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“Sign the Wire with Love”: The Morality of Surplus in *The Sun Also Rises*

By George Cheatham
(Greensboro College, NC)

Bill Corton’s mocking words as Jake Barnes returns from digging worms for trout fishing offer an interesting point of entry into *The Sun Also Rises*:

"If you see out the window" (Bill) said, "don't want to interrupt you. betting your money?
"You lazy brute."

"Been working that common cruel?" (Jake). Then you to do that every morning, money and its uses turn the individual by which the moral responsibility of Jake, Bill, and Brett is measured against the carelessness of Brett, Mike, and Robert. Financial considerations mirror moral strength.

Well, certainly, to an extent. But Donaldson’s thesis raises at least two basic questions which I wish to explore. First, isn’t such an analysis rather too pat, rather too much like an equation which can be rather too easily manipulated. And second isn’t such an explicit exposition as that in Jake’s monologues rather characteristic of Hemingway’s usual technique to explore central concerns indirectly, through apparent trifles?

First, Donaldson’s thesis is clear: Jake, Bill, and Pedro = financial and thus moral responsibility; Brett, Mike, and Robert = financial and thus moral carelessness; financial soundness = moral strength. But the entire pattern is undermined by Bill’s joke, for example, which briefly foregrounds the miserly. "Buying and selling! Bill, finally, doesn’t use the normal thing to what Donaldson approvingly calls Jake’s "melodramatic about money" and somehow subtly, aligns Jake with Robert.

Spring 1992

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