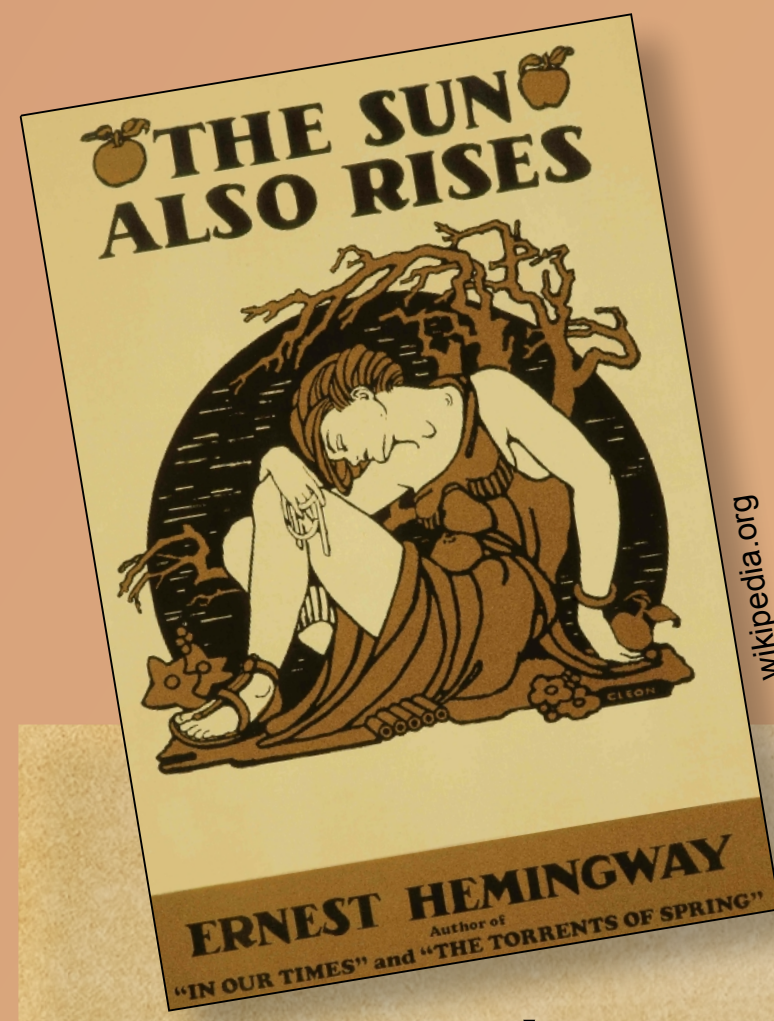


TRAITS OF EXPANDED GENDER IN HEMINGWAY'S LADY BRETT ASHLEY

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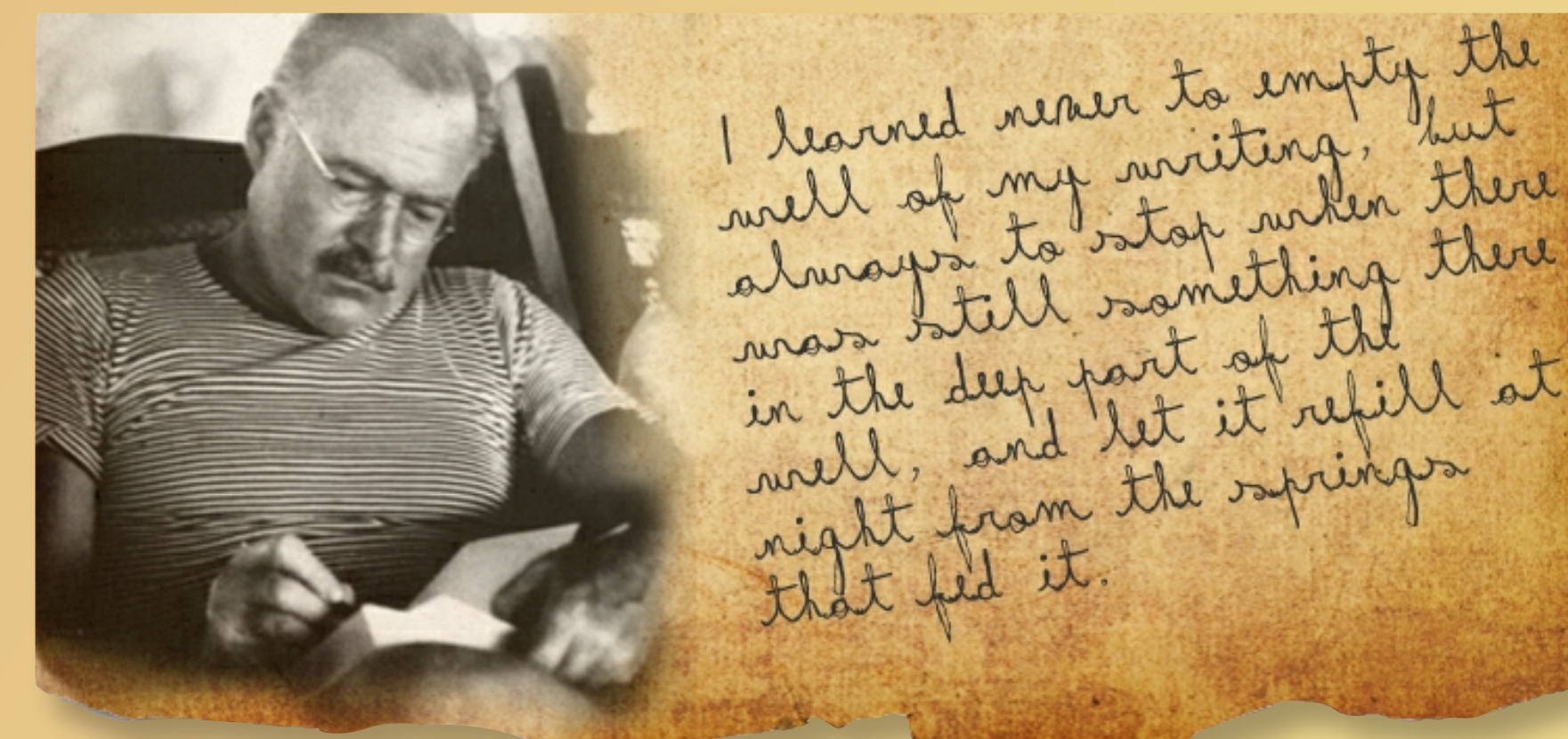


