



The Lost Generation

An Introduction to the Movement

The Lost Generation

- “That is what you are. That’s what you all are...all of you young people who served in the war. You are a lost generation.”
- Gertrude Stein
- “Who is calling who a lost generation?”
- Ernest Hemingway



Pictured: Gertrude Stein with Ernest Hemingway’s son, Jack

- The term originated with [Gertrude Stein](#) who, after being unimpressed by the skills of a young car mechanic, asked the garage owner where the young man had been trained. The garage owner told her that while young men were easy to train, it was those in their mid-twenties to thirties, the men who had been through World War I, whom he considered a "lost generation" — *une génération perdue*.

The Lost Generation

- The term is used to describe the generation of writers active immediately after World War I (post 1920s)
- Gertrude Stein became famous for the using the phrase, borrowed from a car mechanic's criticism of twenty-year-old slackers
- The phrase signifies a disillusioned postwar generation characterized by...
 - Lost values
 - Lost belief in the idea of human progress
 - A mood of futility and despair leading to hedonism

- The 1926 publication of Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* popularized the term, as Hemingway used it as an epigraph. The novel serves to epitomize the post-war expatriate generation.
- However, Hemingway himself later wrote to his editor Max Perkins that the "point of the book" was not so much about a generation being lost, but that "the earth abideth forever"; he believed the characters in *The Sun Also Rises* may have been "battered" but were not lost.

What makes a “Lost Generation” story?

- Economy of Language
- Presence of War (overt or implied)
- “Iceberg Theory”
- Symbolism – colors, nature, etc.
- Alcohol
- Jazz
- Influence of European culture, art, etc.
- Rejection of Victorian era style



Famous Writers of the Movement

- The Lost Generation mostly includes expatriate writers who left the United States for Europe after WWI:
 - Ernest Hemingway
 - F. Scott Fitzgerald
 - T.S. Eliot
 - Ezra Pound
- You could also include writers who were heavily influenced by these writers and/or WWI:
 - William Carlos Williams
 - Wilfred Owen



Hemingway's Style



Writing Style

- A few characteristics:
 - Stark minimalist nature
 - Grade school-like grammar
 - Austere word choice
 - Unvarnished descriptions
 - Short, declarative sentences
 - Uses language accessible to the common reader

The Iceberg Principle

- Hemingway's theory of omission is widely referred to as the "iceberg principle." By omitting certain parts of a story, he actually strengthens that story.
- The writer must be conscious of these omissions and write true enough in order for the reader to sense the omitted parts.
- When the reader senses the omitted parts, a greater perception and understanding for the story can be achieved.

Paratactic Style

- **Paratactic style** is a style in which sentences or elements within sentences are set down successively with little or no indication of their relationship.
- An example of a sequence of complete sentences, which are put after each other without any expression of their connection or relations except the conjunction “and”:
- “It was a warm spring night **and** I sat at a table on the terrace of the Napolitain after Robert had gone, watching it get dark **and** the electric signs come on, **and** the red and green stop-and-go traffic-signal, **and** the crowd going by, **and** the horse-cabs clippety-clopping along at the edge of the solid traffic, **and** the *poules* going by...”

Symbolism

- Hemingway disliked discussions regarding the symbolism in his works. The "iceberg principle," however, by its very nature, invites symbolic interpretations and Hemingway acknowledged this in his own subtle way.

The Sun Also Rises



Key Facts

- Genre: Modernist novel, post war novel
- Setting: 1924 in Paris, France
- Narrator: Jake Barnes—the protagonist.
- Action: Jake, Brett, and their friends pursue a dissipated life in Paris. Jake is in love with Lady Brett Ashley, but cannot maintain a relationship because a war wound has made him impotent.
- Tone: Detached, ironic, nostalgic
- Style: Spare, concise, and seemingly very direct, although the speakers tend to give the impression that they are leaving a tremendous amount unsaid.

“Hemingway’s surfaces seem always to suggest “the undruggable consciousness of something wrong.” A world of trauma, sleeplessness, an awareness of nada. . .” (Ruland and BradBury)

Hemingway generally avoids descriptive words like adverbs and adjectives.

