine became too expensive and he had to give it up" (p. 5). Turning to the creative side of literature, he wrote "not really such a bad novel as the critics later called it, although it was a very poor novel" (pp. 5-6).

Jake termed Cohn's wife's desertion "a very healthful shock" (p. 4), but the salutary effect of this did not prevent his being "taken in hand" by the "very forceful" and opportunistic Frances Clyne and being "sure that he loved her" (p. 5). As years passed and her beauty began to fade, however, France's attitude toward Cohn "changed from one of careless possession and exploitation to the absolute determination that he should marry her" (p. 5). Jake's narration couples this with the facts that Cohn's present solvency depends on a generous "allowance" provided by his mother, and that during the two and a half years he has spent with Frances, "I do not believe that Robert Cohn looked at another woman" (p. 5).

The first chapter establishes a pattern in Cohn's behavior of passivity, bad judgment, and unconscious willingness to be dominated by women. The latter quality explains his expatriation. To please Frances, he has spent several years abroad, although, "like many people living in Europe, he would rather have been in America" (p. 5). Cohn

is not an expatriate by choice, but by default; and this factor contributes to the spiritual distance between Cohn and the rest of Jake's circle.

Jake identifies himself as Cohn's "tennis friend" (p. 5); and his attitude toward Cohn in the first chapter, if critical, is not without indulgence: "I rather liked him and evidently [Frances] led him quite a life" (p. 7). But in the second chapter, two events occur which begin to qualify Jake's liking: the book Cohn has written is accepted for publication in America, and a book he reads fires his imagination with a tale of adventure and romance. After spending a winter in New York, Cohn returns to Paris "not so simple, and. . .not so nice" (p. 8).

The publishers had praised his novel pretty highly and it rather went to his head. . . .Also, playing for higher stakes than he could afford. . .he had held cards and won several hundred dollars. It made him rather vain of his bridge game. . . (pp. 8-9).

Coming after "the rotten time he had in college" (p. 8), financial disasters, and a broken marriage, this success gives Cohn's ego a boost. Feeling a surge of independence, "he talked several times of how a man could always make a living at bridge if he were ever forced to" (p. 9). Jake emphasizes, however, that the discovery that he is desirable to women makes the greatest impression on Cohn.

. . .I think that was where Frances lost him, because several women were nice to him in New York, and when he came back he was quite changed. . . .he realized that he was an attractive quantity to women, and that the fact of a woman caring for him and wanting to live with him

was not simply a divine miracle. This changed him so that he was not so pleasant to have around (pp. 8-9).

In the light of Frances's later accusations, it is significant that only at this point does Cohn begin to have second thoughts about marrying her.

In conjunction with his new-found vanity, which Jake terms at first a "healthy conceit" (p. 45), the seeds of fantasy find fertile ground in Cohn's imagination:

. . .Cohn had read and reread "The Purple Land". . .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. . . .Cohn, I believe, took every word. . . as literally as though it had been an R. G. Dun report. . . .It was all that was needed to set him off (p. 9).

Struck with the sudden realization that he will not live forever, that his life "is going by," and that he is not "taking advantage of it" (p. 11), Cohn attempts to convince Jake to go with him to South America.<sup>17</sup> It is easy to assume from this passage--and Cohn's subsequent actions--that he is at heart an incurable romantic. Jake, however, makes clear Cohn's dependence on what he reads in books to shape his thoughts; and their conversation suggests that stubbornness more than sincere conviction underlies his "romantic" inclinations. Refusing South America, Jake proposes an alternative:

"Did you ever think about going to British East Africa to shoot?"  
 "No, I wouldn't like that."

"I'd go there with you."

"No; that doesn't interest me."

"That's because you never read a book about it. Go on and read a book all full of love affairs with the beautiful shiny black princesses."

"I want to go to South America" (p. 10).

Cohn rejects, also, the idea that he start living his life in Paris, which leads Jake, later, to speculate that this "incapacity to enjoy Paris" came from reading Mencken (p. 42).

Despite the childish persistence of Cohn's argument, Jake is not without sympathy for him. Assuming that his wish to travel reflects a deeper desire to escape dissatisfaction with himself, Jake offers advice drawn from his personal experience: "I've tried all that. You can't get away from yourself by moving from one place to another" (p. 11). The reason this makes no impression on Cohn is suggested at the close of the chapter. Asleep in Jake's office, he cries out in a nightmare: "I can't do it. Nothing will make me do it" (p. 12). In going to South America, Cohn does not want to escape from himself but, rather, from his promise to marry Frances. He confirms this the next day when Jake asks him why he doesn't "start off" on his own (p. 37). Cohn replies, "Frances. . . wouldn't like it" (pp. 37-38). Cohn needs Jake to come with him in order to justify the trip to himself. Without Jake's company, he cannot blithely forget that being engaged to Frances creates "certain obligations to her" (p. 38). But another way of avoiding these obligations

soon offers itself. "The Purple Land" of amorous adventures, which Cohn had envisioned as South America, is realized in "the promised land" he beholds with his first glimpse of Lady Brett Ashley (p. 22).

