

Rescuing Fiction | The Sun Also Rises | the unsung chapters in Hemingway's novel

When you have loved three things all your life, from the earliest you can remember; to fish, to shoot and, later, to read; and when, all your life, the necessity to write has been your master, you learn to remember and when you think back you remember more fishing and shooting and reading than anything else, and that is a pleasure.

– Ernest Hemingway, 1935

I sat upon the shore fishing, with the arid plain behind me.

T. S. Eliot, *The Wasteland*, 1922

Back in the 1920s after T.S. Eliot's *The Wasteland* and Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, were published (the novel in 1924) there was an acrimonious dispute whether Hemingway had copied the idea that the modern world was a 'wasteland' from Eliot.

I've never understood this, for the novel and the poem don't conflict. They joined together then, and they remain working together in our time, to show us that something was, and still is, fundamentally wrong with our civilization.

In both book and poem, people roam the human desert searching for real experience, real communication, real feeling, hurrying from place to place, relationship to relationship, and, with those who can afford it, country to country, trying find some authenticity in their lives, or just to forget what has happened so far.

Of course, that can be said of most of human history.

Here we're going to look at something else in *The Sun Also Rises* – the one part that is not in the wasteland, that is mostly ignored by most of the critics, and probably most readers, as just a sideshow to the main story. I'm referring to the journey into the mountains of Jake Barnes and his friend Bill Gorton, to Burguete, and the five days they spend there.

Beongcheon Yu, one of Hemingway's most perceptive critics, declared the the center of the book to be the bull-ring of Pamplona, where matador "Romero stands alone in the stillness performing his priestly rites." For Yu, Romero is the center of the book. All the characters are focused on him,

partly because beautiful Brett Ashley, who has had temporary relationships with most of the men in the party that goes to the fiesta in Pamplona, and who Nick is secretly in love with, focused on nineteen year-old Romero, targeted him, as soon as she met him.

Pedro Romero is motionless in the centre, focused on the bulls he fights, like Eliot's "still point of the turning world." He ignores the antics of the others, at least until Brett finally undermines him and makes him a tragic hero.

That's how Yu sees it, and I don't say he's wrong. But there is something else that's important too, at least for Jake Barnes.

The trip to Spain itself is the beginning of an attempt to escape the wasteland. "The journey from Paris to Pamplona is the pilgrimage to life's center, Yu says, "What it suggests is that life is still possible in Spain."¹

But Jake's thoughts go beyond Pamplona. On the train from Paris, replying to an American woman who asks them if they are going to Biarritz., Jake answers, "No, we're going fishing in Spain."

When they reach the Spanish frontier, at a bridge over a stream where some carabineers are posted with guns on their backs, and they have to stop the car, Jake reports: "We got out and went over to the stream to see if there were any trout."

To any readers who fish themselves, that little remark tells us how much about Jake. We too know how hard it is to pass even small streams or ponds without wondering if there are fish in them. We know immediately that Jake loves fishing.

That not all readers would catch the significance of this last point, tells us something about Hemingway and his sports. He sees himself writing primarily for those who understand. Early in life he seems to have appointed himself one of the "aficionados." He was never concerned about pleasing everyone.

In the case of this trip into the mountains though, anyone who likes being outside connected to Nature should understand what's going on.

Burguete is not in the wasteland. It takes a lot of traveling to get there. Once installed in the Hotel Montoya in Pamplona, they catch a bus to Burguete. It's important that Brett and the others don't come. Originally, the whole group was to go fishing, but Brett and her husband Mike are delayed in San Sebastian, and Robert Cohn, having spent a weekend with Brett recently, which he thinks gives him some entitlement to her, would rather skip fishing to see her again. The three people who, through their bickering, selfishness and childish lack of control will later spoil the fiesta for Jake, are not allowed in Burguete.

Only Bill Horton accompanies Jake. Always ready with warm, inventive, cheerful humor, Bill sees eye to eye with Jake on most things. One senses that Jake would like to be like Bill, and might have been if he hadn't been permanently wounded in the war.

But we also know, from Hemingway's 1924 short story *Big Two-Hearted River*, where Nick Adams, also a veteran of World War I, goes fishing alone in the wilderness of northern Michigan, that, had been no Bill, Jake could have gone fishing alone in Burguete.

