



The Search for the Lost Self in the Literature of the American Lost Generation

La Recherche du Soi Perdu dans la Littérature de la Génération Américaine Perdue

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Abstract :

The present research paper deals with the theme of the search for the lost self in the literature of the American Lost Generation as well as with the role played by this literary group in American literature and society. In reality, the term "lost generation", coined by Gertrude Stein, is applied to a group of American men of letters and artists who used to live in Paris during the 1920s, among them, one can cite Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, and others. The literature of this men of letters is often characterized by the similar themes discussed in their works. This generation of writers was "lost" in the sense that its inherited values were no longer relevant in the postwar world and because of its spiritual alienation from the United States.

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Résumé:

La présente recherche traite le thème de la recherche du soi perdu dans la littérature de la génération américaine perdue ainsi que le rôle joué par ce groupe littéraire dans la littérature et la société américaines. En réalité, le terme « génération perdue », inventé par Gertrude Stein, s'applique à un groupe d'hommes de lettres et d'artistes américains qui vivaient à Paris dans les années 1920, parmi lesquels on peut citer Ernest Hemingway, William Faulkner, et d'autres. La littérature de ces hommes de lettres est souvent caractérisée par les thèmes similaires abordés dans leurs ouvrages. Cette génération d'écrivains était « perdue » dans le sens où ses valeurs héritées n'étaient plus pertinentes dans le monde d'après-guerre et à cause de leur aliénation.

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Introduction

Like any other literature, American literature has got its expatriate writers who wrote about the new nation from afar. Important is the fact that those writers were dissatisfied with the life style of the American individual, and they often criticized the American political and economic system which according to them was disappointing and unjust. As a matter of fact, they used literature as a form of power to express their dissatisfaction and disappointment. In fact, they did not hide their conviction that the New World lacked cultural atmosphere and safe environment for writers to be creative. That is why they preferred to leave the New Nation and they headed over to Europe in which, according to their belief, one can find a better literary and cultural environment. This throng of writers is often referred to as “the Lost Generation”

1. The Lost Generation and the disillusionment in Post First World War Era

One needs to emphasize that the term “Lost Generation” refers to the generation of people who reached adulthood during or immediately following World War I. This term more specifically refers to a group of American writers whose works were published after that period. The term “Lost Generation” comes from a comment that Modernist writer Gertrude Stein made to author Ernest Hemingway—that Hemingway and his colleagues were “all a lost generation (Fitch, 1985, p. 125). from a psychological point of view, using the term “lost,” psychologists often refer to the “disoriented, wandering, directionless” feelings that haunted many survivors of what had been one of the most horrific wars in modern history. The term is believed to have come from an actual verbal exchange witnessed by novelist Gertrude Stein during which a French garage owner derisively told his young employee, “You are all a lost generation.” (Mellow, 1991, p. 273) Stein repeated the phrase to her colleague and pupil Ernest Hemingway, who popularized the term when he used it as an epigraph to his classic 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises*.

From a literary point of view, the term also refers to a group of well-known American authors and poets including Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and T. S. Eliot, who because were disillusioned by the horrors of war, rejected the traditions of the older generation. The works of this group of American writers often detailed the internal struggles of the “Lost Generation.” Their struggles were characterized in the works of a group of famous American authors and poets including Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and T. S. Eliot. Common traits of the “Lost Generation” included decadence, distorted visions of the “American Dream,” and gender confusion.

In a more practical sense, the term “Lost Generation” has a double meaning. While it refers specifically to the generation of writers and artists disillusioned after the war, it can also refer to the post-war generation more broadly. That generation found the cultural lessons they had learned in childhood irrelevant; they were “lost” in the modern world. But the term also refers to the large percentage of that generation that had been lost to the violence of war.” (Mellow, 1991, p. 244) J.R.R. Tolkien, who became famous after writing his *The Lord of the Rings*, also fought in the war that is why echoes of trauma are obvious in his writing. He later reflected that, by the end of the war “all but one of my close friends was dead.” Experiences like his were common. Britain and Russia lost around two percent of their total population in the war. Germany, France, and Austria lost about four percent. Some nations, such as the Ottoman Empire, Serbia, and Romania lost nine to fifteen percent of their prewar populations.