Before Brett, Jake felt sure, Cohn "had never been in love in his life" (p. 8). He emphasizes that this love completes the change in personality that began with Cohn's trip to America:

Somehow I feel I have not shown Robert Cohn clearly. The reason is that until he fell in love with Brett, I never heard him make one remark that would, in any way, detach him from other people (p. 45).

With Brett, for the first time, Cohn finds himself in the role of the pursuer rather than the pursued; and this more manly status seems to act as a goad to his egotism and his obstinacy. In addition, Jake is not unaware that Cohn's behavior, in general, displays a marked immaturity. He sees in Cohn "a funny sort of undergraduate quality" and a "boyish sort of cheerfulness"--traits that are objectified by Cohn's continuing to wear his collegiate polo shirts (p. 45). That Cohn, at thirty-four, is still an "emotional adolescent"<sup>18</sup> is indicated through his exchange with Harvey Stone, an "initiate" and barroom philosopher.

Asked what he would do if he could do anything he wanted, Cohn replies,

"I think I'd rather play football again with what I know about handling myself, now."  
"I misjudged you," Harvey said. "You're

not a moron. You're only a case of arrested development" (p. 44).

This suggestion is ironically confirmed by Cohn's reaction to it. He threatens, "Some day somebody will push your face in" (p. 44), exactly as he might have done in a college boxing ring. Cohn's football days preceded college and were spent at a military prep-school where he had "played a very good end" and "no one had made him race-conscious" (p. 4). His answer to Stone's question, perhaps, expresses an unconscious desire to return to this "state of innocence." The fact is, though, that his Princeton-ingrained race-consciousness has become a "painful self-consciousness" (p. 4); and the aggressive reaction he had resorted to only when victimized by prejudice now surfaces often and under a variety of circumstances. In Jake's opinion, being in love causes Cohn to develop "a wonderful quality of bringing out the worst in anybody" (p. 98). Cohn's vanity, stubbornness, immaturity, and tendency toward unnecessarily aggressive behavior are all established early in the novel and contribute to his growing unpopularity as the novel progresses.

## II

Deciding why Cohn has an alienating effect on others, what makes him so completely an outsider, and how he can be at once "pitiful" and "nice" but "just so awful" (p. 101) is a basic problem the novel poses. To solve it requires looking beyond Jake's opening presentation and comparing Cohn's attitudes and actions with those of the other characters.

The Paris section of the novel sets up an opposition between the artistic, decadent, pleasure-seeking Latin Quarter on the Left Bank and "the other side of town" (p. 29), the working man's Paris where Jake lives and has his office. The Seine flowing between them, the long taxi rides, and Brett's refusal to visit Jake at work (as well as her failure to meet him, as planned, at the right bank Hotel Crillon) emphasize the physical and spiritual distance that separates these areas. Jake moves easily between both worlds, not corrupted by the one or trapped and stultified by the other: "It was always pleasant crossing bridges in Paris" (p. 41). Cohn, on the other hand, wanders back and forth finding no real purpose in either.

Count Mippipolous reigns as the novel's supreme hedonist and provides, in Book I, the most important contrast

to Cohn. He enjoys the Quarter but is also a businessman in America. Having "been in seven wars and four revolutions" (p. 60), he has led the adventurous life in exotic places that Cohn wishes for himself. The count's philosophy offers one possible answer to Cohn's fear of aging: "I can't stand it to think my life is going by so fast and I'm not really living it" (p. 10). For the count, "It is because I have lived very much that now I can enjoy everything so well. . . .That is the secret. You must get to know the values" (p. 61). Value, for the count, is determined by sensual enjoyment. His belief in the importance of gratification through the senses marks him for Brett as "one of us" (pp. 32, 60) even before she sees the scars that indicate his experience and suffering. The count does not fear growing old, he is superlative in his generosity, and his values are based on concrete reality rather than on outward forms and appearances. His concept of "value" is limited, but he is free of the illusions and pretensions so conspicuous in Robert Cohn's make-up. Rejecting immediate pleasures in favor of visions gained from books, Cohn ignores his physical senses and is unable to simply enjoy himself.

That Cohn's physical vision is faulty ironically contributes to this state. As Jake comments, when Cohn meets him at the Bayonne station, "He was a little near-sighted. I had never noticed it before" (p. 89). This poor eyesight resulted from Cohn's last year at Princeton,

where "he read too much and took to wearing spectacles" (p. 3). Implicit in Cohn's sight impairment is that he sees, like a tourist, with no true depth or insight, and that reading "too much" has restricted his ability to appreciate or evaluate reality. The instance in Bayonne of Cohn and Jake looking at a cathedral together suggests both the "tourist" and the "bookish" aspects of Cohn's blindness. For Jake, "It seemed like a nice cathedral, nice and dim, like Spanish churches." But Cohn feels called upon to make "some remark about it being a very good example of something or other, I forget what" (p. 90). If this in itself is hardly damning, it stands as symptomatic of Cohn's broader failure to see what life offers him--or even to look in the right places.

The experience of crossing the border into Spain, with the accompanying change in scenery, is exhilarating for Jake and Bill; but Cohn does not share their enthusiasm.

