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Silently as an Alcoholic: Let's talk over a drink

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In both Hemingway and Fitzgerald, alcohol is used to characterize people. Where Hemingway uses alcohol to construct a modern masculine identity shaped by tolerance and intoxication, Fitzgerald instead associates alcohol with performance, class anxiety, and emotional disintegration. In their writing the differences in each author's characterization of alcohol reveals much about their individual approaches to defining masculinity.

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Across the writings of F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway, alcohol and its connotations are used decidedly to characterize people, themes, and environments. It is evident that drinking is more than a simple social gesture, instead it also displays both the shifting and established identities of characters. When considering the application of drinking in the style of either writer, it is clear that they both use alcohol as a tool for the silent personification of their characters. Where Hemingway uses alcohol to construct the more modern masculine identity shaped by tolerance and intoxicated male camaraderie, Fitzgerald instead associates alcohol with performance, class anxiety, and emotional disintegration. Their respective portrayals of drinking serve not only as devices of characterization but also as commentaries on post-war identity and the fragility of social belonging.

Considering the alcoholism in both authors' works it is important to understand the zeitgeist surrounding drinking in the 1920s. With the introduction of Prohibition, new cultural ideas arose to create a negative stigma surrounding incessant consumption of alcohol. As opinions shifted more negatively towards drinking, the act itself grew rebellious connotations alongside its newfound unlawfulness. Alongside the growing societal distance from drinking came a cultural disgust with the illegal acquisition of alcohol, creating a distinction of class between those who drank from bootleggers versus those who did not.

As noted by Jeffrey A. Miron and Jeffrey Zweibel in their article "Alcohol Consumption during Prohibition," "Changes in consumption during Prohibition were modest given the change in price. This suggests that legal deterrents had little effect on limiting consumption outside of their effect on price. Social pressure and respect for the law did not go far in reducing consumption during Prohibition" (Miron & Zweibel 246). While consumption of alcohol was still high, the presence of legal deterrents created a dichotomy where anything associated with drinking became taboo. This furthered the negative connotations surrounding the acquisition of an illegal substance and thus fostered negative opinions about those who exploited or defied Prohibition.

As the negative stigma surrounding alcohol grew, so did the opportunity to use this stigma for subtle modes of characterization. The culture defined drinking as something both illegal and societally corrosive, ironically providing more substance and meaning to the alcoholism present in literature. Characters who drink are not only rebellious, but also twisted. There is a newfound edge to the

conversations held over a bottle of wine. Simple social gestures quickly turn to complex discussion of what is symbolized by a poured glass of whiskey. There is nuance not only to drinking but even in the acquisition of alcohol. Whoever takes it upon themselves to provide alcohol can be seen as a criminal, a fool of the lower class doomed to involvement in illegal activity. Both Hemingway and Fitzgerald tapped into this cultural zeitgeist surrounding drinking; with Hemingway conveying social bonds and rugged masculinity and Fitzgerald highlighting mental deterioration as well as social decay.

As Emma Ericson argues in her 2017 article "The Portrayal of Alcohol in *The Sun Also Rises*: Alcohol as Socio-Political Commentary and Measurement of Character," "drinking in *The Sun Also Rises* often interrupts serious conversation and serves as a 'safety blanket' when reality gets too real" (Ericson 12). Hemingway complicates this dynamic through the character of Robert Cohn; alcohol eventually isolates him from the group rather than shielding him from reality. Hemingway's use of drinking is often to convey the camaraderie between characters, particularly between men. This is apparent in the dynamic between Bill and Jake, as they pack two bottles of wine for their upcoming fishing trip. Coupling the wine with the traditionally masculine hobby of fishing, drinking becomes something that is both casual but also affirmative. As the men get further into discussion, constant repetition of the phrase "utilize a little, brother" reiterates the masculine connotation of their alcoholic unification (Hemingway 94). Meaningless conversations surround their first bottle of wine as they casually eat their prepared lunch, but as their conversation becomes increasingly morbid they reach for the second bottle. Bill's deceased friend Bryan comes up in the conversation which prompts Jake to once again ask Bill to "utilize a little of this" and hand him the wine bottle.

This furthers Hemingway's characterization of the wine as something not only casual but strangely therapeutic, as if the wine is synonymous with transitioning masculine emotion. It is something to be utilized upon the realization that emotion has escalated, and to subsequently ease those emotions. It is a further distinction of drinking as a masculine tool for the betterment of a man's mind, letting himself relish in intoxication rather than to be greeted by reality.

