Wings Of Fire: **Volume 4 (2026), No. 1**

Gender Performances in Tender is the Night *and* The Sun Also Rises

GABRIELLA ZICKMANN
Muhlenberg College

Fitzgerald's Tender is the Night *and Hemingway's* The Sun Also Rises *reveal how masculinity–and by extension, gender–is not an innate aspect of identity but a defensive mask that is constructed to cope with trauma, compensate for loss, and conceal vulnerabilities.*

Zickmann, Gabriella. 2026. "Gender Performances in *Tender is the Night* and *The Sun Also Rises.*" *Wings of Fire.* Volume 4, No 1.

Following the first World War, the cultural coherence of masculinity was left in shambles. The disintegration of old-world social structures, the rapid changes in gendered power, and the violence experienced on the battlefield left men without the stable identities that had once been inherent, secure aspects of their status. Masculinity, which had been a longstanding category with unquestioned expectations, dissolved into a fragile, improvisational performance that the individual was forced to assemble in an attempt to negotiate the destabilized modern world. Within this historical and cultural context, the protagonists of Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* experience a similar crisis of selfhood. Masculinity is no longer an idealized quality because it "belongs" to men; it is now an open audition that guarantees roles to no one–a completely unfamiliar concept to men at this time. Jake Barnes, Brett Ashley, Dick Diver, and Nicole Diver all embody different facets of the struggle to secure a sense of identity and power through gendered performance. Ultimately, both novels reveal how masculinity–and by extension, gender–is not an innate aspect of identity but a defensive mask that is constructed to cope with trauma, compensate for loss, and provide the illusion of concealed vulnerabilities to its performers.

A number of literary critics have identified war-generated uncertainty at the root of modernist gender instability, arguing that shell-shock and cultural upheaval placed emphasis on masculinity as the preferable mode of gender expression while simultaneously making it impossible to maintain. This perspective suggests that modern male characters display overcompensatory behaviors due to a sudden lack of stable markers of manhood that have rendered it unattainable. Another critical viewpoint–overlapping with the first–focuses on specific gender reversals in novels of the period and reads them as evidence that gender after World War I is no longer a natural component of identity but a performance shaped by trauma and cultural expectations. Together, these arguments reveal how the contrasting performances of masculinity in Hemingway and Fitzgerald's novels explain gender not as an inherent quality, but as a defense mechanism, made necessary due to psychic instability. The protagonists, Jake Barnes (*The Sun Also Rises*) and Dick Diver (*Tender is the Night*), appear on a superficial level to be opposing models of masculinity, but by employing the Hemingway-esque "iceberg theory," - that is, the idea that the most important things lie beneath the surface - the two men reveal very similar constructions of compensatory roles geared to cope with their internal fractures. In both novels, gender is depicted as a fragile, illusory performance that characters willingly use to hide their vulnerabilities and

losses, illuminating the ways in which the modern world was impacted by unprecedented cultural changes.

Tiffany Joseph's "Non-Combatant's Shell-Shock: Trauma and Gender in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *Tender Is the Night*" and Faith Pullin's "Gender Anxiety: The Unresolved Dialectic of Fitzgerald′s Writing" both argue that *Tender is the Night* identifies gender identity not as a series of inherent traits but as an unstable performance that is shaped by money, trauma, and cultural expectations–the exact dynamics of both Jake Barnes's and Dick Diver's compensatory masculinities. Joseph uses the phrase "traumatization of gender" to describe the upheaval of traditional gender roles that rendered gender ideals impossible to perform in the wake of World War I (Joseph 64-67). Even noncombatants were affected by this trauma, producing defensive overperformances of gender and an overall sense of psychological uncertainty. In this context, Dick's decline represents masculinity's roots in compensation, as Dick is financially dependent on his wife's sister, Beth "Baby" Warren, denied the opportunity to prove himself on the battlefield, and increasingly aware of his own lack of manly power. Dick is left to cling desperately to his relationship with his wife Nicole as she provides him the opportunity to enact the fragile heroism he so desperately craves.

Joseph shows how Dick and Nicole both reenact their trauma through their gendered roles–Dick allowing himself to repeatedly become the failed father-turned-lover, while Nicole's personalities when she is sick and when she is well represent femininity and masculinity respectively–revealing how trauma compels repetitive performances to disguise themselves as elements of identity (Joseph 67-72). For Joseph, gender is inherently traumatic because the cultural expectations that dictate its appearance simply cannot be fully met or fully rejected, resulting in physical and psychological breakdowns (Joseph 74-75). Dick adopts masculinity as if it were a mask–a mask that dissolves the moment it cannot compete with his vulnerability–and mirrors Jake Barnes's unstable postwar performance of stoic detachment.