I was up in front with the driver and I turned around. Robert Cohn was asleep, but Bill looked and nodded his head (p. 93).

The feeling of love for Spain that these two can affirm together, Cohn is untouched by. The fishing trip to Burguete and the bull-ring in Pamplona, especially on the last day of the fiesta, represent high points in the novel's moral structure, as the bal musette in the Rue de la Montagne might be said to represent its moral nadir. Appropriately, it is in this dancing-club that Cohn first

meets and falls in love with Brett. It is equally appropriate that Cohn absents himself from both the fishing and the last, triumphant bull-fight.

The Englishman Wilson-Harris in Burguete serves, like the count, to emphasize Cohn's deficiencies. He replaces Cohn as Jake and Bill's companion and shares with them the love of nature, of fishing, and of "utilizing" wine (p. 128) that Cohn, in the throes of his passion for Brett, willfully cuts himself off from. Burguete provides sensations of a different quality from those obtainable in the Latin Quarter. In contrast to the moral nausea Jake experiences in the bal musette and, at times, in the cafes of Pamplona, these sensations bring "health, pleasure, beauty and a sense of order;" further, "they are part of a healing process, a private and imaginative means of wiping out the damages of civilized life."<sup>19</sup> Wilson-Harris reveals his spiritual affinity to Jake and Bill when he agrees that a tour of the monastery at Roncevalles is pleasant but not "the same," not as meaningful as fishing (p. 128); and again when he eschews the fiesta in Pamplona in favor of having more time to fish for the "enormous trout" (p. 127). Like Jake and Bill, he recognizes the importance of moments of recuperation and peace; but Cohn, not realizing the extent of his own damage, feels no necessity to participate in this cure.

The spirit of masculine camaraderie flourishes in Burguete, and friendship is a quality of special value to

the Englishman. He shows his appreciation through insistent generosity: "I wish you would let me pay for it. It does give me pleasure, you know" (p. 129). In recognition of the good time they have had together, he gives them both on parting the memento of a dozen hand-tied flies. A brief telegram from Cohn arrives to contrast both with the Englishman's generosity and with an amiable letter just received from Mike.

"What a lousy telegram!" I said. "He could send ten words for the same price. 'I come Thursday'. That gives you a lot of dope, doesn't it?"

"It gives you all the dope that's of interest to Cohn" (p. 128).

It is chiefly in contrast to the value others place on generosity that Cohn's apparent stinginess becomes significant. In a novel which places great emphasis on sums of money, what they purchase, and who pays, Cohn is seldom credited with paying for anything.<sup>20</sup> Jake is always careful to tip adequately and to pay his share of any expense. Further, he willingly subsidizes "starving" Harvey Stone and returns to Madrid at the end of the novel to pay Brett's hotel bill. Through Romero, however, who is also a man of generosity, the bill had already been paid. The Basques on the bus to Burguete share their wine in the spirit of comradeship, as the peasants during the fiesta are anxious to share wine and even their meal with Mike and Jake. Deriving variously from sympathy, fellowship, or a sense of fair play, this generosity comes naturally to those who display it and is missing just as naturally in Cohn.

Mike is a bankrupt, Stone a panhandler, and Brett, getting "hell's own amount of credit" on her title (p. 57), shows, to a lesser degree, the opportunistic traits of Frances Clyne. But Cohn's abuse of money is far more serious and culpable than theirs. The money he receives from his wealthy family allows him to behave with cavalier disregard for the feelings of others. Failing in his attempt to buy Jake's company for a trip to South America (p. 10), he is more successful in buying his way out of his engagement to Frances. Her insinuation that he tries to get rid of her cheaply is even more to his discredit:

You were only going to give me a hundred pounds, weren't you, Robert? But I made him give me two hundred. He's really very generous. Aren't you, Robert? (p. 49).

She sees her dismissal as parallel to the fate of the "little secretary" she had persuaded Cohn to get rid of, "and he didn't even pay her fare back to the coast" (p. 50). Scott says of this incident, with apparently unintended irony, that Cohn "exhibits toward Frances the same decent responsibility which Jake shows when he leaves money for the street-walker."<sup>21</sup> What is decent in Jake's gesture, however, becomes indecent in Cohn's. If Frances has used Cohn, she is also "fond of him" and would like to bear his children (p. 47). The extent of her bitterness toward him suggests a deeper cause than the loss of the security of marriage. Whether or not she has been wronged, she is clearly a woman scorned. By offering payment in a situation where values are

reckoned in terms other than the exchange of cash for services rendered, Cohn implies that Frances is now, in his eyes, little better than a whore.

Listening to Frances berate Cohn, Jake wonders, "Why did he sit there? Why did he keep on taking it like that?" (p. 51). Much later, after their abortive fist fight, he will wonder why Cohn hadn't "hit someone the first time he was insulted, and then gone away" (p. 199). This time, however, he can provide an answer: "He was so sure that Brett loved him. He was going to stay, and true love would conquer all" (p. 199). Refusing to see that Brett does not love him, Cohn seems to have fallen in love with the idea of being in love.

