

Spaces of Desire: An Explication of Taxis in *The Sun Also Rises*

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Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* reveals characters describing, riding in, watching, paying for, and living among the taxicabs of Paris. Although perhaps a meaningless presence at first glance, the taxicabs in *The Sun Also Rises* exist not as an arbitrary setting to advance the plot, but rather as a carefully-selected space that heavily influences the meanings of the entire work. Particularly, the taxicabs magnify the ways in which Jake expresses and represses his sexual desires, expectations, and actions with other characters.

The relationship between taxis and sexual desire in Hemingway has remained almost entirely untouched. Allyson Nadia Field does briefly suggest a relationship between the two when associating a taxi scene of *The Sun Also Rises* with Claude Washburn's *Pages from the Book of Paris* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (Field, 39), but much room exists for expansion, and even foundation, of the topic. By further researching the relationship between taxis, sexual desire, and the characters, especially Jake, we are able to more fully understand how the characters interact with the spaces around them, and more fully appreciate Hemingway's choice and inclusion of settings and cityscapes. More importantly, recent literary scholarship (such as Robert Scholes and Nancy Comley's *Hemingway's Genders: Rereading the Hemingway Text*) reveals that sexuality and sexual desire in Hemingway's life and fiction are far more complex than what we have previously understood them to be. Approaching these complexities in great detail, an explication of taxis in *The Sun Also Rises* expands conceptions of desire beyond gender, affirming space and geography as a catalyst and locus of sexual desire.

A taxi is often considered as a necessary means to an end, a fixture of society that is far less important than the destination to which it travels. In contrast, both *The Sun Also Rises* and its historical setting depict the taxi as a destination in itself, something that is worthy of our attention and explication. The taxis of Paris during the 1920s primarily functioned to transport their riders, but their social meanings and symbols meant much more than that. Private backseats, urban surroundings, and social controversy often placed taxis in the center of the media discourse and everyday life of Paris. While Hemingway was working on *The Sun Also Rises* and even throughout its circulation, taxis were central to the day-to-day experiences of the average Paris traveler, whether tourist or resident. Certainly both tourists and residents alike read the sensational newspaper articles, whether at home or abroad, which recounted news stories concerning Paris taxis.

In 1920s Paris, anything could happen in a taxi, or so the newspapers implied. Journalistic accounts eagerly documented the “menace of two dangerous taxicab bandits” (“American Woman Defies Paris Taxicab Bandits” 1). The deaths of taxi riders who were well-known or interesting were also recounted, such as General William Chamberlaine, who died when his taxi struck a Trolley Car in the Latin Quarter (“Chamberlaine Killed In Paris Taxi” 15). Newspaper subscribers also were alerted when the rich and famous accidentally left their pricy valuables inside Paris taxis (Duranty 13) or if they committed a crime involving the theft or use of a taxicab (“Paris Taxi Speeder Revealed as Prince” 2).

Although these media topics span widely in scope and focus, their common bond rests in their absence of a “normal” taxi experience. Whether depicting deaths, robberies, losses, or legal infractions, journalistic narratives molded the taxi as a locus of deviant behavior and abnormal events, and the newspaper readers likely associated these sensational and

transgressive narratives with the taxis in which they rode. If we are to consider the living history of Paris that surrounds the novel, then it is no surprise that the taxis of *The Sun Also Rises* would be a space in which Jake's abnormal intimate life and sexual transgressions would be explored. Further, Hemingway closely considered, or at least seemed to closely consider, his Paris surroundings when writing *The Sun Also Rises*: Herbert S. Gorman's 1926 critical review of the novel claimed that "practically all [of Hemingway's] characters are directly based on actual people" (Gorman, quoted in Stephens 38). This relationship between Hemingway's fiction and historical fact merits exploration of the relationship between Hemingway's taxis and their historical counterparts.