By the way, there is no doubt that the novel is based on a real trip that Hemingway and friends

¹ B. Yu in *Hemingway – Five Decades of Criticism* – p.109

made in 1925 to the San Fermin festival in Pamplona. The fictionalized characters match up well with those on the real trip, which angered some of them. Don Stewart, who was a member of that party, said the novel was "little more than a very clever reportorial 'tour de force'".¹

There was a fishing trip to Burguete then too, but here Hemingway altered the story significantly. In 1925 they found the streams ruined by logging operations. They fished for four days and caught nothing. "Fish killed, pools destroyed, dams broken down," Hemingway wrote, "Made me sick."²

In 1925 Hemingway was disappointed in both the fiesta and the fishing. Obviously, in the book he felt fishing had to be a good experience, so he wrote about it that way, removing the loggers and the characters who would have spoiled it.

"Well, I hope you catch something," said the old Basque to Jake on the way to Burguete. Jake hoped so too, and Hemingway, who had to deny him a woman, would not deny him that.

Yes, it takes a lot of travelling to get to Burguete, and this is important to Jake. The trip is describe in detail, especially as they get closer to their destination:

The bus climbed steadily up the road.As we climbed higher, the horizon kept changing. The country was barren and rocks stuck up through the clay.

You still have to get through the wasteland to reach Burguete. But there is something else too – they are going *up*. Even in the car on the way to Pamplona, Jake reported "*the road climbing all the time*." This escape from the wasteland is to a place above it. When he first mentioned the fishing trip earlier in the story, Jake said it was to "Burguete, up in the mountains."

The mountains are for Jake, and for we the readers, what Ezra Pound meant when he said natural objects are "perfect symbols," symbols with profound fundamental meaning.

Then comes a change in the landscape. After the dry, dusty barren land the bus has gone through, they come over a crest in the mountains onto the plateau of Burguete:

.....ahead of us was a rolling green plain, with dark mountains beyond it, These were not the brown heat-backed mountains we had left behind. These were wooded and there were clouds coming down from them.

Anyone who has read Eliot's *Wasteland* might be reminded here of that line late in the poem:

Then a damp gust bringing rain

As we arrive on the plateau of Burguete, we are leaving the wasteland behind. In case we forget how far up we've come, Bill reminds us when he says, "It's cold up here." But the cold is a pleasure. Jake reports of their first night at the inn:

After supper we went up-stairs and smoked and read in bed to keep warm. Once in the night I woke and heard the wind blowing. It felt good to be warm and in bed.

The strong winds suggest a major change, and one is coming. In Paris Jake suffered from insomnia and being in bed was no pleasure. Here he sleeps well, and he is content for the first time.

1 An account of that event can be found in Carlos Baker's biography, *Hemingway – A Life Story*, pages 116 – 119 in the Bantam paperback edition – Don Stewart's remark is on p. 230.

2 *Hemingway – A Life Story* – p. 230

The next morning he gets up early, and sees a changed world. "It had cleared and there were no clouds on the mountains." Goats were sporting playfully outside the inn. The first thing he does is go outside and dig worms.

..... I drove the mattock and loosened a chunk of sod. There were worms underneath. They slid out of sight as I lifted the sod and I dug carefully and got a good many.

More detail, something those who don't like Hemingway find so tiring. Readers who fish though, reading that, know the fond anticipation Jake is feeling; they anticipate with him the fishing that is about to come. They know too that worms are abundant like this only in rich dark soil – in *fertile* soil. Clearly the wasteland has been left behind.

Images of fertility abound in these pages. The night before Jake and Bill ate a bounteous meal, including fried trout (sure to be fresh in this country of trout streams), and a "big bowl of wild strawberries." Crossing a stream later on their way to the Irati river, Jake notices that "in the flat pool beside the stream tadpoles spotted the sand." Frogs have been breeding.

The Irati river doesn't just have trout, "it's full of them" Jake says, who has been there before. "This is country," Bill replies.

We're out of the wasteland, but there is still far to go. The hike to the Irati is arduous and takes most of the morning. Only when they reach the river is Jake's journey over. He lets Bill go fishing down the river, while he remains at the dam, sitting on its squared timbers as the water comes "thundering down," content to do his fishing there.

Water means a lot to Jake. In Paris he likes passing over the Seine, and when travelling in trains or buses, he is always noticing rivers. His senses are attuned to it. At Bayonne, waiting in a cafe for the car to come, he noticed that "a breeze started to blow and you could feel that the air came from the sea."