Frances had suggested that the idea of having a mistress was more important to Cohn than the actual fact: "if he doesn't marry me, why, then he's had one," and, "if he marries me, like he's always promised he would, that would be the end of all the romance" (p. 51). Jake seems to be making a similar point when he comments on the pleasure Cohn derives from being in Brett's presence:

It seemed to make him happy. It must have been pleasant for him to see her looking so lovely, and know he had been away with her and that everyone knew it. They could not take that away from him (p. 146).

To leave Brett, admitting that their affair "didn't mean anything" (p. 181), would also "be the end of all the romance"; but to stay, confessing his love and enduring

insults for love's sake, serves to intensify the "romance" of Cohn's adventure. Being made to suffer for his love seems to confirm for Cohn the idea that he is in love:

Cohn still sat at the table. His face had the sallow, yellow look it got when he was insulted, but somehow he seemed to be enjoying it. The childish, drunken heroics of it. It was his affair with a lady of title (p. 178).

Cohn's willingness to suffer, tightness with money, airs of superiority, and talent for not knowing when he isn't wanted are also chief characteristics associated with the stereotyped Jew. Several of Cohn's defenders have questioned the extent to which his being Jewish influences the other characters' attitude toward him (and ultimately the reader's). Viewing Cohn basically as a caricature, Hoffman accuses Hemingway of outfitting him "with all the Jew's cliché characteristics. . . using him to set off the Protestant types who are the code followers."<sup>22</sup> Scott comments, "let us not blink the fact that Cohn is a Jew. . . .Mike and Bill dislike Jews. Time after time they make nasty remarks about Cohn's Jewishness. . . ."<sup>23</sup> Mike and Bill also, it seems, dislike "the English" (pp. 180, 188-89), but this does not prevent the one from loving Brett or the other from being friends with Wilson-Harris. Finding even Jake "not immune to this racial bias," Scott concludes that "their prejudice not only colors the story but also blinds them [and "us"] to many of [Cohn's] virtues."<sup>24</sup>

The novel makes reference to a negative Jewish stereotype, but it also recognizes a stereotype of the English (pp. 130, 180), a stereotype of middle-class American Catholics as "snappers" (p. 87), and even, ironically, a stereotype of expatriates (p. 115). Such is the way of the world--and its language--that Hemingway was recording. References to Cohn's having "a hard, Jewish, stubborn streak" (p. 10), acting "superior and Jewish" (p. 96), and, above all, showing, through his "sad Jewish face" (p. 177), his "damned suffering" (p. 182) come only when he has succeeded in annoying his particular critic almost past endurance. A remark by Mike helps to put the novel's use of epithet into its proper perspective. Angered by the problems arising from Brett's infidelities, he reports, "I gave her a fearful hiding about Jews and Bull-fighters, and all those sort of people. . ." (p. 203). This bull-fighter symbolizes the moral pinnacle of the novel, but in Mike's context his "type" becomes almost a dirty word. Rather than blinding the others to his virtues, Cohn's Jewishness seems only to provide the convenient outlet of name-calling for their irritation with him.

Jake's presentation of Cohn raises some question of his reliability as a narrator. His jealousy would constitute motive enough for offering a distorted view of Cohn's character. An extreme reading goes so far as to suggest that Jake sees Cohn as a rival and encourages Brett toward

Romero in order to frustrate him.<sup>25</sup> The argument for Jake's prejudice against Cohn would obviously be stronger if it were supported by other conflicts in the novel between Jake's point of view and the given facts. But not only are Jake's judgments elsewhere reliable; in addition, his attitude toward Cohn is shared by the other characters, Cohn's actions confirm Jake's evaluation of him, and what Jake despises in Cohn he despises in anyone who exhibits the same characteristics.

Jake concedes that he was "blind, unforgivingly jealous" of the week Cohn spent with Brett in San Sebastian: "The fact that I took it as a matter of course did not alter that any" (p. 99). What he cannot take as a matter of course, however, is Cohn's self-conscious preening over "what had happened to him":

I do not think I ever really hated him until he had that little spell of superiority. . . and when he went through all that barbering (p. 99).

It is Cohn's reaction more than the fact of his affair with Brett that offends Jake; and if this attitude seems petty in itself, it gains significance in the context of Jake's earlier feelings. He describes his irritation at Cohn's "air of superior knowledge" (p. 95) in terms that recall how he felt when Brett first appeared in the novel, entering the bal musette with a group of homosexuals.

I was very angry. Somehow they always made me angry. I know they are supposed to be amusing, and you should be tolerant,

but I wanted to swing on one, any one, anything to shatter that superior, simpering composure (p. 20).

These qualities annoy him further in "a rising new novelist," also named Robert, who remarks to Jake at the Bal: "Oh, how charmingly you get angry" (p. 21). As the homosexuals dance with Jake's poule Georgette "in deliberate parody of normal love,"<sup>26</sup> so Cohn's fussing and posing as he awaits Brett's arrival seems to Jake to partake of this phoniness.