Pullin expands this reading of *Tender* by placing gender performance within the economic and cultural forces of modernism. She argues that Fitzgerald's depiction of the artificial nature of modern life exposes gender to be a social construct upheld by role-play and capitalism (Pullin 178). Instead of gaining power simply by their roles in the occupational and political spheres during the absence of men which Joseph describes, women gain power not through their distinct "feminine" traits but by adopting masculine ones. Men's failure to reclaim their authority leaves them to either become women or to rigidly cling to the pre-war ideals of brutish masculinity (Pullin 187).

Nicole adopts the "chameleon-like" ability of women to shift personas within capitalism that Pullin describes, contrasting sharply with Dick's inability to adapt to the new world. Pullin suggests that Dick is "bought" by "Baby" Warren and is constrained by an outdated gender identity that lacks the adaptability of his female counterparts. Additionally, Pullin mentions Frances Kerr's claim that Fitzgerald asserts masculinity while confessing femininity, coining the phrase "artistic masculinity"' to describe Fitzgerald's unique approach to gender (Pullin 409). This further aligns Dick with a broader cultural anxiety about male identity in a time where traditional sexual morality and economic structures were collapsing (Pullin 183-184). Therefore, both of these critics show how *Tender is the Night* isn't just a psychological novel but a study of gender performance; illustrating how masculinity is a fragile construct built to conceal trauma, loss, and the failure of antiquated masculine ideals to endure in the modern world.

The dynamics of instability and compensatory gender performances directly parallel the gender politics of Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, as outlined by Ira Elliot in his essay, "Performance Art: Jake Barnes and 'Masculine' Signification in *The Sun Also Rises*" and Wolfgang Rudat's "Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*: Masculinity, Feminism, and Gender-Role Reversal". Elliot describes Jake Barnes as a man whose war injury has destabilized his identity, forcing him to overperform emotional restraint and stoicism. Like Dick, Jake clings desperately to masculinity as a defense mechanism. His hostility towards the homosexual men at the bal musette reveals his inability to accept the "potentialities of gender-sexual mutability" (Elliot 250). Jake is able to identify these men not through their orientation alone but

because of visible signs of "feminized behavior" that is "predictive of their bedroom behavior" (Elliot 252). Jake's impotence aligns him with these men as he too is guilty of "gender transgressions" that creates a "visible sign of homosexuality," which Jake resents because, if he had the choice, he would "correctly" perform the sexuality that the homosexual men reject (Elliot 252).

Elliot considers the possibility that Hemingway's refusal to name Jake's wound or homosexuality outright mirrors the cultural refusal to identify the instability of gender itself–creating narrative gaps that represent the fragility of masculine identity. Elliot believes that the "gendered body is performative" and has "no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute reality," implying that gender itself is a fabrication, and "genders" are neither true or false, merely produced as truth affects the discourse of primary or stable identity. The idea of a "primary and interior gendered self" is a cultural construct that creates the illusion of this disguised self, and Elliot further argues that gender is a kind of "performance of drag" that reveals the imitative structure of gender and its uncertain future (Elliot 251).

Similarly, Rudat argues that war destroys traditional masculinity and produces exaggerated or reversed gender roles. Despite the common perception of Hemingway's work, Hemingway does not just portray typical postwar masculinity in his novel, but rather uses his characters to question fixed ideas about gender, destabilizing the traditional masculine/feminine binaries and power dynamics. These gender reversals come about in response to a loss of certainty after the war, causing the characters to compensate by rejecting or overcorrecting traditional gender norms. Hemingway does not only write about masculinity but also presents a "new womanhood", and by extension, a new understanding of gender itself.

Brett Ashley's dominance and sexual autonomy in *The Sun Also Rises* contrasts sharply with Jake's passivity, as her many sexual relationships function as symbolic castrations for the men she is involved with, exposing the hollowness of masculinity in the postwar world. Rudat believes that the driving force behind Brett's sexual exploits is that she struggles to orgasm (Rudat 43), and suggests a unique interpretation of the ironic fact that Brett's true love is a man without a penis–arguing that Brett's "attitudinal problem" is best described as "penis envy." "Penis envy," as Rudat explains it, is "the sentiment which tradition has assigned to the female, namely, envy of that which possession of a penis symbolizes: envy of the male's social status," (Rudat 45). The "irony" Rudat mentions is not just problematic from the author's point of view, but more so from the narrator's perspective. Brett's "attitude is a thorn in Jake's flesh", and since he is "devoid of the anatomical symbol of the male's social state," Jake is aware that he too could be suspected of "penis envy" (Rudat 45).

