

Jim Burden and Jake Barnes: As Similar as Their Initials

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My Ántonia by Willa Cather and *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway would not appear to be two novels that are comparable. In fact, they are not; one is a celebration of the imminent progress that the multicultural inhabitants of the bucolic heartland of America promise to bring forth, and the other is a bittersweet never-ending quest embarked upon by members of the “lost generation” to find themselves. One would also assume that the characters from each of these novels are innately different as well—and most are. However, two characters from these works have striking similarities when studied closely: Jim Burden and Jake Barnes.

Jim is definitely enamored of the great American frontier, as well as the enormous changes that industrialization demands. *My Ántonia* also mostly follows Jim as a youth. Jake Barnes, however, is a slightly cynical expatriate and drunk who is significantly older and more worldly than Jim. Despite these glaring disparities, Jim and Jake do share many commonalities—from simple things, such as their inability to settle in one place, to more intricate connections, like their intense desire for strong women whom they will never have. Also, these two characters deal with the fact that they will never belong to these women in similar ways, by frolicking with women with whom they sympathize, yet to whom they would *never* become attached. Although both Jim Burden and Jake Barnes face many hurdles, they still cannot seem to get their loves out of their lives—both literally and figuratively.

The most obvious similarity between Jim and Jake is that both are constantly relocating. Jake Barnes grew up in America, but when the readers first meet him in *The Sun Also Rises*, he is an expatriate living in Europe. Barnes spends his time associating with different artistic groups in European countries, just as Hemmingway did; in one of his letters, Hemingway remarks,

“May be there will be a little literary colony in Madrid” (*Letters* 203). At the start of the novel, Jake and his friends often “went out to the Café Napolitain to have an *apértif* and watch the evening crowd on the Boulevard,” among other places (Hemingway 21). Later, Barnes is observed in Spain to be very admired by the bullfighting crowd, who consider him to be one of them:

When they saw that I had aficion, and there was no password, no set question that could bring it out, rather it was a sort of oral spiritual examination with the questions always a little on the defensive and never apparent, there was this same embarrassed putting the hand on the shoulder, or a “Buen hombre.” (Hemingway 137)

What is interesting about Barnes’ restlessness is that while he is certainly a confused individual, he seems to be perfectly comfortable with his lifestyle. However, when his “friend,” Robert Cohn, suggests doing something much the same, Jake protests with this advice: “Listen, Robert, going to another country doesn’t make any difference. I’ve tried all that. You can’t get away from yourself by moving from one place to another. There’s nothing to that” (Hemingway 19). Why, then, is Jake satisfied to live this type of life himself?

Like Jake, Jim Burden is also regularly on the move. In terms of Willa Cather’s work, constant movement seems to be indicative of humanity as a whole; in the opening line of Cather’s high school graduation speech, she states, “All human history is a record of emigration, an exodus from barbarism to civilization...” (“Superstition”). In accordance with this quotation, each of Jim’s subsequent residences take him further and further away from the primitive countryside in which he spends his childhood. On the first page of *My Ántonia*, Cather blatantly describes this movement: “...my Virginia relatives were sending me out to my grandparents, who lived in Nebraska” (*My Ántonia* 5). After spending the majority of his “wonder years” in

the Midwest, the still-young Burden travels to Lincoln, studying under Gaston Cleric, who “had arrived in Lincoln only a few weeks earlier than [Jim Burden], to begin his work as head of the Latin Department”(Cather *My Ántonia* 165). Finally, an older Jim settles in New York. The narrator of the introduction describes Jim’s wife as a woman who “finds it worthwhile to play the patroness to a group of young poets and painters of advanced ideas and mediocre ability. For some reason, she wishes to remain Mrs. James Burden. As for Jim, disappointments have not changed him” (Cather *My Ántonia* 2). Like Jake Barnes, Jim Burden still seems unhappy despite his constant travelling.

