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Finding the Lost Generation

The 1920’s were a gilded age for Western Civilization. Many countries from the winning side of World War I had booming economies and seemed to be throwing a party that would never end. Just underneath the surface, however, all was not as happy as it seemed. The generation of soldiers returning from the war came back as shells of the people they once were; the war had completely dismantled old tropes of valor and bravery and instead subjected soldiers to new kinds of horror. The war was fought primarily in a new, arduous, and terrifying form of combat known as trench warfare. Soldiers would hide in trenches dug in the ground for weeks or months at a time, living engulfed by the constant sound of gunshots and artillery fire. Returning to normal life after suffering through this horrific combat was incredibly difficult, if not impossible for many people. An entire generation, now known as the Lost Generation, returned from the war disillusioned, emasculated, and terrified. Ernest Hemingway wrote about the Lost Generation in his novel *The Sun Also Rises.* The cast of characters in the story all have problems shared by the majority of the war-stricken generation, and the book follows their struggles to live fulfilling lives in the absence of greater meaning. Although most members of the Lost Generation spent their lives wandering without purpose, Hemingway used *The Sun Also Rises* to show that they were not beyond hope, and that, by forging meaningful relationships and moving away from the chaotic lifestyle they had invented, they could still work to find meaning and fulfillment in their lives.

Hemingway’s novel explores the struggles the Lost Generation went through by following a number of American veterans of World War I. The main character, Jake Barnes, suffered an injury in the war that rendered him infertile “...it was a rotten way to be wounded...on a joke front like the Italian.” (Hemingway ch. 4). His injury is a very literal take on the damaged masculinity that many members of the Lost Generation suffered from. The war did not reward the traditional esteemed values warriors and soldiers had strived for in the past; valor and bravery meant very little in the trenches, with technology being much more important than any individual soldier. The months these soldiers spent in tight quarters fearing for their lives while under nearly constant fire resulted in something known to the Lost Generation as “shell shock.” The term was coined from the shock soldiers suffered from being bombarded with artillery shells; today, we know the affliction as post-traumatic stress disorder. The affliction was one of the biggest reasons for the pain the Lost Generation suffered.

The Lost Generation was lost in many senses: millions upon millions of soldiers, among them many middle and upper class young adults who may have had promising futures, lost their lives, and the soldiers who did return had lost any youthful enthusiasm they had once had. Upon returning home from war, many of the ex-soldiers turned to drinking and partying as a way to hide from their sorrows. Others tried to travel, hoping the sights of the world could reinvigorate them. One of the main characters in *The Sun Also Rises,* Robert Cohn, is looking to travel to South America early on, and invites Jake along with him. Jake shuts him down, saying “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.” (Hemingway ch. 2). Jake brings up a valid point, concluding that the problems the Lost Generation suffers from are not problems that can be solved by running away. Regardless of its ultimate utility, this does not stop the majority of the Lost Generation from avoiding their problems in one way or another, through partying, drinking, or loveless relationships and sex. These loveless relationships are particularly important in *The Sun Also Rises*; in a conversation about Lady Brett, the story’s primary female love interest, Cohn tells Jake “I don’t believe she would marry anybody she didn’t love.” to which Jake replies “Well...She’s done it twice.” (Hemingway ch. 5). The dynamic between Jake and Brett becomes the backdrop for the entire story; Jake is one of the few men that Brett has any legitimate feelings for, but his injury prevents them from being together. Brett goes on to have several affairs with different men, most of which do not work out for one of several reasons. This inability to truly connect with other people, for any one of many different reasons, is a defining characteristic of the Lost Generation.