When Cohn starts to join the other characters of *The Sun Also Rises* on their drinking excursions, alcohol turns from a unifier of men to a detonator of social destruction. Where earlier in the story alcohol shielded Bill from the reality of his friend's death, now it gives Mike all the confidence he needs to tell Cohn how he really feels: "Do you think you'll amount to something, Cohn? Do you think you belong here among us? People who are out to have a good time? For god's sake don't be so noisy Cohn!" (Hemingway 184).

As the veil of heavy drinking is lifted and Hemingway exposes the nastier sides of his complex characters, it is apparent, as John William Crowley writes in "Bulls, Balls, and Booze: *The Sun Also Rises*," the third chapter of his book *The White Logic: Alcoholism and Gender in American Modernist Fiction*, that "Hemingway uses drinking [...] to establish a hierarchy of moral merit for his characters" (Crowley 51). Over the course of the novel many characters are seen to drink but only a few have negative events associated with their drinking. It is argued in much Hemingway scholarship that there is a concept of "The Hemingway Hero" who follows an established code of ethics (Ericson 15). As Crowley observes, "a character who can handle his alcohol in a 'good' way is portrayed as a trustworthy person whilst a character that acts in a 'bad' way is portrayed as a person with less integrity" (Crowley 51). If we look at who Hemingway depicts as a "good" drunk vs a "bad" drunk it becomes apparent that Hemingway meant to show that not only was Mike bad at tolerating his alcohol, but also that he is also a man of little character. However this raises the question of Robert Cohn, who is described as "never drunk" (Hemingway 155). If a character does not act within the confines that define their morality within this story, then how are they to be perceived?

As previously stated, Cohn's sober reputation already separates him from the other characters. His Jewish identity compounds this isolation; as Gay Wilentz notes in her article "(Re)Teaching Hemingway: Anti-Semitism as a Thematic Device in *The Sun Also Rises*," Cohn may be "seen as a symbol of the apprehensions that mainstream Americans had about an alien immigrant population in the early 20th century," (Wilentz 188). Comments such as "Well let him not get superior and Jewish"

(Hemingway 75) reinforce this cultural tension, situating Cohn's inability to bond over alcohol within a broader context of social exclusion. These comments set an antisemetic tone throughout the whole narrative of *The Sun Also Rises*. When it is also considered that Cohn's Jewish nose is described as "permanently flattened" from boxing but that it "certainly improved his looks" (Hemingway 9) it becomes clear that Cohn's Judaism is only a further isolating factor to a man who does not have room for more social inadequacy.

A "Hemingway Hero" is defined by "the discipline of a soldier, the form of an athlete, the gameness of a sportsman, and the technique of an artist" (Crowley 51), and the only metric Brett ostensibly fails to meet is her gender. Her drinking, steady and controlled like Jake's, shows her to exemplify many of Hemingway's heroic criteria, demonstrating Hemingway's gendered flexibility in the performance of masculine virtues. Brett's masculine edge is established early in the novel with "her hair... brushed back like a boy's," and she moves through social spaces with a confidence that defies traditional stereotypes of femininity (Hemingway 17). Her drinking becomes an extension of this masculine persona. Brett drinks with the same steadiness and tolerance as Jake, and by the end of the novel she matches his drinking habits with what might be called the "form of an athlete" in the arena of alcohol. If Jake represents the clearest embodiment of the Hemingway code, Brett fulfills many of the same criteria through her poise under pressure, emotional resilience, and mastery of drinking. Hemingway's depiction of Brett's alcoholic competence therefore not only masculinizes her but also intensifies the pressure placed on the novel's male characters, who increasingly appear insecure or emasculated when they fail to meet the standards Brett herself so effortlessly occupies.

Brett's ability to meet masculine standards makes Cohn's failure to occupy them seem worse. Hemingway plays upon his established notions of alcoholic camaraderie and inversely applies it to make Cohn appear even more isolated than he already is. This culminates when Cohn is actually seen to start drinking in the story and it only pushes him further away from his friends rather than bringing him closer to them:

> In a back room Robert Cohn was sleeping quietly on some wine casks. It was almost too dark to see his face. They had covered him with a coat and another coat was folded under his head...
>
> "What a lot we've drunk," Cohn said.
>
> "You mean what a lot *we've* drunk, you went to sleep." (Hemingway 124)