Water imagery permeates literature and mythology. Its presence there is almost always for the same reason. Psychologist C. G. Jung wrote of it:

The maternal significance of water is one of the clearest interpretations of symbols in all of mythology,From water comes Life.¹

This is a 'mother' country for Jake. Things are born here, and they thrive here. His return to this waterfall in the mountains of Spain, far from Paris, and thousands of miles from his own America, is a homecoming. There is no "oedipal" suggestion here, no regressing to the womb in the derogatory sense of withdrawing from life. Here *is* Life, all of it beautiful, healthy and rewarding.

And here are the trout. Jake gives us a detailed account of his fishing, step by step. He does this partly because he knows those of us who appreciate fishing will like that, and partly, I think, because remembering good things is always a pleasure for him. So Jake says of his fish:

.....I laid them out side by side, all their heads pointing the same way, and looked at them. They were beautifully colored, and firm and hard from the cold water.

When he says they were "beautifully colored," that is another example of Hemingway's mastery of understatement, the device he used to strengthen words. A fish is an indescribable creature. For

¹ *Symbols of Transformation*, Princeton University, 1977.

example, in his 1925 book on fishing, British naturalist Frank Buckland wrote of a perch (a fish usually assigned a lower ranking than trout on the beauty scale), said it reminded him of the serpent in Keats' poem *Lamia*:

*she was a gordian shape of dazzling hue
Vermilion spotted, golden, green, and blue;
Striped like a zebra, freckled like a pard,
Eyed like a peacock, and all crimson barr'd;
And full of silver moons.¹*

When fish die, their colors fade rapidly, the reason why most people aren't excited looking at them in a supermarket. When you pull them alive out of the water, their iridescence is magical. Jake's trout are like divine creatures come down from the stars, sacrificed so a man can be reborn. As Jung said – from water comes life.

Jake packs his fish in his bag reverently, with layers of ferns in between them, and over them ("They looked nice in the ferns."), lays them in the shade of a tree and begins to read a book. Unlike Brett who can never get enough of whatever she wants, Jake knows when to stop so he won't spoil an experience.

Reading in bed in Paris was often a way to take his mind off other thoughts, but reading here is something more. When, waiting for Bill to return, he pulls out the book he brought, the story he reads is dreamlike – a young woman and her lover waiting twenty-four years for her husband's body to come out of a melting glacier. He finds it "wonderful." It is as if he is partially asleep, for he doesn't notice Bill's return.

When Jake and Bill take a nap beside the river, Bill on waking says, "I had a lovely dream. I don't remember what it was about, but it was a lovely dream."

No one will have pleasant dreams later in Pamplona.

Life is renewed and expanded for Jake and Bill while they are at Burguete. Only there can Bill say to Jake, "You're a hell of a good guy, and I'm fonder of you than anyone else on Earth. I couldn't tell you that in New York."

Their mock religious ceremony while having lunch, with wine chilled in the cold water emerging from a spring, is only half in jest. Shortly after, before they go to sleep beside the river, Jake is able to tell Bill about his love for Brett, which no one else knows. If you re-read the acrimonious pages of the fiesta, watch how this simple fact of Bill knowing Jake's secret, without it being mentioned in those pages, increases the tension. Though Hemingway was still young when he wrote *The Sun Also Rises*, he had already learned many writing tricks.

Yes, the happiness that Jake finds at Burguete will soon be eroded during the events at the Fiesta in Pamplona.

Brett, who seems to have had relations at some point with all of the men except Bill Gorton, develops a crush on the 19 year old matador who Jake admires, Pedro, and insists that Jake help her find his room, which is in the same hotel. The owner of the hotel, Montoya, an old friend of Jake, and unofficial guardian of Pedro, had warned Jake against letting Brett near him. To his remorse, Jake gives in. Cohn, an amateur boxer, searching for Brett too, beats up Mike, Brett's

1 Frank Buckland – *Float & Fly* – Beechwood Books, London, 1925 – the lines from *Lamia* are 47-51

official partner in response to his scornful remarks, beats up Jake for trying to impede him, then, finding out that Romero has made love with Brett, beats him up too. Cohn's weeping apologies to everyone afterward only make it all worse.

So everyone except Bill Gorton gets caught up in the relationship disaster.

The happiness of the fishing in Burguete is destroyed, but not forgotten. Arriving alone at Bayonne after, where he will take the train back to Paris, Jake gets out of the car with his fishing equipment, then says as he walks away, "I rubbed the rod-case through the dust. It seemed the last thing that connected me with Spain."

The fishing at Burguete is the only good memory he will take home with him.

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