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A Glimmer of Hope in a Dark Wasteland

The 1920’s were a time of great prosperity in Western Civilization; war had ended and many countries from the winning side seemed to be throwing never-ending parties. This excitement, however, was really a gold plating covering a maelstrom of confused, angry emotions and wounded pride following the most brutal war in world history. An entire generation of people was left with no enthusiasm and no hope, instead left to wander the world aimlessly, drinking and partying to ignore their sorrows. This generation came to be known as the Lost Generation. Many works of literature have explored the Lost Generation and its struggle to find meaning in its life. Two of these works are Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land.* Both works describe postwar society as bleak and devoid of meaning, while exploring the world’s struggle to continue onwards. In spite of the desolate world described in both works, they each have subtle hints of optimism and hope throughout. Both works share the belief that the world is a dark place in the 1920’s, but also share a common view that the Lost Generation may ultimately be able to find itself in the end.

*The Sun Also Rises* tells the story of several characters’ lives in postwar Paris, France as they try to find meaning in their lives in spite of their wounded pride and masculinity. Hemingway uses the main character Jake as a microcosm for the entire Lost Generation after World War I; they drift from bar to bar in search of booze, music, and women, without any true aspirations or goals. Robert Cohn tries early in the story to cover his feelings with forced aspirations, saying “Listen...don’t you ever get the feeling that all your life is going by and you’re not taking advantage of it? Do you realize you’ve lived nearly half the time you have to live already?..Do you know in about thirty-five years more we’ll be dead?” (Hemingway, ch. 2) Similarly, the entire cast fights this sense of impending doom. They travel together, some go on a tranquil fishing trip, and attend the Running of the Bulls in Spain. While this happens, Jake, Cohn, and two other characters Mike and Romero, all compete for Lady Brett’s love and affection. They argue and fight and struggle, and Brett never finds someone who can completely satisfy her, eventually ending with Mike, just like she started. This massive endeavor with little payoff is very indicative of Hemingway’s view towards the Lost Generation’s struggle as a whole. Try as they might, they have been unable to make a big difference in their lives or in the world since they returned from war.

Eliot conveys similar sentiments of hopelessness and despair in his work, *The Waste Land.* The entire work paints a picture of sadness, emptiness, and depicts society unravelling in certain sections. From the women’s attitude towards Lil’s sex life with her husband in section 2, saying “He’s been in the army four years, he wants a good time, And if you don’t give it him, there’s others will..,” (Eliot 148-149) to the literal depiction of broken down cities in the fifth section ending with the prophetic depiction of London falling, “Over endless plains, stumbling in cracked earth...Falling towers, Jerusalem Athens Alexandria, Vienna London,” (Eliot 370-377) the poem explores broken, loveless relationships throughout while showing the reader a world of death and despair. That line’s inclusion of Jerusalem goes as far as to depict religion itself crumbling into the ground, reduced to nothing but dust. In spite of this, the work also briefly references rebirth and regeneration; it describes April as a month for healing and regeneration, opening with “April is the cruellest month, breeding Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing Memory and desire, stirring Dull roots with spring rain.” (Eliot 1-4) The poem also brings up Buddhist teachings in leaving worldly attachments behind. These lessons’ inclusion in the poem are indicative of a belief in a small glimmer of hope. In spite of the bleak wasteland surrounding the Lost Generation, Eliot still believes that society has a chance to regenerate and bloom once again.

Both *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Waste Land* feature bleak outlooks on the society of the 1920’s, illustrating both authors’ opinions of the Lost Generation. While the two seem to agree on overarching topics, they do diverge many times. *The Sun Also Rises* depicts booming, successful cities, which throw parties with loud music and booze, and makes a large spectacle of bullfighting with a crowd of excited onlookers; these images all starkly contrast those seen in *The Waste Land*, which, when describing physical locations, describes them as deserted battlegrounds or decrepit cities “a blackened wall...empty cisterns and exhausted wells...decayed hole among the mountains...the tumbled graves, about the chapel...the empty chapel, only the wind's home” (Eliot 382-389) In many ways, Eliot describes a much bleaker picture than Hemingway. This disparity helps us see a subtle difference in Eliot’s and in Hemingway’s modes of thinking: Hemingway sees people and society as broken and lost after the war, while Eliot believes it goes farther than that. Eliot sees the entire world as a war swept battleground, with very little virtue left, while Hemingway sees a specific generation of people robbed of happiness in their lives. Despite this disparity, the two works spread similar messages. They describe the Lost Generation as hopeless and loveless, with tons of effort being made for naught. Both agree that there is hope for the future, but Hemingway seems a bit more optimistic.

The Lost Generation found themselves in a world unlike what they were accustomed to before the war, and many of them never found themselves in the aftermath. Many people drifted about, living their lives day to day with no true ambitions or aspirations aside from finding a place to drink for the evening. Hemingway’s characters all strove to find meaning for themselves and ultimately accomplished very little from the beginning to the end of the story. Eliot’s poem shows loveless sex, begrudging relationships, death, and destruction. At the end of *The Sun Also Rises,* Brett reminisces on what she and Jake could have had, saying “Oh, Jake...we could have had such a damned good time together.” (Hemingway ch. 19) Jake agrees, and the story ends. This conversation can be interpreted as the ending of their ongoing struggle, and a mutual agreement that they will both search for happiness on their own terms moving forward. While it is debateable that either of them will succeed in this, this message of laying past grievances to rest and moving forward is an optimistic note for the story to end on. In this sense, Hemingway believes that the Lost Generation may be able to find some meaning and hope in their lives after all. Eliot paints a less optimistic picture, but still includes imagery of regeneration in his discussion of April as a healing time from winter and in his references to Buddhist philosophy, believing that the world and its people will be able to recover over time. Both authors, while acknowledging and showcasing the current bleak state of the world, believe that it can heal over time.

The 1920’s were filled with laughter, alcohol, loud music, and parties. They were an exciting time, though the excitement covered an empty struggle to find meaning and hope in a meaningless and hopeless existence. After being robbed of their youthful enthusiasm and pride, members of the Lost Generation found themselves without aspirations in life, and struggled to do more than merely exist from day to day. Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and Eliot’s *The Waste Land* take different approaches in describing life for the Lost Generation, and both reveal subtle differences in opinion of the world following World War I. Hemingway sees the world as inhabited with people drifting, searching for meaning in their lives, while Eliot sees a world devastated by warfare and filled with death and despair. In spite of these bleak pictures, Hemingway ends his work on an optimistic note promoting working towards bettering one’s self, and Eliot includes references to religious teachings of regeneration and to the Earth’s yearly cycle of destruction and recreation throughout his poem, implying that the planet and its population will ultimately heal from their wounds. Both works acknowledge the bleak atmosphere of the world, but both have at least a glimmer of hope that the Lost Generation will ultimately find themselves, and bring the world into a new figurative springtime.

Works Cited

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