Context

- *The Sun Also Rises* portrays the lives of the members of the so-called Lost Generation (remember Gertrude Stein): the group of men and women whose early adulthood was consumed by WWI.
- The war shattered many people's beliefs in traditional values of love, faith, and manhood. Without these notions to rely on, members of the generation that fought and worked in the war suffered great moral and psychological aimlessness.
- The futile search for meaning in the wake of the Great War shapes *The Sun Also Rises*. Although the characters rarely mention the war, it effects everything they do and say.

Lost Spirits

JAKE BARNES:

- **American veteran of WWI** working as a journalist. He and his friends engage in drinking and parties.
- **Sexually wounded soldier:** He has lost the ability to have sex. He also struggles with anguish over his love for Lady Brett Ashley and the moral emptiness.
- **Narrative voice:** characterised by refinement and implication. He positions himself as an observer, generally describing only those around him, rarely speaking about himself. However, in describing, he reveals much about his own feelings.
- **Insecure about his masculinity:** He suggests that Brett does not want him because it would mean giving up sex. His insecurity about his masculinity is typical of the anxieties that many members of the Lost Generation felt.
- **An example of the Lost Generation:** He lives an aimless, immoral existence as he wanders through Paris, from bar to bar, drinking heavily. Yet, Jake differs from those around him. He seems aware of the futility of the Lost Generation's way of life. He acknowledges, if only indirectly, the pain that his war injury and his unanswered love for Brett cause him. Though he understands the dilemma of the Lost Generation, he remains trapped within it.

Lost Spirits

LADY BRETT ASHLEY:

- **A beautiful British woman** who drinks heavily. She loves Jake, but is unwilling to commit to a relationship with him, because it means giving up sex. She is portrayed as somewhat nymphomaniac.
- **Great power over men** as her beauty seem to charm everyone she meets. She refuses to commit to *one* man, preferring independence.
- **Independent:** But she does not seem to draw much happiness from her independence. Her life seems aimless and unfulfilling.
- **Wandering from relationship to relationship**, which parallels Jake and his friends' wandering from bar to bar. Although she will not commit to a man, she seems uncomfortable being by herself. As Jake remarks, "She can't go anywhere alone."

WWI seems to have played an essential part in the formation of Brett's character. Her aimlessness, especially with regard to men, can be seen as a futile, subconscious search for love. Brett's search is perhaps symbolic of the entire Lost Generation's search for the shattered pre-war values.

Themes

The aimlessness of the Lost Generation

- Jake, Brett, and their acquaintances give dramatic life to the Lost Generation. Because they no longer believe in anything, their lives are empty and full of inconsequential and escapist activities.
- Hemingway never explicitly states that Jake and his friends' lives are aimless, or that this aimlessness is a result of the war. This is implied through his portrayal of the characters' mental lives, contrasting the characters' surface actions.

Themes

Male insecurity

- WWI forced a radical re-evaluation of what it meant to be masculine. The pre-war ideal of the brave, stoic soldier was undermined by the realities of the war. Jake embodies this cultural change. The war leaves his manhood (that is, his penis) useless. He feels “less of a man” than he was before and cannot escape the sense of inadequacy, which is only increased by Brett’s refusal to be with him.
- In many ways Brett is more manly than the men in the book. She refers to herself as a “chap”, she has a masculine name, and she is strong and independent. Thus, she embodies traditional masculine characteristics.

Motifs and Symbols

- **The failure of communication:** The conversations among Jake and his friends are rarely direct or honest. Although the memories of the war torments them all, they are unable to communicate this torment. When Georgette and Jake have dinner, Jake narrates that they would probably agree that the war “*perhaps would have been better avoided*”. (p. 25)

Motifs and Symbols

Excessive drinking: Hemingway's characters seemingly all try to escape something – in this case by drinking.

The wound is a metaphor for the pain of life in a troubled age. The castrating war wound does not only afflict Jake, but all of the young people in the novel: “*What’s the matter? You sick?*” “*Yes.*” “*Everybody’s sick. I’m sick, too.*” (p. 23) The writing proliferates in images of fragmentation, waste and castration. The wound leaves him in a world of...