Regardless, Brett is ultimately unable to maintain a relationship with the bullfighter Romero, the man she's seeing instead of Jake. Brett's inability to "get the bullfighter on her own terms," which Rudat defines as her having "failed to get him to accept her affectation of masculinity in behavior and appearance" ends the relationship (Rudat 44). Interestingly, the driving force behind Brett's desire to be sexually gratified is no match for her need to control her own masculinity. Like Nicole and Dick, Brett and Jake embody identities shaped less by any innate traits than by the pressures of trauma, desire, societal expectations, and modern disillusionment.

Richard Fantina and Milton Stern further explore the theme of overcompensation in *The Sun Also Rises*, focusing on the contradictions within the compensatory acts performed by male characters. Fantina focuses on the ways in which wounded male heroes respond to their physical or symbolic castration by embracing forms of masochistic submission. He notes that Hemingway's protagonists often exhibit a "non-genital sexuality and occasionally submit to passive sodomy", showing how their "general physical and psychological submission to women who alternately punish, humiliate, and nurture these suffering men, sufficiently demonstrates masochism" (Fantina 85). Instead of compensating for their loss of phallic authority through aggression–the unsuccessful response of many of their peers–men like Jake Barnes compensate through self-willed passivity, surrendering to the "ideal Hemingway woman" who "demonstrates power and a will to dominate" (Fantina 84). Fantina emphasizes how this dynamic is fundamental to Hemingway's understanding of masculinity.

Hemingway's expression of "an alternative masculinity" appears "diametrically opposed to that which he publicly embraced," leads Fantina to claim that critics have mistaken Hemingway by interpreting him as the "prototypical he-man" when in fact he exposes "homoerotic wishes," "suppressed femininity," and "queer desires," as well as masochism (Fantina 85).

Jake's wound has dislocated his penis from the phallus, and his inability to restore his power causes him to perform masculinity dependent on humiliation, erotic deferral, and suspense, which Fantina defines as the core traits of masochism (Fantina 86-87). Jake's relationship with Brett is an endless cycle of self-inflicted pain, and he continuously performs the weakness that culture has forbidden him from acknowledging. Brett constantly humiliates Jake through her affairs with Romero, Cohn, the Count, and so on, and yet Jake returns willingly to the scene of his public humiliations and eagerly accepts more suffering (Fantina 90). This masochistic obedience, Fantina argues, is not merely psychological but is likely also sexual.

Hemingway's use of the element of suspense is frequently noted by commentators as masochistic, particularly his tendency to use the word "then" to imply sexual activity in *The Sun Also Rises.* As Fantina explains, "some scholars have speculated that, against the odds, Brett and Jake manage to consummate their relationship during 'gaps' in the seventh chapter of the text," (Fantina 101) for instance, in the space the "then" indicates in lines such as: ""Darling," she said. Then: "Do you want me to send him away?" (Hemingway 51) and "Sent him for champagne. He loves to go for champagne." Then later: "Do you feel better, darling? Is the head any better?" (Hemingway 51). Fantina also notes that Jake's position lying either face down or with his face turned away from Brett around the time of these narrative gaps allows for the possibility of Brett's anal penetration of Jake, signaling heterosexual sodomy with the man in the passive role (Fantina 93-94). The only form of sexual fulfillment available to Jake is one where "the woman must possess the phallus so he can receive it" (Fantina 94). Here, masculine identity converts vulnerability into a form of erotic authority in an attempt to compensate for its own collapse, allowing Jake to emerge as a "newly constituted man" through his renouncement of phallic power (Fantina 96). Fantina believes that Hemingway's descriptions of wounded masculinity and submission to women subvert the patriarchy, though his ideologies only allow him to undermine the phallus in exchange for "other trappings of patriarchal power" (Fantina 102).

Milton Stern identifies yet another form of overcompensation in Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night.* While Hemingway's characters eroticize their damaged masculinity, Fitzgerald's characters compensate by performing dominance, paternity, or emotional retreat. Stern argues that Fitzgerald viewed the postwar world as one in which women had been "oppressively subordinated to men" and become fed up, breaking out into "moral chaos", tossing the fixed identities, values, and functions of the patriarchy to the curb (Stern 40). However, women did not succeed in claiming power as women, they instead became "female men," claiming power ironically based on either their sexual desirability or through their male control of money, leaving men the choice to either become physically dominant or to abandon their responsibilities to submit entirely to their female counterparts (Stern 40).