It is in fact worth noting that the Lost Generation rebelled against post-World War I American ideals. During that time American culture valued a work ethic of capitalism and entrepreneurship. Members of the Lost Generation, however, felt the United States lacked culture and sophistication." (Gale, 2011, p. 66).

In a deeper sense, the lost generation was "lost" because it found the conservative moral and social values of their American parents lost in a post-war world. In the United States, President Warren G. Harding's "back to normalcy" policy calling for a return to the way of life before World War I, left the members of the lost generation feeling spiritually alienated from facing what they believed would be hopelessly provincial, materialistic, greedy, and emotionally barren American society. (Monk, 2004, p. 175). In reality, having witnessed what they considered pointless death on such a massive scale during the war, many members of the generation rejected more traditional ideas of proper behavior, morality, and gender roles. The generation of men and women who came of age during or immediately following World War I: viewed, as a result of their war experiences and the social upheaval of the time, as cynical, disillusioned, and without cultural or emotional stability.

Important is the idea that they were considered to be "lost" due to their tendency to act aimlessly, even recklessly, often focusing on the hedonistic accumulation of personal wealth. The lost generation writers criticized the loss of hope that war had taken from an entire generation of people and instead opted for a non-conformist life across the ocean in Europe, a life where patriotism was not mandatory, where faith was lost and morality was a rapidly fading concept. "In those days we did not trust anyone who had not been in the war, but we did not completely trust anyone." (Hemingway, 1996, p. 88).

Interesting is the idea that The Lost Generation had a remarkable impact on society because the writings that came out of this period showed the effects war has on people. War was a terrible thing that made men lose their masculinity, gave people a sense of disillusionment, and made people want to return to a simpler, idealistic past:

Something must be radically wrong with a culture and a civilisation when its youth begins to desert it. Youth is the natural time for revolt, for experiment, for a generous idealism that is eager for action. Any civilisation which has the wisdom of self-preservation will allow a certain margin of freedom for the expression of this youthful mood. But the plain, unpalatable fact is that in America today that margin of freedom has been reduced to the vanishing point. Rebellious youth is not wanted here. In our environment there is nothing to challenge our young men; there is no flexibility, no colour, no possibility for adventure, no chance to shape events more generously than is permitted under the rules of highly organised looting. All our institutional life combines for the common purpose of blackjacking our youth into the acceptance of the status quo; and not acceptance of it merely, but rather its glorification. (Stearns, 1989, p. 91). For his part, Kirk Curnutt, author of several books about the Lost Generation writers suggested that they were expressing mythologized versions of their own lives. In an interview for The Hemingway Project, Curnutt claims:

"They were convinced they were the products of a generational breach, and they wanted to capture the experience of newness in the world around them. As such, they tended to write about alienation, unstable mores like drinking, divorce, sex, and different varieties of unconventional self-identities like gender-bending." (the-lost-generation, 2021).

One needs to stress the very idea that the writers of the Lost Generation viewed the idea of the “American Dream” as a great deception and mythic concept. That is why this becomes a prominent theme in *The Great Gatsby* as the story’s narrator Nick Carraway comes to realize that Gatsby’s vast fortune had been paid for with great misery. In fact, *The Great Gatsby* is about the efforts of this young man, Jay Gatsby, to reinvent himself. We see the whole story from the narrator’s perspective – Nick Carraway, which moved out to New York from Mid-west and now lives next door to Gatsby.” (Mellow, 1991, p. 127).

The main character of the novel is an everlasting dreamer with a really extravagant lifestyle. He lives in a gigantic Gothic mansion and throws glamorous parties every Saturday night. But his persona is a complete invention as Gatsby actually grew up poor and this is not even his real name. All his efforts to become rich are dedicated to winning back the woman he loves.

“Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that’s no matter - tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther. . . . And then one fine morning - So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.” (the-lost-generation, 2021)

It is quite obvious that to Fitzgerald, the traditional vision of the American Dream—that hard work led to success—had become corrupted and even lost in the American society. In his famous novel, he stresses the idea that America is no longer the land of equal opportunities but rather it was a land in which existence was for the strongest. To the Lost Generation writers, in general, “living the dream” was no longer about simply building a self-sufficient life, but about getting stunningly rich by any means necessary.

Unable or unwilling to come to grips with the horrors of warfare, many of the Lost Generation created impossibly unrealistic hopes for the future (Winter, 1977, 449–466). This is expressed best in the final lines of *The Great Gatsby* in which narrator Nick exposed Gatsby’s idealized vision of Daisy that had always prevented him from seeing her as she really was.

From the foregoing, it became obvious that The Lost Generation writers all gained prominence and fame in 20th century literature. Their thematic and stylistic innovations challenged assumptions about writing and expression, and paved the way for subsequent generations of writers. (Monk, 2004, p. 195) Ernest Hemingway, for instance, was the Lost Generation’s leader in the adaptation of the naturalistic technique in the novel. John Dos Passos had also seen the brutality of the war and questioned the meaning of contemporary life (Fitch, 1985) His novel *Manhattan Transfer* reveals the extent of his pessimism as he indicated the hopeless futility of life in an American city. F. Scott Fitzgerald is remembered as the portrayer of the spirit of the Jazz age. (Fitch, 1985, p. 172)

2. John Steinbeck’s Questioning the Meaning of Contemporary Life in an Epic Chronicle

John Steinbeck, who believed that “the ancient commission of the writer has not changed ; received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1962. His native region of Monterey Bay was later the setting for most of his fiction. From his mother, a teacher, Steinbeck learned to love books. He is best remembered for *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), a novel widely considered to be a 20th-century classic. The impact of the book on society and government led critics to compare it to of Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, the novel which shed light on the blacks of America and; therefore, contributed to the outbreak of the American Civil War. Steinbeck’s epic about the

migration of the Joad family, driven from its bit of land in Oklahoma to California, ignited a wide debate about the hard lot of migrant laborers in the American society, and helped to put an agricultural reform into effect. He was born in Salinas, California.

In this same context, it should be stressed that before writing *The Grapes of Wrath* Steinbeck travelled around California migrant camps in 1936. When the novel appeared, it was attacked by US Congressman Lyle Boren who characterized it as "a lie, a black, infernal creation of twisted, distorted mind" his governmental rejection of the novel might be in fact attributed to the fact that it did not focus on the smiling aspects of the American life (Winter, 1977, p. 450). In fact in this very novel Steinbeck excelled in depicting the dangerous effects of harsh capitalism on the American individual and society. He probably, had a social list ideology that made of him a staunch defender of the poor and the low class in the new nation. Later, when Steinbeck received his Nobel Prize, the Swedish Academy called it simply "an epic chronicle." In describing the plight of the poor Americans Steinbeck states.

They stand still and watch the potatoes float by, listen to the screaming pigs being killed in a ditch and covered with quicklime, watch the mountains of oranges slop down to a putrefying ooze; and in the eyes of the people there is the failure; and in the eyes of the hungry there is a growing wrath. In the souls of the people, the grapes of wrath are filling and growing heavy, growing heavy for the vintage. (the-lost-generation, 2021)

One can observe that the narrator clearly states that the people having been displaced from their homes have nostalgia to their different things that they have left behind. They are seeing potatoes, pigs, and oranges, which are making them furious as well as making them realize their failure to protect them. He often refers to the title that as they see grapes, they also become angry over this displacement and the feeling of being a failure.

No wonder that after the great success of *The Grapes of Wrath*, Steinbeck, during WW II, Steinbeck served as a war correspondent for the New York Herald Tribune in Great Britain and the Mediterranean area. He wrote such government propaganda as the novel *The Moon is Down* (1942), about resistance movement in a small town occupied by the Nazis. The film version of the book, starring Henry Travers, Cedric Hardwicke, and Lee J. Cobb, was shot on the set of *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), which depicted a Welsh mining village. "Free men cannot start a war,"

As matter of fact, Steinbeck's post-war works include *The Pearl* (1947), a symbolic tale of a Mexican Indian pearl diver Kino. He finds a valuable pearl which changes his life, but not in the way he did expect. Kino sees the pearl as his opportunity to better life. When the townsfolk of La Paz learn of Kino's treasury, he is soon surrounded by a greedy priest, doctor, and businessmen. Kino's family suffers series of disasters and finally he throws the pearl back into ocean. Thereafter his tragedy is legendary in the town. *A Russian Journal* (1948) was an account of the author's journey to the Soviet Union.