When Cohn tries to embrace the shared camaraderie of drinking that seems to come so easy for other characters, it seems to only lead to Cohn lying hidden and far away. Cohn attempts to establish himself more squarely in a group of alcoholics by becoming one himself, but as his drinking develops Hemingway shows where Cohn lies in the male characters' hierarchy of merit. Cohn is not initially defined by his drinking so there is no clear throughline for his position amongst other characters like Brett, Mike, or Jake. Instead Cohn is someone who was already characterized as bad from the beginning, with his lack of success in drinking only emphasizing that he is a man of little character. This marks Cohn as the inverse of the idea of the "Hemingway Hero" that could be attributed to a character like Jake. Cohn cannot use alcohol to access the masculine bond achieved by people like Bill or Jake, thus failing the model of what makes a man in the eyes of Hemingway.

Hemingway's nuanced portrayal of alcohol introduced a compelling model for how drinking can be portrayed in literature. Firstly, he introduces drinking as part of nearly every conversation present in *The Sun Also Rises*. This conveys drinking as something that is casual and common, something that anyone is capable of. However as the story progresses this dynamic is reinterpreted through Robert Cohn. Instead of bringing him closer to the group and increasing his sense of belonging, Cohn's use of alcohol separates him. It subtly marks the shift of Cohn's role in the story from distasteful acquaintance to alienated villain. Where Hemingway originally was only concerned with the positive social connotations of alcohol, it also becomes a vehicle for Cohn's social destruction. This use of alcohol is

much more like that seen in the work of F. Scott Fitzgerald, who prefers to associate alcohol with his characters at the height of their immorality.

Where Hemingway allows alcohol to facilitate masculine bonding before ultimately revealing its destructive limits, Fitzgerald approaches alcohol from the opposite direction and uses it to expose the performance, fragility, and corruption beneath the characters' social ambitions. It is in works such as *The Great Gatsby* that these destructive elements are placed in the forefront, often being used to highlight characters at the height of their immorality. Fitzgerald's use of alcoholism mirrors Hemingway's only in regards to Robert Cohn, where drinking leaves one stranded on the island of their own foolishness. This is the kind of characterization that we see in *Gatsby's* Tom Buchanan, whose immorality is blatant in every interaction with his character.

When Tom is arguably at his most immoral and brings Nick up to visit his mistress, it is only natural that the scene also features "a bottle of whiskey from a locked bureau door" (Fitzgerald 29). Not only does whiskey seem to accompany the foreboding despair of Tom's affair, but it emerges from somewhere hidden – a locked door as to remain out of sight. This parallels the masked nature of Tom and Myrtle's relationship. So as to not attract prying eyes, Tom keeps Myrtle out of sight, but not out of reach. With a little effort one can skirt around the perceived rules of the time and relish in the deceit. This impacts Nick as well, impacting his perception of the day quite clearly: "I had been drunk just twice in my life, and the second time was that afternoon; so everything that happened has a dim hazy cast over it, although until after eight o'clock the apartment was full of cheerful sun" (Fitzgerald 29). Not only does Nick's often reliable narration fade in the wake of his intoxication, but the "cheerful sun" diminishes from the room upon the introduction of a whiskey bottle. Tom is able to spread his clouded judgement to the rest of the room, using his forbidden alcohol to do so.

However it is not just in the drinking of alcohol that the darker sides of characters are exposed for a full view. As the truth is revealed about the origin of Gatsby's wealth his careful image is shattered, leaving every character to see James Gatz for who he truly is. Gatsby's wealth remains a mystery for much of the novel, adding to his carefully constructed allure and mystique. However while Gatsby tries to maintain the image of old money that should accompany a supposed "Oxford man," his illusion of glass shatters upon the revealed truth of his newfound wealth:

> "I found out what your 'drug-stores' were. He and this Wolfsheim bought up a lot of side-street drug-stores here and in Chicago and sold grain alcohol over the counter. That's one of his little stunts. I picked him for a bootlegger the first time I saw him, and I wasn't far wrong." (Fitzgerald 133)

Gatsby not only acquired his wealth through the illegal means of bootlegging but did so with his own social status in mind. Even as a man who rarely drinks, Gatsby used alcohol to ascend the social ladder and build the life he had dreamt of. Fitzgerald hints at the origin of Gatsby's wealth at several points earlier in the novel but it is only when it is brought to the forefront that it is seen to fall on top of him. Not long after the facade of "The Great Gatsby" is crumbled is James Gatz himself killed, with hardly a soul to attend his funeral.