Another state of affairs which seems to keep Jake Barnes and Jim Burden’s happiness unfulfilled is that both are in love with a woman they will never have. While this frustration is not as obvious in Jim’s case, it is as noticeable as a firearm in a nursery in the instance of Jake. Mr. Barnes is unmistakably in love with Lady Brett Ashley. This fact is made quite clear in the first scene shared by Jake and Brett, where they remark,

Oh, Brett.

You mustn’t. You must know. I can’t stand it, that’s all. Oh, darling, please understand!

Don’t you love me?

Love you? I simply turn all to jelly when you touch me.

Isn’t there anything we can do about it? (Hemingway 33-34).

There are several conversations such as this between the two throughout the novel, and while they may seem somewhat repetitive, Ernest Hemingway makes it quite clear that Jake’s unswerving devotion to Brett is totally essential to the development of the story when he states in one of his letters, “I think that words—and I will cut anything I can—that are used in conversation in *The Sun* etc. are justified by the tragedy of the story” (*Letters* 211). In this statement,

Hemingway's journalistic minimalist style is revealed to be intentional, informing the reader that Jake and Brett's declarations of love are not merely emotional babblings but strategically placed, to-the-point, genuine announcements of devotion meant to communicate the desperation and power of their need for each other. Brett and Jake are an impossible match, however, because Jake's impotency, the result of a war injury, is simply not compatible with Brett's insatiable cravings for frequent physical pleasure.

While the object of Jake Barnes' affection is overtly mentioned throughout *The Sun Also Rises*, Jim Burden's love of *Ántonia* Shimerda is slightly harder to see. Perhaps the strongest, yet possibly subtlest, piece of information confirming Jim's love for her is the title he decides to give his story about *Ántonia*. At first, he simply titles the piece with her name, a choice which makes perfect sense since this story is about her, while also being completely neutral. On second thought, the introduction states that Jim "...frowned at this moment, then prefixed another word, making it 'My *Ántonia*.' That seemed to satisfy him." (Cather *My Ántonia* 2). In the American vernacular, most people do not refer to someone as being "theirs" unless it is a child or a lover—and *Ántonia* is certainly not Jim's daughter. Burden's attraction to Shimerda is further reinforced when he recalls that, in comparison with the other Bohemian girls, he "used to think with pride that *Ántonia*, like Snow-White in the fairy tale, was still 'the fairest of them all'" (Cather *My Ántonia* 137). While it is obvious that Brett does love Jake in return, *Ántonia*'s feelings for Jim are much more obscure. At one point in *My Ántonia*, Shimerda's feelings are alluded to through something that Lena Lingard says to Jim: "I don't know what first put it into my head, unless it was *Ántonia*, always telling me I mustn't be up to any of my nonsense with you" (Cather *My Ántonia* 187). This statement can be viewed innocently enough, as if *Ántonia* is trying to shelter Jim as an older sister would. However, when paired with Jim's above-

mentioned equally ambiguous remarks, Lena's words take on a more intimate meaning. Sadly, like Jake and Brett, Jim and *Ántonia* can never be together. As Jim points out early in the novel, "The country girls were considered a menace to the social order. Their beauty shone out too boldly against a conventional background. But anxious mothers need have felt no alarm... The respect for respectability was stronger than any desire in Black Hawk youth" (Cather *My Ántonia* 129). While to the modern reader, Jim's circumstances might seem preferable to Jake's, one must remember that Burden lives in an era when appearances are everything, and societal code is king.

Despite Burden's obligation to the "social order," he (and Jake Barnes) sometimes deal with their unrequited love by going about with less-than-reputable women, with whom they commiserate. At the start of *The Sun Also Rises*, the narrator describes a scene where

One of them saw Georgette and said: 'I do declare. There is an actual harlot. I'm going to dance with her, Lett. You watch me.' The tall dark one, called Lett, said: 'Don't you be rash.'...I was very angry. Somehow they always made me angry. I know they are supposed to be amusing, and you should be tolerant, but I wanted to swing on one, any one, anything to shatter that superior, simpering composure. (Hemingway 28)

