

The First World War, because of the economic, social and emotional scars it left on Europe, had a deep influence on the writers that lived through this period and helped shape the Modernist movement that Ernest Hemingway belonged to. He published *The Sun Also Rises* in 1926 and drew heavily on his own experience as ambulance driver during the war in the crafting of his novel. In this excerpt, the narrator and main protagonist goes back to his apartment in France and goes through a series of nightly rituals before going to bed. However, sleep eludes him as he recalls memories of his being wounded in the war and how this has affected his relationship with a woman he seems to be in love with, Brett.

**This excerpt gives us a glimpse into the mind of a narrator plagued by the traumatic experience of the war, who seems to try to avoid feeling his emotions. It also allows to question the gender relationships in a post war society by hinting at the destruction of traditional European values through the use of heavy irony, which also reveals the limits of language to express trauma.**

It seems relevant to start with the study of a narrator trying to escape trauma that fails in his attempt to stave off his emotional turmoil and then move on to the devastating impact of the war on the narrator and European society, in order to conclude with the shattered genders and difficult relationships in the post WWI society.

## **I- A narrator plagued by trauma**

### **1) A desire to escape something through flight and avoidance**

- moves through several countries : USA, France, Italy = shows desire to flee something unpleasant ?
- A narrator that feels stifled and boxed in (l.12 'opened the wide windows') ; opening of the windows reflects desire to escape something, break free BUT paradoxical actions because he opens the windows yet undresses far away from them = hints at uneasiness within him, fear of being seen ? Fear of people's reaction when seeing him ?
- Strengthened by his reaction at line 15 ('Undressing, I looked at myself in the mirror')= instead of commenting upon his physical appearance, as could be expected, he goes on with a comment about the furniture in the room = shows desire to move away from his own reflection because he is bothered by it, so he tries to focus on something else = hints at trauma
- l.23 ('My head started to work. '), l.38 : opposition between his still body and his mind 'jumping around'

### **2) A failed attempt to stave off his emotional turmoil / unrest**

- Recurring insomnia (l.15, l.21-22) = impossible to find peace in sleep
- Narrator's insomnia mirrors the urban landscape that never sleeps either and accentuates the inner turmoil of the narrator (l.14 'Outside a night train ... They were noisy at night when you could not sleep.')
- Ritualized actions to prevent his thoughts from taking over : careful examination of the mail, doing his accounting, reading the paper cover to cover, putting on his pajamas
- However, the description of those actions is interspersed with bursts of strong emotions linked to memories : form of stream of consciousness that intrudes and reveals the inner unrest of the narrator
- 'It' repeated several times : l.17, l.24, l.29, l.33, l.37, l.38 = trauma that cannot be named because taboo ? Associated with shame ? Attempt to distance himself from the anguish caused by this 'it'.
- Unability 'not to think about it' (l.37) = trauma emerges over and over, needs to be addressed

## **II- The trauma left by the war**

### **1) A narrator left at odds with the traditional vision of masculinity**

- Veteran wounded on 'a joke front'(l.24) = disabled on a battlefield considered as ridiculous and with no impact whatsoever on the war / not very brutal ?

- Narrator rendered impotent by his wound (1.29-30, 1.35) and thus deprived of traditional male attribute, symbol of virility : what defines a man after that ?

- Wound never clearly described, only hinted at : shows how traumatizing this is for the narrator + impossibility to admit it out loud because that would mark him as unmanly.

For example, the Italian colonel considers it as a fate worse than death ; shows how sexual potency is a key factor of masculinity in society, but the war shattered all of this, since other men are in this situation (1.24, 'we were going to form a society')

- Heavy irony throughout the text which shows disillusionment of the narrator and his uncertainty about many things

## **2) A war that destroyed traditional values and turned everything into a joke**

- 'a joke front'

- International war, so many people involved that there is a confusion about the nationalities involved + don't care enough to make a difference ? (1.30 'any foreigner was an Englishman')

- War depicted as deeply ironic ; no glorification of battle whatsoever, reflected in the narrator's injury seen as a kind of cosmic joke (1.17 'Of all the ways to be wounded. I suppose it was funny') = being a soldier brings impotence and humiliation instead of glory

- Destruction of spiritual values = sarcasm and resentment towards the Catholic Church (1.9, 1.36-37) who is unable to help soldiers cope with their emotional scars and whose only advice is 'not to think about it.' It shows the limits of the old system of values, the fact that it is not efficient and relevant anymore + refusal to acknowledge the havoc wreaked on society by the war

## **III- Shattered genders, difficult relationships and the limits of language**

### **1) Traditional gender roles challenged**

- Narrator cannot ignore his wound and its implications anymore when he meets Brett = Question of romantic relationship + shows challenge to masculinity brought about by the new role of women in society / 'run into Brett'(1.34) ) = shock, violent confrontation with all that he was trying to avoid

- The narrator is a man but impotent = loss of traditional male attribute + war wound is no longer a badge of honor but something shameful since it has emasculated him.

- Opposition with Brett, a woman with a man's name + attitude towards sex traditionally linked to men (1.35) = she cannot conceive a romantic relationship without sex and the narrator will never be able to bring her the type of sexual fulfillment that she wants = doomed relationship, source of deep pain for the narrator (1.39-41)

### **2) Traditional norms are no longer relevant and even language is questioned**

- Marriage as a traditional institution mocked by the narrator, prewar norms that do not make sense anymore (1.8-9)

- Uncertainty that pervades all the text : 'I suppose', 'I guess', 'probably' = shows how lost the narrator is + there is no longer a secure framework for people to act and think

- 'funny' used many times in the text with ambiguous meanings = through repetition, the word loses all meaning = reflects a loss of bearings that causes even language to be questioned

- Unability to voice the trauma : 'it', shows limits of language + impossibility to share something so traumatizing, no tools available to cope with it