In both Hemingway's novel and its real-to-life setting, taxis surrounded the daily lives of Paris urbanites. Even when Napoleon III first established and developed a centralized Paris cab trade as early as 1855, the *voitures de place*, or *fiacre*, "stood at the very centre of Parisian commercial life" (Papayanis 52). Just as importantly, the cab industry "played a central role in the social life of Paris" (Papayanis 53). Their social and economic significance remained strong far into the beginning of the twentieth century and beyond: in 1920s Paris, the setting depicted in *The Sun Also Rises*, real and common interactions with taxis were far from boring, and media discourse tended to depict more extreme events involving taxis.

Residents often described the taxis and their surroundings with superlative adjectives, suggesting that their presence and politics catalyzed opinion and debate rather than acquiescence and apathy. The "cheapest taxi-cabs in the world" ("Paris Taxi Rate Rise Permitted By Council" 16) constantly drove through the streets of Paris, the "noisiest city in the world" ("New Horn For Paris Taxis" 42). In his 1925 work *The City of Tomorrow* (original title *Urbanisme*), French architect LeCorbusier argued that the city's streets and

boulevards comprise a “machine for traffic” (128). Journalist narratives revealed that it was difficult to avoid this machine: after returning from a voyage to France, a *Chicago Daily Tribune* travel journalist who reported under the moniker “Mme. X” noticed the importance of the Parisian taxis: “Certain it is that I spent more [time] in taxis in Paris than in all the rest of my travels” (Mme. X G4). Paris residents and officials would have spent much of their day hearing taxi horns and motors, and sometimes they voiced their opposition to the “nerve-racking kinds of noises which the horns of 12,000 taxicabs of Paris now emit” (“New Horn For Paris Taxis” 42), or to the daily obstacle of “dodging Paris Taxis” (“New Traffic Regulations To Reform Paris Traffic” A3).

Jake Barnes does not ignore that taxis were a vital element of 1920s Paris. He is aware of the “solid taxi traffic” (22) that surrounds him, and often observes the other characters and taxis simultaneously. Such is the case with Harvey, for example: “I watched him crossing the street through the taxis, small, heavy, slowly sure of himself in the traffic” (51). He also takes care of an inebriated Brett on occasion by “[putting] [her] into her taxi” (81). Jake’s interactions with the taxis seem normal and trivial at first, but they may have had a special meaning for him. World War I left Jake sexually and spiritually wounded, and this was a reality for many Paris taxi drivers as well: “Paris [was] full of taxi drivers who were wounded in the war” (“Demand Medical Tests For Paris Taxi Drivers” 40).

Like Jake does in the novel, these taxi-driving war veterans make every attempt to hide their wounds: “half of them are short-sighted, though they refuse to wear glasses in case this disclosure of their defect should cause their clients to refuse to engage them” (40). James Rother argues that Jake, a “scourge of the factitious” (Rother 86), tries to hide his genital wound by hiring a *poule*, Georgette, to affirm his masculinity. Just as the taxi drivers failed to

hide their shortsightedness, Jake fails to hide his war injury from Georgette when she tries to kiss him in a *fiacre* (23). Noticing his reticence, she asks him, “What’s the matter? You sick?” Jake responds, “Yes” (23). Georgette would not know for certain what type of sickness Jake is implying (she probably thought he was referring to a sexually transmitted disease), but she nonetheless forces Jake to admit, at least implicitly, to his genital injury, drawing a certain self-awareness of his inability to consummate a sexual relationship; he does not kiss because he cannot fulfill any desire to which the kiss might lead. Not coincidentally, these social and sexual interactions occur within the *fiacre*.

Throughout the novel, we see a heightened awareness of Jake’s wounded sexuality whenever he steps into a taxi not only with Georgette, but also with Brett Ashley. The taxi gives Jake and Brett an arena that fosters the fleeting element of their romance. Unable to consummate a sexual relationship, Brett and Jake nonetheless still hold attraction for each other, and the taxi is a place where they can show a limited sort of intimacy without feeling the pressure to advance to sex. The taxi offers them an exciting and possibly arousing unpredictability: the potential turbulence of the car ride could at any time throw passengers together within each other’s private space, creating a type of forced intimacy.