Jake's anger towards these men shows his concern for Georgette's well-being, despite the fact that he later tells Brett that he brought a prostitute along because he was "bored" (Hemingway 31). Like Jake Barnes, Jim Burden also begins to go about with a talked-about woman. Lena Lingard, although not a prostitute, is constantly looked down upon by all members of Black Hawk for "[making] somethings with [her] eyes at married men," as *Ántonia*'s mother puts it (Cather *My Ántonia* 109). Even before he begins to sleep with Lingard, Jim cares about her as something more than how the town sees her. When Jim hears that Sylvester Lovett has been

seeing Lena Lingard, he says, “In my ingenuousness I hoped that Sylvester would marry Lena, and thus give all the country girls a better position in the town” (Cather *My Ántonia* 130).

Commenting on the brief relationship between Lena and Jim, Blanche H. Gelfant, a critic of Willa Cather’s work, states that the pair are “mismatched lovers because of social class, they remain irreconcilable as dream and reality. A real person, Jim must stop drifting and study; he can leave the woman while possessing Lena the dream in remembered reverie” (69). As Jake revealed to Brett that Georgette would never be anything to him, so does Jim realize that he and Lena are an ephemeral couple.

Contrary to the brevity of Jake and Jim’s relationships with Georgette and Lena, the two men cannot seem to get away from their actual loves. Most sections of *The Sun Also Rises* are dominated by situations in which Brett shows up and unknowingly dictates Jake’s actions through her control of his emotions, the most extreme example being the alarming and nondescript telegram that she sends to Jake *twice*: “COULD YOU COME HOTEL MONTANA AM RATHER IN TROUBLE BRETT” (Hemingway 242). Whereas Jake literally and physically cannot stay away from Brett, Jim Burden is always connected to Ántonia in a more mental and figurative sense.

While Shimerda and Burden were constantly together as children, always overcoming the frequent and intense arguments in which they participated, Jim finally leaves Nebraska and, at the end of the novel, recalls that “I told Ántonia I would come back, but life intervened, and it was twenty years before I kept my promise” (Cather *My Ántonia* 211). The fact that it took Jim so long to see her reflects Jim’s fear of going back; Burden even says, “Perhaps it was cowardice that kept me away so long...I did not want to find her aged and broken; I really dreaded it” (Cather *My Ántonia* 211). This type of “dreading” is peculiarly reminiscent of the fear would-

have-been lovers feel when they spend a great deal of time apart, coincidentally meet again, experience the old unfulfilled feelings creeping up on them, and then realize that the time in which they could have been together has slipped away, leaving them with little opportunity for closure. This idea is expanded upon by Gelfant, who states, “We tend to believe with Jim that his authoritative recitation of childhood memories validates the past and gives meaning to the present even though his mature years stream before him emptied of love, intimacy, and purpose” (Gelfant 62). It looks as if Jim has stayed away from Black Hawk for so long because he would rather convince himself that he is still in the time and place where he and *Ántonia* can be forever young and forever in love in their minds.

It is also clear that Jim did not forget about *Ántonia*, storing her in the back of his brain like a dusty file, which is rarely used and sometimes thought to be lost, because throughout those twenty years, Jim professes that she was constantly on his mind. He “heard...that she married...had not ‘done very well’...and...had had a hard life” (Cather *My Ántonia* 211). Jim also went out of his way for her, saying, “Once when I was abroad I went into Bohemia, and from Prague I sent *Ántonia* some photographs of her native village” (Cather *My Ántonia* 211). Jim’s most powerful lamentation over losing *Ántonia* can be found in the very last line of the novel: “Whatever we had missed, we possessed together the precious, incommunicable past” (Cather *My Ántonia* 238).

Once *My Ántonia* and *The Sun Also Rises* are closely scrutinized line by line, Jim Burden and Jake Barnes almost melt into a single confused character fighting a losing battle. The discrepancies between the duo’s similarities are meager; they do not interrupt the overall essence, which emanates from both Jim and Jake alike. Although their struggle is a futile one, the valor and passion with which they pursue their desires is nonetheless hopeful and admirable.

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