Gatsby's initial lack of drinking at his own parties sets him apart from other attendees: "for he seemed to grow more correct as the fraternal hilarity increased" (Fitzgerald 61). Magdalena Wojnar, in her 2020 thesis "'The Bottle of Whiskey – a Second One – Was Now in Constant Demand by All Present': Alcohol Consumption as Cultural Capital and Part of Habitus in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*," emphasizes that it is specifically Gatsby's sobriety that Nick recognizes among the festive excess, signaling a form of social ascendance that contrasts sharply with Hemingway's model of alcoholic fraternity. Fitzgerald here links sobriety with class, control, and charisma. Tom Buchanan's version of being high class is associated with acts of moral debauchery, drinking and cheating in the bubble of his noble delusion. However, Gatsby's hospitable attitude and charmed mystique are only accentuated by his sobriety and lack of drunken fraternizing with the other guests.

For characters like Jake in *The Sun Also Rises*, drinking is so common that it borders on a necessity for social interaction, however for Gatsby alcohol fulfills a new purpose. The social interaction enhanced by drinking in *The Sun Also Rises* now becomes an ascending social hierarchy in *The Great Gatsby*, with bootlegging rather than drinking propelling Gatsby to the heights he used to only dream of. This marks a striking shift between the alcoholic authorship of Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Where sobriety is decidedly used to isolate both the characters of Cohn and Gatsby, the connotations are completely different. Cohn's sobriety accentuates his outsider status within a social setting, painting an emasculated picture of an already troubled man. Fitzgerald instead combines sobriety with poise, establishing Gatsby as a man of class whose sobriety ascends his social perception. He only grows "more correct" while the other partygoers revel in their own hilarity, standing sober and alone atop the social ladder. While sobriety characterizes both Cohn and Gatsby in separate ways, they both have ominous outcomes connected to alcohol, perhaps signifying a shared understanding between both Hemingway and Fitzgerald of the potentially destructive capabilities of strong drink.

Between the two authors a clear throughline is established of how alcohol can be used as a subtle mode of characterization, silently conveying the dynamic of their identities between shifting identities and social class. Hemingway's respect for alcohol as a means of social fraternity clearly establishes the moral identities of his characters. This also allows Hemingway to use alcohol as an easy mode of personifying characters such as Cohn, who only starts to drink after the narrative has begun. Similarly, Fitzgerald also uses alcohol to communicate the corroded mental state of his characters. Playing with societal perceptions surrounding Prohibition, Fitzgerald used Gatsby's relationship to alcohol to completely destroy the character he had spent the whole story building. The first time the reader meets Gatsby he is distancing himself from alcohol, letting his sober image elevate him. However, the revelation that Gatsby himself does not exist without alcohol frames him not only as a criminal but also as disingenuous. The image, wealth and power behind Gatsby's persona is built on bootlegging, and when other people realize this it destroys him.

In conclusion, both Fitzgerald and Hemingway use alcohol as much more than a narrative detail, instead intentionally weaving it into the fabric of their characters. While Hemingway often uses alcohol to establish the masculine and social identities of his characters, Fitzgerald assassinates his characters through their drinking. While both authors are conversant with the negative qualities of incessant drinking, it is Fitzgerald who engages solely with its negative elements. This is characteristic of the societal perspective of the 1920s, where Prohibition deemed alcohol a social detriment. Hemingway's characters actively move against that motion and are shown to be socially accepted through their intoxicated banter. Fitzgerald instead reinforces the negative beliefs about drinking held during Prohibition and illustrates alcohol's corruptive nature through the imperfect characters who drink it.

Through the writing of both authors, a multilayered construction of alcohol is built, which they both use to their advantage when crafting the individual stories of each character. Fitzgerald's use of alcohol embraces social anxiety, immorality, and is often reserved to show the deteriorating state of a character's arc. Hemingway inversely propels his characters through their drinking, establishing their place in the narrative with their alcohol as the test. He establishes socialization and masculinity as fundamental principles of drinking, and is able to then firmly measure these qualities in a character through their own alcoholic tolerance. Both authors confront the social stigma manufactured by Prohibition-era ideals; yet in Hemingway's works, drinking is a cool test of character rather than as a sign of immorality or imminent destruction. As both authors seek to convey nuanced characters in the wake of Prohibition they find themselves painting separate but similar pictures of how a drink can define someone. Where social unity can be embraced over wine, it can just as easily be erased after too much, highlighting the delicate but dangerous dance each character embarks upon after taking a drink.

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