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Robert Cohn as an Antagonist in *The Sun Also Rises*

*The Sun Also Rises* starts out with a detailed description of Robert Cohn. But he is not the main character of the book, surprisingly. Of course, we know that Hemingway did nothing without a definite purpose in his writing. Why did he include this in the very beginning? One reason may be that he wanted to markedly contrast Cohn with all the other characters in the novel and set him apart. Another reason that Hemingway put him in the beginning is because he is the antagonist in the story—in contrast with Jake Barnes, the protagonist. But the two characters do have some things in common. Jake despises Cohn, not only because he is annoying, but because he is a painful reminder of Jake's own foolish, though suppressed, romantic nature. Cohn is Jake's reflection of the characteristics that Jake is ashamed of and wants to hide. He is the extension of Jake's romantic unrealistic side, mutilated by the war and bitter realities of life.

We hear the story from Jake's point-of-view, first person. Though he has befriended Cohn, he comes to despise him. But there seems to be some concern and sympathy for him on Jake's part even when Cohn is at his worst. For example, when Cohn is passed out and drunk, and the others are unconcerned, but Jake checks on him to make sure he's OK. Jake also feels badly when Mike verbally abuses Cohn, calling Mike's actions disgusting, though he does get some satisfaction from seeing Cohn suffer.

Jake relates to Cohn in some ways. At one point in the story, he says, "I had been sleeping heavily and I woke feeling I was too late. I put on a coat of Cohn's and went out on the balcony. Down below the street was empty"(160). This is symbolic of Jake's identification with Cohn. He is in his coat for a time and sees like Cohn sees. The world in front of him is empty and he has just woken up from a long sleep and is far

behind his friends. He has missed out and is alienated from them and the world—just like Cohn.

Cohn is a hopeless romantic in a bad sense. He acts on impulse, does not heed reason or common sense in his romantic inclinations, and alienates people in doing so. He gets many of his ideas from books and lives in a fantasy world. He is the hero of his romantic world, oblivious to reality. For instance, he tries to persuade Jake to go to South America with him in search of romance and adventure based on a book that he had read. He is stubbornly convinced he will find happiness there. Jake sees through his foolishness and tries to burst his bubble with practical reasons not to go, saying, “You can’t get away from yourself by moving from one place to another” (11). But Jake is moving all the time himself and trying to find himself as well. He is simply not as foolish-looking and obvious as Cohn is.

The main reason Jake hates Cohn is the fact that Cohn has an affair with Brett Ashley, one thing Jake is physically incapable of. Cohn is very proud of it and sure that Brett loves him. He is willfully blind to Brett’s true character, that she doesn’t love him, and that it didn’t mean much to her. Cohn calls her “absolutely fine and straight” and insists upon her virtues in spite of hard contrary evidence from Jake. Cohn acts very foolishly, following Brett around like a “steer,” but is not daunted in his efforts, fighting any man who would question her “honor” and challenging any rival lovers. He makes a fool of himself, following her around Pamplona with her fiancée. Even after being humiliated again and again by Brett’s fiancée, Mike, who is a mean drunk, he still persists. When we compare Cohn to Jake in that respect, Jake is very cool. He is there passively and observantly, but remember: He is still hanging around Brett too even though he knows that it is a futile relationship. He doesn’t seem to be able to shake her either. Cohn is very jealous of every man around Brett and physically challenges them. Jake doesn’t react openly, but he is still jealous of them, especially of Cohn.

Everyone in the book generally dislikes Cohn. Harvey Stone, a friend of Jake’s,

says, “You’re not a moron. You’re only a case of arrested development” (44). Cohn is very immature and acts like a juvenile most of the time. He’s still obsessed with his college days and amateur boxing accomplishments. He seems very obsessed with his personal appearance, always getting shaved and groomed at every opportunity. He is very insecure and uses his boxing skills to defend himself as Jake points out in the beginning of the book. He is internally smashed in the end, though, after making a big outward show of his romantic ideals of chivalry and manliness. He very much wears his heart on his sleeve for all to look at—at the expense of looking very foolish and alienating those around him.

Cohn does not fit in with the others at all in the book, sticking out like a sore thumb. He seems almost to enjoy suffering and is despised for that also. He is the Jewish scapegoat, the brunt of a lot of racial comments. He’s called a “kike” by Mike and is despised for his Jewish arrogance by Bill and Jake. Brett gets tired of him hanging around. Jake says he hates him several times in the story. It makes one wonder why he was hanging around Cohn at all, the two characters seem so different. Cohn is obviously emotionally dependent on Jake and admires him, but Cohn is so self-absorbed that he can’t be a true friend to anyone. Cohn says over lunch, “You’re really about the best friend I have, Jake”(39). Jake feels pity for him at times and despises him at times, but tolerates him, even after Cohn beats him up. Jake really doesn’t like him, especially after he has an affair with Brett, but Jake still tolerates him. Jake’s disgust toward and dislike for Cohn increase throughout the story, especially after his bad behavior around Brett.

Cohn is a classic jerk in this story. He really doesn’t get it, doesn’t have a clue, as one would say. He is not one of the in-crowd. He is not looked on in a good light, and seems to be an irritant to everyone around him. He is self-deluded and somewhat conceited, though considered very nice also at times. Even his “niceness” is fake, as he does things out of convention, not from his heart. He seems to be very book-learnéd but ignorant of real life. For instance, he says of the beautiful Spanish cathedral that it is a very good example of something or other. He doesn’t have any real appreciation for it or of the

people or country. He is shallow and concerned only with surface realities. An example of this is the trip in the beautiful Spanish countryside. Cohn falls asleep, uninterested. Jake and Bill, on the other hand, understand and appreciate it.

A lot of this is narrated through Jake, but a lot of his actions and his reactions to people around him suggest that he really is a pretty lame guy. But Hemingway chose him for a reason. He shows us the side that Jake so skillfully hides. Jake says to Brett, "I'd be as big an ass as Cohn"(181), when she says that Cohn has behaved badly and Jake would never do so. Cohn's stubborn unrealism and romantic notions are in stark contrast to the wounded, bitter realism of Jake, Brett, Mike and even ironic Bill. They are all trying to find themselves again after the war and to make sense of things again, especially Jake. Cohn is an annoying reminder of romantic ideals, and naïve sincerity—though mistaken and foolish. He does things openly in public that Jake would only think about in the privacy of his own thoughts. In some ways, Cohn is an antithesis of Jake. But he is also a sort of alter-ego of Jake's, acting out what Jake will not or cannot.

Works Cited

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Sun Also Rises*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1954.