What Jake despises in Cohn is his superficiality and the unconscious hypocrisy of his manner. Nowhere is this hypocrisy more clearly shown than in the moment of self-righteous indignation when Cohn calls Jake a pimp. In this, it does seem that he has Jake dead to rights; but Jake does not need Cohn to tell him that he has betrayed himself in bringing Brett and Romero together. He knows "It was not pleasant" (p. 187), and he knows why. Cohn's anger at Jake comes mainly from the fact that he wants Brett in his bed and not in Romero's. In Mike's words, having "nearly killed the poor, bloody bull-fighter," Cohn "wanted to take Brett away. Wanted to make an honest woman of her, I imagine" (p. 201). Since all of Brett's lovers, even Jake, would like to marry her, this is hardly evidence of Cohn's superior virtue. Cohn's hypocritical assumption of moral superiority, as much as the insult itself, leads Jake to strike at him. By his action, Jake is not denying that he has behaved like a pimp, but, rather, refusing Cohn the right to call him one.

Through Jake's friend, Montoya, a great aficionado of bull-fighting, Hemingway provides the example of a passion that is realistic and discriminating rather than blinded by egotism and illusion:

Aficion means passion. An aficionado is one who is passionate about the bull-fights. All the good bull-fighters stayed at Montoya's hotel; that is those with aficion stayed there. . . .In Montoya's room were their photographs. . . .The photographs of bull-fighters who had been without aficion Montoya kept in a drawer of his desk. They often had the most flattering inscriptions. But they did not mean anything. One day Montoya took them all out and dropped them in the waste-basket. He did not want them around (pp. 131-32).

The cult of aficion, like the cult of sensation, is based on the importance of knowing the values. An aficionado must be able to distinguish between a "real" and a "fake emotional feeling" arising from a matador's performance (p. 168). What is real, in the bull-ring, does not need to advertise itself; what is fake emphasizes a danger that doesn't exist. The same factors that lead Cohn to reject the idea that a bull-fight has meaning beyond the slaughter of animals also explain his refusal to see that his affair with Brett "didn't mean anything" (p. 181).

Mark Spilka suggests that Cohn's role, on an allegorical level, is that of "the false knight," and

the last chivalric hero, the last defender of an out-worn faith, and his function is to illustrate its present folly--to show us, through the absurdity of his behavior, that romantic love is dead, that one of the great guiding codes of the past no longer operates.<sup>27</sup>

He finds that "Cohn's romanticism explains his key position in the parable": the "Romantic Hero" is a guiltless victim of a world where "distortion of sexual roles" has led woman to step off her "romantic pedestal" and become "the free-wheeling equal of any man."<sup>28</sup> On the level of literal action, however, he points out that Cohn's infatuation with "the pose of manhood"<sup>29</sup> and his emotional immaturity cut him off from the possibility of love. A tension arises in Spilka's argument between the failure he attributes to Cohn on the mythic level, and the failure Cohn achieves within the plot. Imposing a mythic interpretation leads to problems in evaluating Cohn's actions.

Spilka cites the fact that "after their first meeting, [Cohn] describes [Brett] as 'absolutely fine and straight' and nearly strikes Jake for thinking otherwise" as evidence of the romantic zeal of his love.<sup>30</sup> The incident as Hemingway has written it, however, seems to deflate Cohn's pose as a romantic lover. The conversation at first concerns whether Brett would marry someone she did not love. Jake replies in the affirmative; and when Cohn suggests that this is an insult Jake tells him, casually, "Oh, go to hell" (p. 39).

[Cohn] stood up from the table his face white, and stood there white and angry behind the little plates of hors d'oeuvres.

"Sit down," I said, "don't be a fool."

"You've got to take that back."

"Oh, cut out the prep-school stuff."

"Take it back."

"Sure. Anything. I never heard of Brett Ashley. How's that?"

"No. Not that. About me going to hell" (p. 39).

Cohn reacts here not to a slight to Brett, but to what he takes as an affront to his personal dignity. Jake's reference to "prep-school stuff" underlines the significance of this exchange. As with Harvey Stone, Cohn unwittingly displays his college-ingrained sense of inferiority. Forgetting Brett, he is ready, childishly, to hit Jake for this imagined insult to himself.

Spilka finds that Cohn achieves at least a measure of self-knowledge through his confrontation with the "Code Hero," Romero:

. . .Cohn's spirit is completely smashed. From the beginning Cohn has based his manhood on skill at boxing, or upon a woman's love, never upon internal strength; but now when neither skill nor love support him, he has bludgeoned his way to his own emptiness.<sup>31</sup>

Cohn is humiliated in this scene, but there is little evidence that he has learned from Romero's example. He would not have made the "prep-school" gesture of offering to shake hands with Romero, and even Brett, had he realized that their fight was not a contest in the realm of sport, but, for Romero, a trial of manhood in deadly earnest. Having been knocked down fifteen times, Romero does not scruple to hit Cohn, when Cohn finally becomes too ashamed of himself to fight back.

"He ruined Cohn," Mike said. "You know I don't think Cohn will ever want to knock people about again" (p. 203).