INTRODUCTION

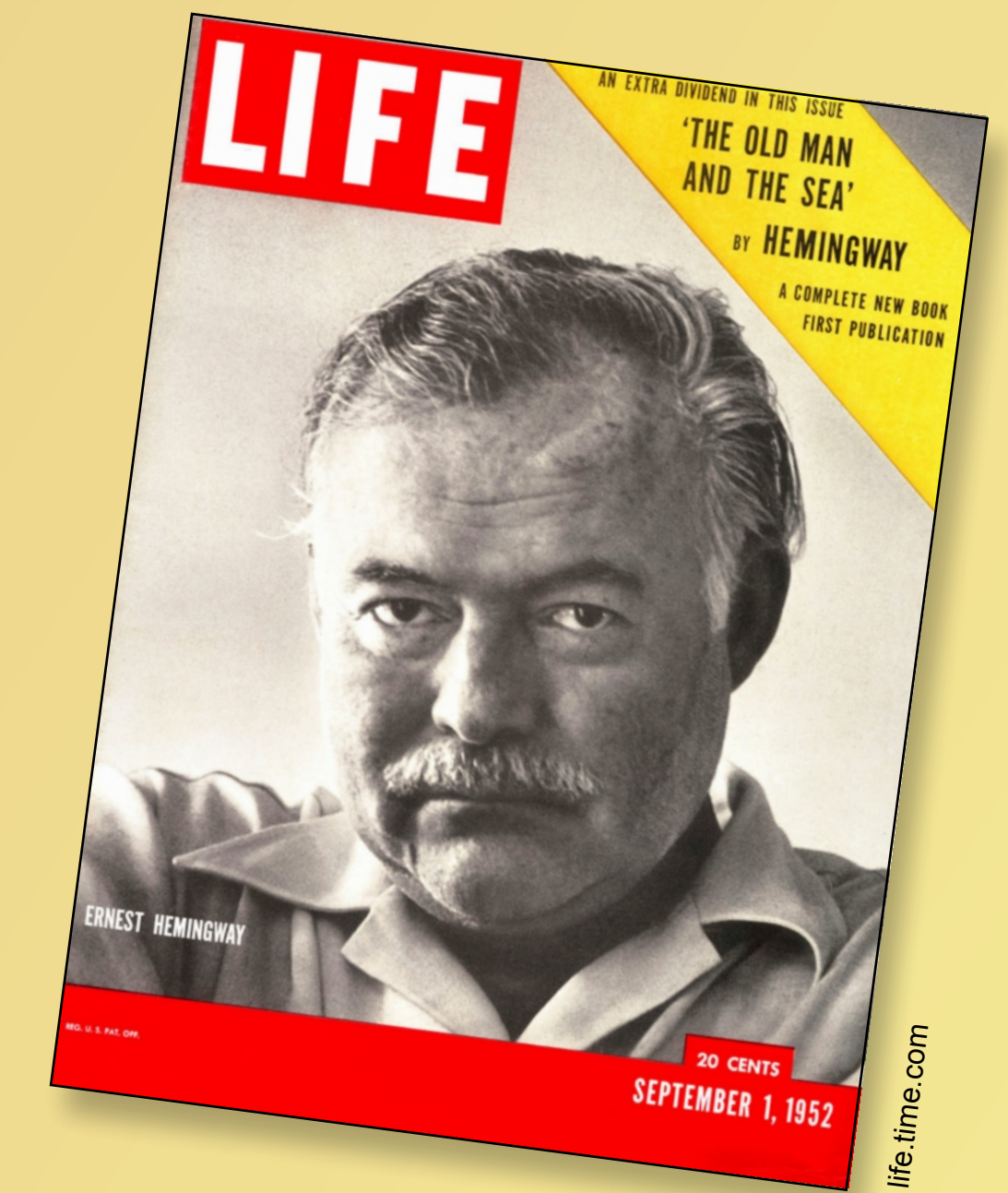
Ernest Hemingway was a male chauvinist pig. This ad hominem attack against him and his writing is an often-repeated, stereotypical polemic that hardly needs scholarly citation. And yet Hemingway paradoxically also created strong female characters who were tough, witty, and supremely independent. Highlighted in this paper is one such character from his 1926 novel, *The Sun Also Rises*. Lady Brett Ashley is Hemingway's shrewd heroine whose sexual behavior, physical appearance, and personal philosophy helped expand modern sociological gender norms.

TRAITS EXPANDED BY LADY BRETT ASHLEY

- ♦ SEXUAL BEHAVIOR
- ♦ PHYSICAL APPEARANCE
- ♦ PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY



"To hell with you, Lady Ashley."
~Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*



SEXUAL BEHAVIOR

Regarding her sexual behavior, Lady Brett Ashley (Brett) is the star in this book. Her sexual views and activities helped to widen conceptions about how modern women may behave. She's a thirty-four year old divorcee who is not only promiscuous, but she also likes to talk about it. Sex, and women who openly discuss sex, was a fairly taboo subject during Hemingway's time. If coupling is a less forbidden topic for women today, we may owe some of that freedom to literary characters like Brett. "Brett's had affairs with men before," says one boyfriend, Mike Campbell, in the novel. "She tells me all about everything" (Hemingway 147). Here, Campbell is discussing Brett's sexual liberation. She finds pleasure and talent