A taxi also brings to them a certain sense of privacy: the backseat comprises just the two of them, and the taxi’s state of transit guarantees that no one will infringe upon this privacy. All the same, the taxi is simultaneously public, a publicly-used vehicle under the watch of the driver (and we have already established the significance of the driver) that only brings a fleeting state of isolation from the outside world until the stop of the taxi signals a monetary exchange with the driver. Knowing that Jake and Brett cannot fulfill a sexual relationship in a taxi because of the taxi’s inevitable exposure to the public, Brett allows Jake

to ride home with her, a type of intimacy that she did not offer to the Count (71). Still, fully understanding the complicated relationship between Jake's sexual desire and inability to act upon it because of his war wound, Brett will not allow Jake to escort her to her hotel room (71).

Brett and Jake also utilize the taxi to both establish and break down the physical boundaries between them. These two opposite actions reflect Jake's constant desire to establish a sexual intimacy with Brett (and Georgette, to a less developed extent) vis-à-vis his inability to completely satisfy her sexual needs. As a result, Brett and Jake both express and repress desire inside the taxis. Brett is more interested in riding in the taxi with Jake than the destination: she merely tells the driver to "drive around" (32) until Jake finally orders the cab to the Café Select. After that, they kiss, and Brett utilizes the space of the taxi to convey a dramatic reticence to this affection: she "turned away and pressed against the corner of the seat, as far away as she could get" (33). Brett not only chooses to turn away from Jake's eye contact, thus disallowing a certain amount of emotional intimacy, but her pressing against the seat conveys a heightened state of emotion, a detail that would be lost if she did not have the opportunity to use the taxi seat to express that emotion. To be sure, the "turning" and the "pressing" actions are especially noticeable in the small taxi and might not be as effective in an environment other than such a contained area.

Later, after Brett "sits up" (34), Jake puts his "arm around her and she was leaning back against [him]" (34). Although Brett remains turned away, the small space of the taxicab keeps Brett within his easy reach. Without having to face Jake, and thus still maintaining an emotional disconnection of sorts, Brett leans back into him, creating a dichotomy of physical connection and emotional disconnection. This ambivalent physical position parallels Brett and

Jake's ambivalent and complicated romance throughout the novel. Later yet, they both return to "sitting now like two strangers" (35), capitalizing upon typical taxicab protocol among strangers to guarantee that they will not cross each other's intimate space. Again, this demonstrates the ease with which Brett and Jake can build up and break down intimate barriers in the taxi from one moment to the very next.

The taxi's path that encounters streetlights, flares, lit shops, and shadows stimulate Jake's previous association of light and dark that conjures a desire for Brett. In the darkness, we already know that Jake "looks at things differently from when it is light" (151), which includes Brett, against whom his emotions can remain stoic during the light of day, as opposed to in the dark, when he desires her presence (42). In fact, it is during the dark of night that he fantasizes about Brett, significantly, stepping into a taxi (42). While the two travel to the Café Select, the alternating lightness and darkness refracted through the taxi windows catalyze Jake's desire for Brett:

The taxi went up the hill, passed the lighted square, then on into the dark, still climbing, then leveled out onto a dark street... There were lighted bars and late open shops on each side of the street... I saw her face in the lights from the open shops, then it was dark, then I saw her face clearly as we came out on the Avenue... The street was torn up and men were working on the cartracks by the light of the acetylene flares. Brett's face was white and the long line of her neck showed in the bright light of the flares. The street was dark again and I kissed her. (33)

This relationship between light/dark surroundings and Jake's observations of Brett depict Jake's desire for Brett during the cab drive. The cab's surroundings become dark three times, and each time, Jake's physical desire for Brett becomes increasingly stronger. After the first

darkness, Jake notices Brett's face. After the second, he notices her face "clearly," perhaps suggesting a delineation of features such as the volume of her lips, the silhouette of her eyelashes, or the colors of her makeup. Also after the second darkness he describes the "long line of her neck" (33), a feature that he possibly would desire to kiss. During the third darkness he kisses Brett, the predictable result after cab, moving from the light to dark, increasingly illuminates Brett's physical features. In this passage, we see how the work closely connects the taxi and its refraction of light with the desires of Jake and Brett.