Scott's point is well taken when he comments, "If Cohn is actually 'ruined'. . .it is not by Romero but by Brett. Romero is nothing to him. Only Brett has the power to ruin him."<sup>32</sup> As Spilka suggests, Romero's actions demonstrate the "difference between physical and moral victory, between chivalric stubbornness and real self-respect;"<sup>33</sup> but this lesson is lost on Cohn. Brett's rejection and insults destroy Cohn's belief that he has found "true love" with a "lady of title." This, more than the discovery that Brett, as his idol, has feet of clay, is the source of his disillusionment and his resulting misery.

Cohn's tears and abject contrition, displayed for Jake as well as for Romero and Brett, are reminiscent of Frances's words about Cohn's self-pity:

Don't have scenes with your young ladies. Try not to. Because you can't have scenes without crying, and then you pity yourself so much you can't remember what the other person's said (p. 50).

Self-pity in this case, and self-centeredness throughout the novel, indicate the basic difference between Cohn and Romero. While Cohn's ego feeds on any signs of success-- luck at bridge, a published novel, a week spent with Brett-- Romero "talked of his work as something altogether apart from himself. There was nothing conceited or braggartly about him" (p. 174). In the bull-ring or in his fight with Cohn, Romero can show his love for Brett without "any loss to himself": "Because he did not look up to ask if it

pleased he did it all for himself inside, and it strengthened him, and yet he did it for her, too" (p. 216). But Cohn degrades himself through his love and then attempts to blame Brett for his weakness, calling her a "Circe" who "turns men into swine" (p. 144) and a "sadist" when she expresses her attraction to Romero (p. 166).

The priest in A Farewell to Arms defines love as wishing "to do things for. . .to sacrifice for. . .to serve."<sup>34</sup> Cohn's love for Brett, however, is entirely self-serving. Conceived as an escape from Frances, it allows him to feel, for the first time, that he is "taking advantage of" and "really living" his life (pp. 10-11). As long as he is in Brett's presence, Cohn can delude himself into believing that his life has meaning and purpose. Further, since he loves her, it seems to him only fitting that she should reciprocate. If Cohn's stance appears more admirable than Mike's amoral (though bitter) toleration of Brett's lovers of Jake's unhappy pandering to her desires, it is only because Cohn makes his particular demands with such complete naivete.

Speaking of For Whom the Bell Tolls, Robert Penn Warren points out a strain of irony that "runs counter to the ostensible surface direction of the story."

We are prepared to see the Fascist atrocities and the general human kindness of the Loyalists. It happens to work out the other way. . . .the irony affirms that the human values may transcend the party lines.<sup>35</sup>

To an extent, this reverse strain of irony is also present in Robert Cohn's characterization. As the paradox of Cohn's niceness and awfulness troubles Jake and other characters throughout the novel, it equally confuses his critics.

Overemphasizing these contradictory factors leads Scott to insist that Cohn is "talented, serious-minded. . . clean-cut, athletic, and a good loser in sports. . . sympathetic to suffering, generous, loyal, trusting, courageous, and intelligent."<sup>36</sup> Objectively, the novel denies Cohn's talent, generosity, or intelligence; and no gesture of Cohn's suggests that he has sympathy for the suffering of anyone but himself. Harvey Stone's comment that Cohn makes his "big mistake"--the assumption that striking him (or Jake, Mike, or Romero) will "make a difference"--because he is "not intelligent" has a clear ring of truth (p. 40). Whether intelligence or sensitivity better describes what he lacks, Cohn uses his fists in the same misguided way he uses his money. And if the novel does not justify Carlos Baker's assertion of Cohn's "essential cowardice,"<sup>37</sup> neither does it suggest that Cohn's actions are courageous. But in spite of these faults, Cohn remains conventionally "nice" in a clean-cut, athletic, sporting way. If he is too trusting in his optimism and too self-centered in his seriousness, the impression remains that he would never consciously commit

a wrong act. The reader may be tempted, finally, to share Bill's attitude: "I feel sorry about Cohn. . . he had an awful time" (p. 222).

The quixotic aspects of Cohn's nature tend further to exonerate him in the eyes of his defenders. They argue that he signifies the quest of the idealist to find values worthy of reverence in the modern world. Robert O. Stephens, while not denying that Cohn is deluded, suggests that the other characters, Sancho Panzas in effect, not only respect Cohn's idealism but ultimately benefit from his positive example.<sup>38</sup> As Robert Lewis points out, however, Cohn "is much more obsessed with love than Don Quixote ever was, and much less concerned with idealism in spheres beyond love's compass."<sup>39</sup> Cohn resembles the Don in his fatuous dependence on what he reads in books, his chivalric regard for ladies of title, and his propensity to use physical violence to enforce his beliefs. But when egotism rather than idealism supports this stance, the quixotic comedy takes on a sinister note.