in being sexually active, and proudly relates her carnal knowledge. Yet she is simultaneously unattached to any one man. Several suitors pursue Brett, and many would like to marry her. These would-be husbands seek to force her into the wife role she eschews. Men throughout the novel would also like to fulfill their own traditional roles as (presumably) dutiful husbands. Yet Brett is a liberated woman who finds little interest in stale relationships. She's been married twice already. Furthermore, as the commentator Rachel Willis argues, the sexual dynamics between the characters of Brett and Jake are complicated (Willis 33). Indeed, their gender roles seem flipped, or reversed. In the sexual arena, she is he and he is she. Jake is a man who has lost his sexual abilities due to terrible injuries he suffered during the war. "Since he can't have sex, he slowly learns to diminish its role. She can have sex, and she does. Daiker argues that during Hemingway's lost generation years, a male's sexual abilities are praised by society as masculine and strong. Lady Brett Ashley encompasses the very attributes that Jake learns to "find little of use" (Daiker 77). Jake's sexuality is useless; Brett's sexuality defines key features of her identity. As Brett thrives in her freedom of sexuality, Jake must redefine himself, his gender role, and his life's meaning. As literary reviewer Allyson Field argues, the "sexuality, drunkenness, and contradictory rules of behavior" in *The Sun Also Rises* leave little room for traditional comparisons between characters (Field 90).