Dick Diver's attempts to maintain professional authority, moral superiority, and patriarchal control over Nicole represents a purely psychological performance intended to conceal his dependence on the Warren sisters, claiming power through all four of the options that Stern illustrates. Nicole, too, manages to land at the very center of this understanding of power, illustrating the limitations Fitzgerald attempts to convey with these exaggerated gender inversions. Stern believes Fitzgerald wishes to critique the social order that has turned identity into performance, one in which alternate expressions of sexual desire–such as homosexuality–have become a metaphor for confused sexual identity (Stern 40); a structural sign that the boundaries between male and female, strong and weak, and dominant and submissive have worn thin (Stern 41).

Although Joseph, Pullin, Elliot, Rudat, Fantina, and Stern all contribute meaningful insights into the gender instability portrayed in *Tender is the Night* and *The Sun Also Rises*, their analyses are not without certain limitations. Each of these critics proposes a singular mechanism–trauma, capitalism,

masochism, inversion, and so on–through which masculinity operates. However, these novels resist categorical explanations through somewhat satirized descriptions. Rather than suggesting how masculinity is defined by one specific type of compensatory behavior, Hemingway and Fitzgerald both depict gender as an inherently unstable social construct that emerges from many intersecting pressures.

Trauma becomes the foundation for the expression of gender, and repetition becomes the tool through which gender identity is formed. Jake's impotence, Dick's loss of authority, Brett's sexual autonomy, and Nicole's psychological fragmentation reveal the continuous improvisation, reconstruction, and renegotiation of gender, illuminating how it is fixed only by the participation in these performances. Looking closer at these limitations exposes an understanding of how Hemingway and Fitzgerald construct masculinity not as an innate identity but as a defensive performance brought on by psychic instability. Trauma then becomes the way in which gender is expressed, and in other words, trauma is gender and gender is inherently traumatic.

I would agree that Joseph's notion of the "traumatization of gender" offers a compelling frame through which to view Dick Diver's decline as a symbol of the societal postwar crisis of masculinity. Dick's character is molded by his economic dependence on the Warren sisters and his desire to be helpful–which he continuously reenacts by becoming the parental role model/lover to a series of young girls, only to be used up and discarded. It is a shocking moment for Dick when he realizes that "Rosemary had her hand on the lever more authoritatively than he" (Fitzgerald 85), foreshadowing his continual decline throughout the novel. By focusing on Dick's identity crisis through the lens of the paternal authority figure and hopeless romantic, his performance is reduced to the same binary system that Joseph describes as not working.

Similarly, Pullin's account of gender through a capitalist perspective does illuminate Nicole's adaptability, but does not fully explore the stakes of her performance. When she buys from that "great list that ran two pages" (Fitzgerald 54), she is acting out a survival mechanism that she has developed due to living in constant threat of losing her autonomy. Her declaration that she is "a whole lot of different simple people" (Fitzgerald 292), reveals the many aspects of her human identity that are fractured by trauma and transcend the gender categories that attempt to define her. Even her assertion that "talk is men" (Fitzgerald 162) exposes how deeply she is impacted by the cultural expectations that infiltrate her understanding of herself. Dick and Nicole ultimately serve to demonstrate how gender is not a set of instructions tied to biological sex but a performance that is adopted because the alternative would be accepting one's self fully–a phenomenon that the world is simply not ready for. Stern also argues that Dick's redundant performances of paternal and moral authority serve to conceal his dependence on Nicole and Baby Warren. However, when Dick is described to have "lost himself" between "the time he had found Nicole flowering under a stone on the Zurichsee and the moment of his meeting with Rosemary," (Fitzgerald 201), these performances are exposed to not just reinforce patriarchal norms but to expose the impossibility of gender as a stable category of an identity fractured by the trauma that is life.

Hemingway's postwar masculinity parallels Fitzgerald's, but manifests in a slightly different key. Elliot argues that Jake Barnes performs masculinity as a form of "drag," which reveals gender's fundamentally imitative nature. I would agree that gender has "no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute reality," and the implication that "genders" are neither true or false, merely produced by the constant misunderstanding that Nicole so eloquently describes: that "most people think everybody feels about them much more violently than they actually do – they think other people's opinions of them swing through great arcs of approval or disapproval" (Fitzgerald 184). Though I find this persuasive, framing Jake's gender this way risks interpreting his suffering as deliberate or aesthetic–a phenomenon he clearly resents. Elliot's interpretation of Jake's feelings towards the men at the bal musette is another place in which his perspective is limited. Jake is bothered by the men's "jerseys," "shirt-sleeves," "newly washed, wavy hair," "white hands," "white faces," and "grimacing, gesturing, talking" (Hemingway 20) because he is reads them as homosexuals, but this isn't the primary reason for his anger.