3. William Faulkner's Decrying Materialist Culture and Racial Injustice

Another lost generation writer is William Faulkner who showed readiness for greatness, even as a small child, when he listened to tales and legends from his distinguished family's past. William was born in New Albany, Mississippi, but the family soon moved to Oxford.

In June 1918, Faulkner joined the Royal Air Force of Canada. After dropping out of the university in 1921, Faulkner took a brief job in a New York bookstore; there he met the future wife of Sherwood Anderson, Elizabeth Prall. His first book of poetry, *The Marble Faun* (1924), continued his work in the decadent/neo-romantic vein.

In Anderson's literary circle Faulkner became acquainted with Freud's theories of sexuality, the mythic world of anthropologist Sir James Frazer's *Golden Bough*, and the sweeping implications of the literary innovations of T. S. Eliot and James Joyce. He also absorbed the despair of the post-war generation, and melded all these influences, first in a series of literary sketches published by the *New Orleans Times Picayune* and *The Double Dealer* (a literary magazine) and then in a first novel, *Soldier's Pay*. Faulkner once wrote.

The writer's only responsibility is to his art. He will be completely ruthless if he is a good one. He has a dream. It anguishes him so much he must get rid of it. He has no peace until then. Everything goes by the board: honor, pride, decency, security, happiness, all, to get the book written. If a writer has to rob his mother, he will not hesitate; the 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' is worth any number of old ladies. (Faulkner, 1996, p. 250)

Like his colleagues, Faulkner had to leave for the Old World, spending time in Italy and England but reacting most strongly to France, to develop later a great love to that country. Returning to Mississippi, Faulkner took a series of jobs while working on his second novel, *Mosquitoes* (1927). For him, 1929 marked the beginning of what critics have come to call "The great years" when he wrote the seven novels that have been judged masterworks. The impetus for this extraordinary outburst came in *Sartoris* (1929), when Faulkner decided to concentrate on what he came to call his little postage-stamp of soil, Yoknapatawpha County; all the great novels are set there, in or around Jefferson, the county seat.

Undoubtedly, the town obviously depicts Oxford and its surrounding Lafayette County. As a result of this focus, Faulkner was able to create a mythic cosmos of his own, with interconnected mythic structures and characters, populating his world with all the various folk he had encountered in life; he made a determined effort to render the experience of women, blacks, and American Indians as well, and showed nostalgia for lost traditions and the vanishing wilderness, while simultaneously decrying materialist culture and racial injustice. Faulkner's first masterwork, *The Sound and the Fury*, was published in 1929:

All of us have failed to match our dream of perfection. I rate us on the basis of our splendid failure to do the impossible. If I could write all my work again, I'm convinced I could do it better. This is the healthiest condition for an artist. That's why he keeps working, trying again: he believes each time that this time he will do it, bring it off. Of course he won't. (the-lost-generation, 2021).

4. Ernest Hemingway: Post War Conflict and Destruction

In addition to Steinbeck and Faulkner, Ernest Hemingway became a great writer of the lost generation who like his colleagues questioned the validity of the American dream and all the American ideals. The biography of Hemingway tells that he published his earliest stories and poems in his high school newspaper (Meyers, 1985). Upon his graduation in 1917, Hemingway worked six months as a reporter for *The Kansas City Star*. He then joined volunteer ambulance unit in Italy during World War I. In 1918 he suffered a severe leg wound and was twice decorated by the Italian

government. His affair with an American nurse, Agnes von Kurowsky, gave inspiration for the autobiographical novel *A Farewell to Arms* (the-lost-generation, 2021).

