

FILM

The Sun Also Rises (1926)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

NBC Television Miniseries (1984)

ANALYSIS

A typical example of Hemingway from Hollywood is the NBC television network miniseries called *The Sun Also Rises*, first aired in 1984, a televisceration of Hemingway's novel that would have been more aptly titled "The Rating Also Rises." This production continues to stand out because of its pretense to serious artistic intent. NBC mailed an advertising brochure for the miniseries to university teachers, posing study questions such as, "How effective are the changes in the characters and events in this television version of *The Sun Also Rises*? Do you think the screenwriter has captured the spirit of Hemingway's novel?" On the same page, the brochure quotes the screenwriter, Robert L. Joseph: "I ask myself, if Hemingway had to earn his living as a screenwriter, what would he do with this story? The vein that I'm trying to dig out of it is the scar that war leaves on everybody."

Reviewers of the NBC miniseries were apologists for the tubeoisie, arguing that an adapter has the right and even the duty to change a novel in any way to make a more entertaining movie, using movie-writing techniques. As consumers of television entertainment, the reviewers demanded a kind of satisfaction comparable to that provided by a good fast-food hamburger. The most consequential added ingredient was Count Mippipopolous, transformed from what he is in the novel, a likeable Greek expatriate with a small role, into a monstrous Russian as a vehicle for the *Star Trek* television actor Leonard Nimoy, the only "star" in the production, whose part was so inflated and so stereotypically written that he single-handedly reduced the miniseries to a melodrama. The most dramatic moment in the whole script, the juiciest bite of the burger, was entirely concocted: The evil Russian got stabbed in the back with a bullfighting sword just as he was about to skewer Brett Ashley in the front, a sandwich of satisfaction for the American tubeoisie, the selfish aristocratic Lady and the evil Russian both getting stuck to degrees that varied in accordance with their roles in the burger.

On the contrary, Hemingway's focus of criticism is Robert Cohn, who is depicted as a fool for his inability to accept Brett's independence, for regarding her as a Lady, and for resorting to his fists--that is, for behaving like a macho bully. In the NBC miniseries Robert was upstaged by the foolishness of the Count, and Hemingway's ridicule of machismo was contradicted by invented scenes that reinforced the popular stereotype. Hemingway reversed other meanings as well. The most stable character in the novel, for instance, Bill Gorton the sensitive American writer, was transformed into a suicidal pilot whose last flight exemplified the priorities of telefiction that militate against literary art: personality against character, glamour against depth, spectacle against substance, visual stimulus against vision.

The inferiority of the NBC miniseries to the novel itself was not due to technical differences between the media but to qualitative differences between telefiction and a work of literature. In the novel, Jake Barnes retreats from his disgraceful moral performance in Pamplona, having betrayed his friends and himself by playing cupid between Brett Ashley and the vulnerable young matador, Pedro Romero. He tries to cleanse himself by swimming in the sea at San Sebastian, a place name evoking with much irony the martyr shot full of arrows and the Count, who is a cynic with arrow wounds. In contrast NBC sent Jake back to the mountains, where he was shown hiking cheerfully along and drinking a bottle of wine as if on a picnic, imagery suggesting regression, since he had already had a similar mountain experience midway through the story.

In the novel, the final scene is Jake and Brett in a taxi, recalling their taxi scene at the beginning in Paris, bringing the novel round, a form evoking the arena of the bullfight, the central image in *The Sun Also Rises*. In the first taxi scene Jake is unable to control his emotions, accept his impotence, and act with integrity. His self-sacrificial love and his sexual desire for Brett are “bull,” as revealed throughout the novel thereafter, because Brett has no capacity for love, and he has lost his capacity for sex. By the end, he has finally developed enough integrity to face the bull, in multiple senses of the word: “‘Oh Jake,’ Brett said, ‘we could have had such a damned good time together.’ ‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Isn’t it pretty to think so?’ Jake kills her bull with irony, pity for her, and grace under pressure--in a manner recalling the performance of Pedro Romero when killing a literal bull.

The novel ends not back where it started, in Paris, but down in Madrid where the best bullfighting takes place. The NBC miniseries ended with Jake and Brett back where they started, implying that Brett would continue depending on Jake and that he had not developed either. Madrid was changed to Paris, an automobile taxi changed to a picturesque horse-drawn carriage, and day changed to night. The end was no longer final. The tragedy became a tearjerker and the miniseries potentially the pilot of a series. The final scene looked like the cover of a popular romance novel, its imagery conveying the sensibility not of Hemingway, but of the foolish romantic Robert Cohn--the macho bully.

Michael Hollister
“Hemingwarp”
Palo Alto Review
(Spring 2000)