

Essay: Antisemitism in *THE SUN ALSO RISES* by Ernest Hemingway

There are several comments throughout the text of *The Sun Also Rises* that could be considered anti-Semitic, but particularly in Chapter 17. The comments are made in reference, of course, to Robert Cohn, a Jew. The question I asked was, "Are these derogatory comments made as an attack on Cohn because he is disliked and his Jewishness is merely a convenience thing to attack? Or, is the author, through the various characters who make these remarks, actually anti-Semitic? To understand what the intent was, it is enlightening to understand the author's relationships with the people he used as models for the novel.

It's known that this novel was as much an attack on his "friends" as it was for the rebuttal to Stein's "lost generation" comment. Hemingway based the character of Robert Cohn on a friend he had met in the US, Harold Loeb. These two men had been close friends until the fateful trip to Pamplona, Spain. As in the book, he learned there that Loeb had gone to San Sebastian with Lady Duff, the model for Brett Ashley. Hemingway was in love with Lady Duff, but, because he was married, Lady Duff wouldn't become romantically involved with him out of respect for Hemingway's wife. The incident portrayed in the book is very close to what happened in the real-life trip. However, Harold Loeb did not hit Hemingway, as does Cohn did to Jake. However, there was a verbal battle and they did step outside to duke it out. After this night, though the friendship between Loeb and Hemingway cooled considerably.

Thus, Hemingway's portrayal of Robert Cohn, based on Harold Loeb, is the result of the breach in their friendship. It is clear that he meant to discredit Loeb through his characterization of Cohn. The following comment was made by Kenneth S. Lynn in his 1987 biography of Hemingway:

The author of *The Sun Also Rises* took sadistic delight in degrading the fictional stand-in for Harold Loeb, only to become ashamed of himself in the process and ambivalently sympathetic with Cohn as a result. Through Jake Barnes, Hemingway gave voice to his on-again, off-again feelings. . . [At one point, Jake] says, speaking directly to the reader, "Somehow I feel I have not shown Robert Cohn clearly." Perhaps it was Ernest Hemingway that he was unable to show clearly. (62)

Lynn also goes on to talk about the jealousy felt by Hemingway towards the wealthy Loeb. Harold Loeb was the grandnephew of one of the founders of *Kuhn, Loeb and Company*, and his mother was the second daughter of Meyer Guggenheim, the legendary copper king. (63) Hemingway was further irritated because Loeb had published his first book before he had. So, it appears that Hemingway was possessed with a stinging jealousy which led him to hit back at Loeb in his most vulnerable spot, his Jewishness.

Numerous critics accuse Hemingway with anti-Semitism. But, as one critic says, "It would be most remarkable if [Hemingway] were not anti-Semitic." What he means is that Hemingway was a historical result of the America in which he was raised, he was a product of the times. "Anti-Semitism was so prevalent in the American Twenties that it was unremarkable," says another critic (Michael Reynolds). To give you an example, Henry Ford and his Dearborn *Independent* tried to keep America vigilant against the threat he claimed the Jews posed not only to American but to Western civilization. They believed that the Jews had a master plan for gaining control of the free world, and many Americans believed themselves threatened by a Jewish conspiracy. These fears were heightened by the resurgent of the Ku Klux Klan, which was a student organization on college campuses. So, part of the truth of the novel is its accurate depiction of the era's dislike of Jews.

What I found particularly interesting, in light of the story of Cohn and his alma mater, Princeton, was that by the mid-twenties anti-Semitism was so rampant on college campuses that the president of Harvard presented a quota plan to spread Jewish students thinly to campuses across the country (the plan was not accepted, though). Knowing this shed more light on Jake's initial comments about Cohn when he talked about Cohn's extreme self-consciousness at Princeton because he was a Jew.

However, as I researched this topic, I found something even more interesting in regards to Hemingway's portrayal of Cohn that I thought you might find interesting. This was the manner in which Hemingway sublimated his personal resentments through a series of linguistic games, which he was apparently fond of doing. The critic, Jackson Benson, in his *Hemingway: The Writer's Art of Self-Defense*, says that the novel is full of wordplays which are "so . . . distasteful . . . that much of it will never be discussed in print."

In the original draft of *Sun*, Robert Cohn was named Gerald Kuhn. The name Gerald obviously was blatantly close in sound to name of Harold. "Kuhn" was a direct reference to Loeb's family connection. Hemingway changed Kuhn to Cohn, which was merely re-Hebraicizing the Germanized version of the name Cohan, the Hebrew word for "priest." He thus, clearly connects the character Cohn to Loeb.

Further, another wordplay on the name Cohn is so distasteful as to be considered gutter language. The pronunciation of Cohn is "con," which is the French slang word for the female genitals. Because Cohn is portrayed as the most manly of all the characters (with the exception of Romero), one wonders why does Hemingway underhandedly transform him into a *con*, or in other words, a woman? Obviously, the reader wouldn't know any of this unless they spoke French. Wolfgang Rudat, in his essay "Anti-Semitism in *The Sun Also Rises: Traumas, Jealousies, and the Genesis of Cohn*," suggests:

Harold Loeb was better off financially than Hemingway was . . . Possession of money means the power that Hemingway does not have. This kind of power can be substituted to make up for "impotence," i.e., for the lack of the male's sexual "power." Hemingway might have wished to punish Loeb alias Cohn poetically by presenting him as sexually impotent. . . . Hemingway is transmogrifying the Harold Loeb of the Kuhn-connection into a part of the female anatomy which the French call *con*. (266)

The wordplay may be distasteful, but for Hemingway it, it's his way of "neuter[ing] Loeb as a writer because Hemingway equates the pencil with the phallus." (Rudat 267) Rudat and James Hinkle, a *Sun* expert, claim that the banter between Bill and Jake in *Burguete* (p115) shows this association by Hemingway. Bill says, "Coffee is good for you . . . Caffeine puts a man on her horse and a woman in his grave." Rudat states:

Bill starts out with a bizarrely twisted allusion to the popular belief that caffeine, as . . . "puts lead in your pencil," i.e., gives a man sufficient potency . . . "to be an easy rider." . . . The first joke intended by Bill is that while caffeine is supposed to have a beneficial effect on a man's potency, it would no do the physically maimed Jake any good. . . . Bill is cracking a second joke which is downright brutal: through the gender exchange [substituting her for his, then his for her] . . . Bill is suggesting that Jake's loss of his "pencil" has transformed him from a man into a woman. (268)

There are other Jewish/sexual wordplays, one being the use of the name Jacob for Hemingway's stand-in, Jake. Jacob was one of the more important Hebrew Biblical figures. The explanation is rather involved, and so I won't discuss here. In these anti-Semitic wordplays, "Hemingway is trying to avenge himself in sexual terms on his friend [Loeb], not so much for having slept with the model for Brett Ashley as for publishing a novel before Hemingway did. Hemingway retroactively takes the lead out of Harold Loeb's pencil by removing the pencil altogether and replacing it with a *con*." (270)

All of this, actually, seems to be a paradox when you realize that Cohn is not only the most manly male, except for Romero, but he a curious double for Jake. He appears as though he would be a code hero, but he is not. John will explain just what a code hero is and why Cohn is not.