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The Freedom to be Impure

Prior to World War I women were expected to be pure, holy, and well behaved until they were married throughout the US and most of Europe. The 1920’s began the feminist Sexual Revolution: women dressed more provocatively, drank, smoked, voted, and went out to parties on their own. Most importantly, they began to have sex on their own terms, more freely. This change was very drastic for many men, many of whom took great offense to the idea of women going off and having sex out of marriage. They believed generations of tradition were being trampled on in exchange for a morally bankrupt, sinful lifestyle. *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway and *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner both explore this idea in some capacity. Hemingway’s novel explores the relationship between Lady Brett and Jake Barnes, as well as Lady Brett’s other relationships and affairs throughout, of which there are several. Faulkner’s story depicts three brothers and how their inability to handle their sister Caddy’s promiscuity doomed them all. Women were rebelling against people who expected them to behave properly; analyzing Lady Brett and Caddy together help exemplify how their newfound freedom was very liberating, but at the expense of potentially hurting people that they cared about. These stories help us understand that any great change will be met with strong resistance, and the post-war Sexual Revolution for women was no different.

Lady Brett lost her true love to dysentery during World War I. Once that happened, she devoted her life to being free and independent. She travels from place to place, from relationship to relationship, at her own leisure. Despite this, she finds that she is not happy. When asked why she would go off to San Sebastian with Robert Cohn, Jake responds: "she wanted to get out of town and she can't go anywhere alone. She said she thought it would be good for him" (Hemingway 10). While she was making her own choice, she still found herself afraid of being alone, and had an affair with Cohn to suit her needs. This is a very hollow take on the post-war Sexual Revolution; Brett, a free woman, has several affairs and plenty of sex but finds her life loveless and empty. Hemingway seems to deliberately paint Brett in an almost misogynistic way; she is described as a bad influence on good men, and even says so herself after breaking up with Romero, the bullfighter, saying "I'm thirty-four, you know. I'm not going to be one of these bitches that ruins children…I'm not going to be that way." (Hemingway 19). She takes pride in her ultimate decision to not corrupt Romero, though it causes her great sadness. Many times throughout the story she relies on Jake to bail her out of a bad situation, and wishes that they could have been together. The two cannot be together due to an injury Jake sustained during the war that left him impotent, and Brett admits that she would be unable to give up sex for their relationship. In a way, the Sexual Revolution doomed her to be unhappy forever -- she is so reliant on sex that she would never give it up, even if it meant emotional fulfillment.

Caddy from *The Sound and the Fury* is also a major character in her story. The story is first told from the perspectives of Caddy’s three brothers, all of whom were affected in some way by Caddy’s decisions. As a teenager, Caddy rebelled against the ideal of the southern lady, which should always behave and remain a virgin until marriage. Her decisions brought dishonor to the Compson family, and may have doomed the entire lineage. One of her greatest influences was on her mentally challenged brother, Benjy. She loved Benjy and was the only true mother figure in his life. Benjy came to associate her with the smell of trees, and once she started wearing perfume and going out with boys this smell changed, which upset Benjy greatly. As he says in his narration: “Caddy put her arms around me, and her shining veil, and I couldn’t smell trees anymore and I began to cry.” (Faulkner 1) Her expulsion from the family ruined Benjy, whose lack of the concept of time lead to him not truly understanding where she had gone, and that she was not coming back. Second comes her eldest brother, Quentin. Both of them found themselves unwanted by their family, so they grew closer. Quentin embodied the heart of a southern gentleman, and believed Caddy should remain pure as all good southern girls should. She went against this, which destroyed Quentin. On top of that he found himself so close to his sister that she was his ultimate desire, which he could never have. The stress from Caddy’s promiscuity and from the lack of love from his family ultimately drove him to suicide. Finally, Jason, the third brother, was offered a job by Caddy’s prospective husband, Herbert Head. When the marriage fell through after it became clear that Caddy’s child was not Head’s, the job offer was rescinded. This infuriated Jason and gave him a grudge that he held against Caddy for several years, and that he took out on her child, also named Quentin. Caddy is never given her own voice in the novel, which illustrates the old southern ideal of a woman who is seen but never heard.

These two characters are very different from each other; one freely travels the world and goes from relationship to relationship, all while searching for a happiness she cannot seem to find. The other’s rebellious actions as a teenager resulted in her expulsion from her family and in the ruination of her brothers. While there are many differences, there are also many similarities between these two, and the comparison helps yield insight on how society saw women throughout the 1920’s as opposed to how women acted during the same time. Both women find themselves the center of attention of many men, and find that their actions and decisions have many unpleasant consequences for those who had been trying to control them. This struggle for control was an unwanted, yet integral part in the life of any women involved in the Sexual Revolution. Men refused to simply give up control over girls’ and women’s lives, and the struggle still persists to this day. Both of these characters made the decision to do what they believed would make them happy, instead of living up to the ideals other people set for them. This caused many people pain and suffering in the process, but only because the people who were hurt wanted somebody to blame for their problems, or because they refused to accept the notion that women had the right to do whatever they pleased. Through their struggle, both Lady Brett and Caddy help illustrate the image of an inter-war women for later generations, and their fight is very representative of the struggle all women faced during that period, and that they still face in the present day.

The pre-war woman was expected to behave properly, and was to listen to what men told her to do throughout her entire life. The women after World War I rebelled against this notion, wearing more revealing clothing, partying, and entering and exiting relationships as they pleased. Men did not react kindly to these notions, and fought to maintain control wherever they could. This power struggle caused lots of pain and emotional instability for many people in this period, and both *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Sound and the Fury’s* main female characters, Lady Brett and Caddy, exemplify this very well. The men they affect find themselves envious, jealous, or otherwise in pain at their behavior or absence, though this is not entirely the women’s fault. The men in these stories find relinquishing control is essentially impossible for them, and instead lash out at these women in one fashion or another. While Brett and Caddy lived their lives more freely than women had before them, they found that the consequences of this were drastic, and resulted in hurting many people they may have cared about. While women of the 1920’s were still vastly regarded as fragile creatures who needed to be controlled by men, they actively fought against this notion, and faced any resistance they found in their way. The battle against this resistance helped jumpstart the modern feminist movement, and the battle has yet to reach its conclusion.

Works Cited

Faulkner, William. *The Sound and the Fury.* New York: Random House. Kindle File.

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Sun Also Rises.* New York: Scribner. Kindle file.

*I pledge my honor that I have abided by the Stevens Honor System.*