The surroundings viewed from the taxi window also assist and amplify Jake's desire for Brett. The "lighted bars and late open shops on each side of the street" (33) signify Parisian spaces circa 1920 that urban analyst Tag Gronberg calls "seductive surfaces" (70):

...The boutique becomes enigmatic in order to arouse the desire of the consumer, to 'seduce.' And it is of course woman who most powerfully embodies seductive mystery; like the famous smile of the Mona Lisa, the boutique as 'sourire' fascinated precisely because it was suggestive rather than revealing. (71)

Jake and Brett ride in the taxi together viewing these "seductive surfaces" while the street flashes from light to dark. Gronberg's argument perhaps aligns Brett as the "seductive mystery" that Jake yearns to solve with his kiss. Yet, just as the shops are "suggestive rather than revealing," so too is the physical relationship between Jake and Brett; in the taxi, they move no further than a kiss. As is the case with the taxi itself, the cityscapes viewable from the taxi windows simultaneously affirm sexual provocation and deny its complete consummation.

The last scene of the novel finds Brett and Jake traveling together in a Madrid taxi:

Brett moved close to me. We sat close against each other...“Oh, Jake,” Brett said, “we could have had such a damned good time together.” ... Ahead was a mounted policeman in khaki directing traffic. He raised his baton. The car slowed suddenly pressing Brett against me. “Yes, I said. “Isn’t it pretty to think so?” (251)

Wolfgang E. Rudat senses the sexual tension in this scene and attributes much of it to Brett, the taxi itself, with its sudden stop, makes sexual demands of Jake more so than Brett does; however, Rudat is correct to associate the policeman’s baton with a phallic symbol that symbolizes “that which is demanded of Jake” (3). The phallic figure’s prominent position outside the cab window emphasizes the sexual anatomy that Jake does not have, and this contrast between the baton’s presence and Jake’s anatomical absence explains, in part, why Jake and Brett discuss their relationship in the context of what “could have” existed.

Just as the boutiques and shops outside the taxis facilitate the tone of Brett and Jake’s relationship, so too does the landscape outside the taxi dominate Jake’s thoughts. Jake’s use of the adjective “pretty” (251) seems to describe a viewable sight rather than the abstract idea of a relationship. Perhaps in his adjectival answer he turns his thoughts and desires away from Brett, and toward the landscapes that the taxi allows him to view. He and Cohn agreed earlier in the novel that “all countries look like moving pictures” (18), and his response focuses on those moving pictures: the landscapes that he twice describes as “hot and bright” (250, 251), and the houses that looked “sharply white” (251). In this manner, we see the taxi assists Jake’s escapist response when speaking to Brett about what their relationship could have been.

Taxicabs formed a significant part of life in 1920s Paris, and attention to them should not go unnoticed in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*. In the novel, the taxis indeed facilitate a vital role, catalyzing the ways in which Jake expresses and represses his sexual desires,

expectations, and actions with other characters. Such facilitation shows us that Hemingway's characters do not simply choose and form their landscapes; rather, the landscapes can sometimes form *them*. Furthermore, the taxis allow us to appreciate space and geography and its effects upon human desire. In *The Sun Also Rises*, sexuality and sexual desire expands beyond the criterion of gender and into the realm of the taxi's unique spatial geography. By continuing to explore Hemingway's landscapes and spaces, we will in turn continue to discover how they form important bonds between the main themes and arguments of the novel as a whole.

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