These men are able to act how they wish regardless of public opinion–most of which would be negative–and allow themselves the liberty of self-expression, regardless of how performative it may appear. Jake, however, is unable to express who he is because there is no way for him to *be* at all. Sexuality is such a huge aspect of men's identities during this era, and Jake is unable to even pretend convincingly. Thus, Jake does not resent the men for their "choice" to use their sexuality "incorrectly," but because they are able to use their sexuality at all, making them more "manly" than he is on top of his–more accurately Hemingway's–obvious homophobia. This calls Fantina's ideas about Jake's masochism back to the conversation. Fantina's claim that Jake is masochistic explicitly in the sexual context does not account for the element of Jake's desire to simply be close to Brett. His masochism comes from his inability to give up on the woman that he loves, and regardless of how we define love, it is clearly a construct that transcends gender and is applicable to *humans* as a whole.

Similarly, Rudat identifies the destabilizing effects of war on gender binaries by describing the role reversals that occur between men and women in Hemingway's novel. However, it is unfair to reduce Brett's expression of dominance to a simple inversion of male authority. While her autonomy and sexual assertiveness certainly expose the fragility of masculine ideals, they also explain how Brett negotiates life within her own traumas and desires. Besides the abusive relationship that gave her an elevated title, she, too, is unable to be with the one person she actually wants to be with. Brett and Jake, like Nicole and Dick, inhabit multivalent identities that exceed the boundaries of male or female.

The contrasting identities in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* reveal how the authors imagine gender not as an inherent trait but rather as a defense mechanism that must be performed in the postwar world. Jake Barnes and Dick Diver both execute compensatory roles shaped by trauma, desire, and social expectations. Their struggles expose masculinity to be an unstable performance as Dick clings to his rapidly declining paternal and professional authority and Jake adopts a passive role in order to retain proximity to the object of his desire that he will never be able to act on. Joseph and Pullin illustrate how trauma–and specifically war–creates societal uncertainty that manifests as gender instability or hyper-gendered compensation. Elliot and Rudat focus on the strategic aspects of gender performance, and Fantina and Stern hone in on the specific gender identity shifts in terms of gender reversals that are a direct response to said uncertainty. Keeping these perspectives in mind, a broader pattern reveals how gender itself is nothing more than a mask that is constructed to cope with vulnerability and hide psychic wounds delivered by war. Ultimately, Hemingway and Fitzgerald show how in the postwar era, gender is never innate or stable, but is instead a fragile, performative defense mechanism. In exposing this instability, the novels draw attention to the cost of maintaining old world appearances in a world that has rendered the ideals unattainable.

References

Elliott, Ira. 2011. "Performance Art: Jake Barnes and 'Masculine' Signification in *The Sun Also Rises." In: Critical Insights: The Sun Also Rises* edited by Newlin, Keith. Salem Press: 249- 269.

Fantina, Richard. 2003. "Hemingway's Masochism, Sodomy, and the Dominant Woman." *The Hemingway Review* 23 (1) 84–105.

Fiedler, Leslie A. 1966. *Love and Death in the American Novel.* New York: Stein and Day. Revised edition.

Fitzgerald, F. Scott. 1934. *Tender Is the Night*. Penguin Books.

Hemingway, Ernest. 1926. *The Sun Also Rises*. New York, NY. Scribner.

Joseph, Tiffany. 2003. "Non-Combatant's Shell-Shock": Trauma and Gender in F. Scott Fitzgerald's Tender Is the Night." *NWSA Journal* 15 (3): 64–81.

Pullin, Faith. 2007. "Gender Anxiety: The Unresolved Dialectic of Fitzgerald's Writing." In: *Twenty-First Century Readings of 'Tender Is the Night,'* edited by William Blazek and Laura Rattray, DGO-Digital original, Liverpool University Press: 177–91.

Rudat, Wolfgang E. H. 1990. "Hemingway's 'The Sun Also Rises': Masculinity, Feminism, and

Gender-Role Reversal." *American Imago* 47 (1): 43–68.
Stern, Milton R. 1994. "Sexual Identities and Baby Identities." *Tender Is the Night : The Broken Universe*. New York, Toronto, New York: Twayne Publishers: 39-68.