The majority of *The Sun Also Rises* depicts members of the Lost Generation as aimless and hopeless. They are shown visiting several bars and clubs every night, drinking constantly and partying heavily. Most of the cast has no true work ethic, and merely survives from day to day, making enough money or having enough money stored away to perpetuate their lifestyle of intoxication. The Lost Generation is also repeatedly shown to be unable to form meaningful relationships; most of the relationships shown in the novel are either doomed from the very beginning, or are falling apart. When Hemingway describes Cohn’s first relationship, he writes “[he] was married by the first girl who was nice to him. He was married five years, had three children, lost most of the fifty thousand dollars his father left him...and just when he had made up his mind to leave his wife she left him.” (Hemingway ch. 1). It is very interesting to note how Cohn’s three children are never mentioned again in the rest of the story. He is shown travelling the world and living his life, all while never making mention of them. He discusses neither visiting them nor taking care of them at any point to which the reader is privy. This can be interpreted as signifying the absence of meaningful relationships throughout the Lost Generation. Cohn’s second relationship, his relationship with Frances, is very manipulative and transactional, with Frances trying to get everything she can out of Cohn while holding a strict monopoly over his freedom and social life. Cohn eventually moves on to an affair with Brett, who leaves him after a few days, destroying his confidence and leading to a fistfight between Cohn, the bullfighter Romero, Jake, and Brett’s potential fiancé Mike. Given these loveless depictions alone, one might consider the Lost Generation doomed to a meaningless existence until the end of its life, but a few parts of the novel go against this notion. One such part occurs when Jake and his good friend Bill Gorton, another American World War I veteran, go on a fishing trip to Burguette, Spain. Throughout the five days of the trip, the two friends engage in friendly competition and are more open with each other, discussing issues like Jake’s wound and relationship with Brett openly and honestly, which is in direct contrast with the rest of the story. This peace and tranquility came with being honest with their own feelings, by leaving the bar hopping, party-filled atmosphere behind, and by confiding in people they trusted and admired. Bill tells Jake “Listen. You’re a hell of a good guy, and I’m fonder of you than anybody on earth.” This entire side story can be interpreted as a potential path of redemption for the Lost Generation: by leaving the loveless, chaotic environment they had created for themselves behind, they could find peace and tranquility in their comrades and in people they trusted. By taking the time to slow down and forge meaningful relationships, they may be saved.

The other large hint towards a chance for redemption for the Lost Generation is seen in the very last scene of the story. After leaving the bullfighter Romero, Brett meets with Jake once again and the two drink and have dinner together. The two go on a drive through the town, and upon reaching an intersection on the Gran Via, Brett exclaims “Oh, Jake...we could have had such a damned good time together.” Jake replies “Yes...isn’t it pretty to think so?” (Hemingway ch. 19). The story concludes on this note, and the reader is left to question its significance. One optimistic interpretation of this scene is that this is the moment when Jake and Brett are agreeing that they will not work, and that they will both move on in search of bigger and better things for themselves. They reminisce on the past, and look forward to the future, choosing a path just like the taxi they are riding in is choosing a path in an intersection. Much of the stress Jake suffered from throughout the novel came from his struggle to come to terms with his inability to be with Brett, primarily due to his injury. By accepting this and moving forward, he has taken one step towards reaching the tranquility and peace he found with Bill on his fishing trip; he may find himself and find a greater meaning for his life.

The Lost Generation returned from the greatest war the world had ever seen as completely shell shocked husks of their former selves. Its members drowned their sorrows by pursuing meaningless relationships, heavily drinking, and partying constantly. While this gave the outward image of a successful, happy generation, a glance underneath the happy facade revealed a much darker truth. The whole generation was left without purpose, and was continuously trying to fill the gaping hole left by the absence of youthful aspirations and goals. Many of them were content to live off of inherited money, or to make just enough to sustain their toxic lifestyle of drinking and bar hopping night after night. Others tried to fake wanderlust, and blindly hoped that travelling the world would help them escape their personal issues and reinvigorate their lives. A rare few tried to redeem their lives and worked to make meaningful friendships and to maintain healthy relationships, in order to find happiness and peace for themselves. Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* explores all of these different types of people within the Lost Generation, and provides a few subtle hints towards salvation for its otherwise hopeless members. Hemingway’s story simultaneously demonstrates the meaningless struggle the Lost Generation lived through every day, while also finding ways to validate that struggle and to show that it may have ultimately lead to a fulfilled, meaningful life in the end.

Works Cited

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Sun Also Rises.* New York: Scribner. Kindle file.

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