PHYSICAL APPEARANCE

In addition to her sexual prowess, Lady Brett Ashley's physical appearance has also helped expand modern sociological gender norms. In the first scene of *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake describes Brett as wearing "a slipover jersey sweater and a tweed skirt" (Hemingway 29). Her hair, he says, "was brushed back like a boy's. She started all that" (Hemingway 29). Brett's a fashion maverick; she dresses out of tradition. As the writer Xiaoping Yu points out, Brett embodies certain androgynous characteristics of a "New Woman" (Yu 177). Brett's freedom to dress as she pleases shows that her gender role is fluid, dynamic, and not bound by the rigid confinement of her garments. Proudly, Brett shows off her nontraditional identity through her consciously redone appearance.



Ava Gardner as Lady Brett Ashley, *The Sun Also Rises*

PERSONAL PHILOSOPHY

Hemingway created Brett as a character who is also liberated in her personal philosophy. She thinks for herself. Witty, caustic, strong-minded and independent she is a heroine who helped to widen societal definitions of womanhood in this culture. Even if her character was created by a man, she is a literary role model for women to follow. For example, many women may have been traditionally taught to be mild and meek like little daisies fragile and in need of protection. Not Brett: she's tough. She's mentally tough during harsh bull fights, for example, when events get bloody. She boldly watches with wide eyed detachment as bulls and horses are mauled. During Hemingway's time, applauding matadors and the suffering of helpless creatures may have been supreme in the domain of manly men only. Not anymore, indicated Ernest Hemingway, and we watch Brett's easy reactions to the Pamplona bull fights. Jake attempted to warn her that bull fights are masculine and brutal. He implores her to close her delicate eyes. "Don't look at the horses," he says, "after the bull hits them" (Hemingway 165). Brett soon surprises everyone with her ability to watch gored animals die with nary a blink: "I didn't feel badly at all," she intones (Hemingway 169). Hemingway's overarching point is that Brett has asserted her position as a strong new woman, and she is not held down by the soft old gender traditions. Yu explains that Brett is "breaking from the stricture of Victorianism" (Yu 177). During the Victorian Age, Yu means, women were treated as delicate child bearers. Their leisure activities might not have included bold face attendances at manly bull fights. Brett is the new kind of woman. She's more involved in masculine activities; she's more adventurous, and perhaps less inclined to faint on rose-scented cushions while sipping tea and gossiping about servants. She has masculine thoughts and beliefs; she acts upon her freedom with psychological rigor and strength. She, a character created out of the head and pen of Ernest Hemingway, is a new genre of womanhood.

CONCLUSION

With all of her traits -- sexual liberation, expanded fashion interpretations, a tougher belief system -- Brett emerges from this novel as a leader and teacher of gender fluidity. Her character has widened our perceptions of what it means to be a woman. In these ways, Hemingway has created a sociologically progressive character who helps us to "rethink the meaning and boundaries of our genders" (Kaplan and Grover 24). The constricting nature of static gender roles is an unhealthy concept. Hard man versus soft woman are impossible traits to maintain; in order to thrive in this life people of both genders must exhibit both hardness and softness depending upon the context. Sometimes women behave in ways that are traditionally defined as feminine, and sometimes they act more like men. So Ernest Hemingway, despite being a male chauvinist pig, has given a gift to modern culture: the flawed yet progressive heroine that is Lady Brett Ashley.

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