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Life unworthy of life? Masculinity, disability, and guilt in The Sun Also Rises

The Hemingway Review. (Spring 2007) Reading Level (Lexile): 1560.
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Full Text:

This essay re-evaluates the character of Jake Barnes from a disability studies perspective. Previous interpretations that treat Barnes’s trauma realistically still tend to reinforce traditional stereotypes about disabled men, including the notion that Jake may "turn" gay because of his injury. However, the text suggests Hemingway’s awareness that cultural narratives make disability more than a personal problem; one of the biggest obstacles to Jake's rehabilitation is a "medical model" of disability that pathologizes any impairment and compels disabled people to continually "prove" they are "normal."

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AS MICHAEL S. REYNOLDS and others have noted, the intense campaign of persona-building that Hemingway engaged in after being wounded in World War I makes it difficult to assess his level of anxiety over degeneration through disability. Even so, the cultural research of Joanna Bourke and Betsy L. Nies suggests that this fear would have been more than "in the air" for a wounded man returning from Europe. Bourke, for instance, notes that an increase of pension claims sensitized Britain to the literal costs of war-related disability and helped to re-energize debates over which veterans "deserved" charity and which did not (63-75). Nies, in turn, describes how similar financial concerns and the popularization of eugenic theories in the United States combined to make the war-wounded body a site for particularly intense fears about "degeneration." (1)

In addition to this body-obsessed cultural milieu, a seemingly minor incident during Hemingway’s recuperation in Italy may have helped cement connections between disability and moral/physical breakdown in his mind. Quoting from the writer’s correspondence, biographer James Mellow reports that not long after Hemingway’s arrival at the hospital in Milan, "one of [his] newly-acquired friends proved to be a problem" (76). The friend was the wealthy Mr. Englefield, "an Englishman in his fifties, brother to one of the Lords of the