Cohn's potential for doing wrong, rather than his actual wrongness in the novel, makes him less the "humorous character" Jackson J. Benson would have him.<sup>40</sup> Describing Hemingway's use of characters that live and act in blind unawareness, Benson himself points to the danger and waste that people like Cohn represent:

Man can become a force aligned with irrationality if he is unaware. The aware man can, with courage, create a temporary, small island of meaning by committing himself to a worthy ideal which brings with it a pattern of behavior that is in itself meaningful. . . .it is the non-meaning created by man himself that often produces the greatest ironies in Hemingway's fiction, perhaps because man need not be unaware, because something could be done. . . .lack of awareness is often a matter of being blinded by one's own ego. . . .<sup>41</sup>

## III

To fit Robert Cohn into the moral perspective of the novel, without exaggeration or distortion, is a delicate process. It is tempting but, perhaps, too much to say that Cohn provides a definition by antithesis of what the Hemingway hero should be. Cohn's basic flaw is an unconscious failure of vision, a blindness which, in its own way, is a wound as gratuitous as Jake's emasculation. Even Cohn's defenders have recognized this fact. Scott speaks of "Cohn's insensitivity to the social and moral climate of his companions."<sup>42</sup> Stephens views Cohn as "so deluded by what he 'knows' that he cannot correctly evaluate what he sees."<sup>43</sup> Hoffman finds that "Cohn fails. . . pathetically, because he cannot reconcile his need to verbalize with his own basic lack of insight."<sup>44</sup>

The "initiates" by Hemingway's code show "a sense of style or good form" that governs their behavior; and Warren suggests that this "style" is significant because it reflects self-discipline.<sup>45</sup> For Warren, technical competence in any endeavor requiring skill or courage or both is an index to moral value in Hemingway's work:

The discipline of the soldier, the form of the athlete, the gameness of the sportsman, the technique of an artist can give some sense of the human order, and can achieve a moral significance.<sup>46</sup>

By this criterion, Romero is outstanding, and Jake and Bill are at least very able men. Mike and Brett maintain a sense of style that to some extent ameliorates their dissipations; but Robert Cohn, outside the tennis court or the boxing ring, shows little sign of discipline in any area of his life.

The "initiates" are those who have come to recognize the ultimate pointlessness of man's existence. Earl Rovit speaks of World War I as the "catalytic agent in releasing the stark factor of nothingness and absurdity at the very root of traditional values."<sup>47</sup> Given this context, "the code and the discipline are important because they can give meaning to life that otherwise seems to have no meaning or justification."<sup>48</sup> The war stands as the "causative background" for the "emotional paralysis" that afflicts the characters of the novel:

The expatriates of The Sun Also Rises are sensitive recorders of the shock which they have suffered and of the distance that has been created between themselves and those back in America who "lived in it /nada/ and never felt it."<sup>49</sup>

Cohn's "messiness" derives from the fact that he, also, does not recognize the "nada" in man's existence. Significantly in contrast to the other expatriates, he is never in any way associated with the war or credited with having taken part in it. The lesson of the war, "the hideous realization that life makes no sense except in those tenuous designs

which enervated man himself imposes upon it,"<sup>50</sup> has not been a part of his formative experience. Hence, Cohn's illusions remain intact, and he feels no need to fall back on the code--on personal discipline--to shape his life.

In the life style of Hemingway's expatriates, self-discipline seems to be lost; but for many of them, drinking and sex have become drugs to be used against the thought of "nada." The count's philosophy epitomizes the pattern Warren describes as "conscious sinking into nature": "if there is at center only nada, then the sure compensation in life, the only reality, is gratification of the appetite, the relish of sensation."<sup>51</sup> The pursuit of sensual pleasure takes on a moral significance only in so far as it is a conscious response to an insight into the nature of man's existence, rather than an unconscious surrender to egotism, appetite, and illusion.

. . .the sinking into nature, even at the level of drinking and mere sexuality, is a self-conscious act. It is not the random gratification of appetite. . . .The initiate in Hemingway's world raises the gratification of appetite to the level of a cult and discipline.<sup>52</sup>

Spilka, Scott and others suggest that Jake Barnes and his friends have no alternative to offer to Cohn's romantic beliefs and blindly egocentric behavior. The structure of the novel, however, indicates that there is a hierarchy of values that opposes Cohn's illusions. The count, Wilson-Harris, Montoya, and Romero reflect values that can endure even in a world where love between men and women, if not

dead, is for the moment held in abeyance. Cohn's failure to recognize these values is the measure and proof of his failure in the novel.

Cohn's despair in his final scene in the novel provides an ironic parody of an individual's confrontation with the idea of ultimate nothingness:

"I just couldn't stand it about Brett. I've been through hell, Jake. It's been simply hell. When I met her down here Brett treated me as though I were a perfect stranger. I just couldn't stand it."

. . . "I've been through such hell, Jake. Now everything's gone. Everything" (p. 194).

Cohn suffers because his world has failed to conform to his illusory image of it, but even his disillusionment with Brett becomes a means of compounding his illusions. The belief that he has lost something confirms for him the idea that he had once possessed it: he had Brett, but now she is gone; he had "everything," but now that is gone also. The action of the novel begins with Cohn's self-pity over the fact of his mortality and his history ends with his implied image of the world in ruins about his feet. Cohn has not been destroyed, but the world has, in his eyes; and he does not recognize that the failure lies not so much with the world as with himself.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Arthur L. Scott, "In Defense of Robert Cohn," College English, 18 (March 1957), 313-14.

<sup>2</sup>Scott, p. 309.