In 1954, Hemingway was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. But unfortunately, he was unable to attend the award ceremony in Stockholm, because he was recuperating from injuries sustained in an aero plane crash while hunting in Uganda. Ernest Hemingway was born in Oak Park, Illinois. After the war Hemingway worked for a short time as a journalist in Chicago. He moved in 1921 to Paris, where wrote articles for the *Toronto Star*. In Europe Hemingway associated with such writers as Gertrude Stein and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who edited some of his texts and acted as his agent. Later Hemingway portrayed Fitzgerald in *A Moveable Feast* (1964), but not in a friendly light. Fitzgerald, however, regretted their lost friendship. When he was not writing for the newspaper or for himself, Hemingway toured with his wife, the former Elisabeth Hadley, France, Switzerland, and Italy. In 1922 he went to Greece and Turkey to report on the war between those countries (Meyers, 1985, p. 95).

In addition to hunting expeditions in Africa and Wyoming, Hemingway developed a passion for deep-sea fishing in the waters off Key West, the Bahamas, and Cuba. The first years of his marriage with Gellhorn were happy, but he soon realised that she was not a housewife, but she displayed ambition to become a journalist and political activist. Gellhorn called Hemingway her "Unwilling Companion". She was eager to travel and "take the pulse of the nation" or the world. She writes about an Unwilling Companion on her trip into China's interior in 1941, always referring to him as U. C. and never mentioning that he was in fact her husband, Ernest Hemingway. (Gellhorn, September 23, 1979).

Literary speaking, one needs to note that it is widely agreed among critics that *Across the River and Into the Trees* was Hemingway's first novel in a decade and poorly received. *The Old Man and the Sea*, published first in *Life* magazine in 1952, restored again his fame. The novella told a story of an old Cuban fisherman named Santiago, who finally catches a giant marlin after weeks of not catching anything. As he returns to the harbour, the sharks eat the fish, lashed to his boat.. Hemingway also made a fishing trip to Peru in part to shoot footage for a film version of *The Old Man and the Sea*. "If the others heard me talking out loud they would think that I am crazy. But since I am not crazy, I do not care." (Hemingway, 1996, p. 91)

In this connection, one can stress the fact that the Lost Generation is a group of authors in particular who wrote about the disillusionment of those who came of age during the First World War. (Thompson, 2019) Their numbers included several American authors living in Paris. The poet and novelist Gertrude Stein is credited with giving them their name: The Lost Generation. In *The Sun Also Rises*, Ernest Hemingway quotes Stein as saying, "All of you young people who served in the war. You are a lost generation... You have no respect for anything. You drink yourselves to death." (Hemingway, 1996).

As pointed earlier, the costs of the war changed the world vision of many. Before the war, European culture embraced Enlightenment ideas of rationality and progress. After the war, writers and artists started to adopt new forms of expression that questioned a world that had allowed such a conflict and destruction. In fact they started asking about the meaning of life. The German historian, Oswald Spengler, wrote *The Decline of the West*. T. S. Eliot wrote *The Waste Land* (Doyle, 1995, pp. 617-634) the psychologist Sigmund Freud wrote about the struggle within human minds between ego

and id—between the rational and irrational mind. F. Scott Fitzgerald critiqued the extravagance of the rich in *The Great Gatsby*. In many facets of life, people were challenging and doubting the inherited wisdom of earlier generations. (Monk, 2004, p. 185)

Conclusion

In the present paper, there is an attempt to demonstrate that the Lost Generation could to a great extent influence American society and at the same time enrich American literature through the important literary production they produced. One can also note that this group of expatriate writers helped raising the American people's awareness about the reality of post world war America and world the lost generation focused more on the mythic nature of the American dream and they insisted on their disappointment about life in American society .For them ,the New Nation is no longer the land of opportunities and happiness it was rather a land of materialism and greed and they could successfully prove that the traditional vision of the American Dream—that hard work led to success—had become corrupted. Meanwhile, new styles of art and architecture rejected everything that people had depended on before July 1914. They rejected the notion of reason and wholesomeness, and instead embraced irony and the general irrationality of the world. These artistic movements often grouped together under the title of "modernism".

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