<sup>3</sup>Scott, p. 313.

<sup>4</sup>Robert O. Stephens, "Hemingway's Don Quixote in Pamplona," College English, 23 (December 1961), 216-18.

<sup>5</sup>Paul Lauter, "Plato's Stepchildren, Gatsby and Cohn," Modern Fiction Studies, 9 (Winter 1964), 338.

<sup>6</sup>Lauter, p. 339.

<sup>7</sup>Lauter, p. 343.

<sup>8</sup>Lauter, p. 343.

<sup>9</sup>Michael J. Hoffman, "From Cohn to Herzog," Yale Review, 58 (March 1969), 345-46.

<sup>10</sup>Scott, p. 310.

<sup>11</sup>Stephens, p. 216.

<sup>12</sup>Lauter, p. 346.

<sup>13</sup>Hoffman, p. 344.

<sup>14</sup>Robert Penn Warren, "Ernest Hemingway," Selected Essays (New York: Random House, 1958), p. 112.

<sup>15</sup>Philip Young and Charles W. Mann offer this description of the original beginning of The Sun Also Rises: "First comes Brett, with her marital history, her present legal separation, and the fact of her son. Then we learn how she fell in with Mike Campbell one day at lunch in London, and went to Paris with him, where a hotel had only one free room and it with a double bed, which was the start of that. Mike's background follows, and Chapter I closes with a short account of their life together, mostly sleeping and drinking. Chapter II deals first with Jake-- his undertaking this novel, his life in Paris, his newspaper

job, his dislike of the Quarter and its inhabitants (which he has to go into, he explains, because Cohn had lived there for two years). Next we are told about Cohn himself, and his novel, and how Braddocks got Jake to read it so he wouldn't have to. This leads to the episode at the Closerie des Lilas which is told at more length about Ford Madox Ford (Madox=Braddocks) in A Moveable Feast, with one change. (Hemingway was alone in the nonfictional account; Jake in the novel is with "Alex Muhr"; in the first draft.) Jake explains that he only tells us about Braddocks because he is a friend of Cohn's, and Cohn is the hero of the book. Then it is a little like coming into daylight to read the good old words, 'Robert Cohn was once middleweight champion of Princeton,' which lead into the novel as we know it. (Of which Cohn is in no sense the hero, and Brett something less than the subject.)" "Fitzgerald's Sun Also Rises: Notes and Comment," Hemingway and The Sun Set, ed. Bertram D. Sarason (Washington, D. C.: Microcard Editions, 1972), p. 253.

<sup>16</sup> Ernest Hemingway, The Sun Also Rises (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1926), p. 3. Subsequent references to the novel, within this paper, are taken from this edition.

<sup>17</sup> This is the passage Hoffman refers to in his comments on Cohn and death.

<sup>18</sup> Mark Spilka, "The Death of Love in The Sun Also Rises," Hemingway: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robert P. Weeks (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1962), p. 135.

<sup>19</sup> Spilka, pp. 131-32.

<sup>20</sup> Scott Donaldson, "Hemingway's Morality of Compensation," American Literature, 43 (November 1971), 401.

<sup>21</sup> Scott, p. 314.

<sup>22</sup> Hoffman, p. 275.

<sup>23</sup> Scott, pp. 309-10.

<sup>24</sup> Scott, p. 310.

<sup>25</sup> Lauter, p. 344.

<sup>26</sup> Spilka, p. 130.

<sup>27</sup> Spilka, p. 129.

- <sup>28</sup>Spilka, pp. 129-30.
- <sup>29</sup>Spilka, p. 128.
- <sup>30</sup>Spilka, p. 130.
- <sup>31</sup>Spilka, p. 134.
- <sup>32</sup>Scott, pp. 312-13.
- <sup>33</sup>Spilka, p. 134.
- <sup>34</sup>Ernest Hemingway, A Farewell to Arms (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1929), p. 72.
- <sup>35</sup>Warren, pp. 104-105.
- <sup>36</sup>Scott, p. 314.
- <sup>37</sup>Carlos Baker, Hemingway: The Writer as Artist (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 86.
- <sup>38</sup>Stephens, p. 218.
- <sup>39</sup>Robert W. Lewis, Jr., Hemingway on Love (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1965), p. 22.
- <sup>40</sup>Jackson J. Benson, Hemingway: The Writer's Art of Self-Defense (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1969), p. 35.
- <sup>41</sup>Benson, p. 104.
- <sup>42</sup>Scott, p. 313.
- <sup>43</sup>Stephens, p. 217.
- <sup>44</sup>Hoffman, p. 347.
- <sup>45</sup>Warren, p. 87.
- <sup>46</sup>Warren, p. 87.
- <sup>47</sup>Earl Rovit, "The Sun Also Rises: An Essay in Applied Principles," Studies in The Sun Also Rises, ed. William White (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill Publishing Company, 1969), p. 70.
- <sup>48</sup>Warren, p. 88.
- <sup>49</sup>Rovit, pp. 70-71.

<sup>50</sup>Rovit, p. 70.

<sup>51</sup>Warren, p. 93.

<sup>52</sup>Warren, p. 95.

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