

The Lost Generation of American Literature in the 20th century——Take The Great Gatsby and The Sun Also Rises as examples

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Abstract: In the 1920s, under the influence of the age, the Lost Generation appeared. They were lost because the traditional values could not adapt to the post-war world, but they couldn't find a new standard of living. They were disappointed and dissatisfied with the development of the American society. Although they had been active in a short period of twenty years, the Lost Generation has written a brilliant page in the history of American literature. This paper discusses the Lost Generation in American literature in the 20th century by respectively analyzing *The Great Gatsby* of Fitzgerald and *The Sun Also Rises* of Hemingway.

Keywords: Lost Generation, Fitzgerald, Hemingway

1. Meaning of Lost Generation

The term came from a sentence Gertrude Stein said to Hemingway: "You are the Lost Generation", which was used as a preface to *The Sun Also Rises*.

In a narrow sense, the Lost Generation refers to some young scholars and writers after the first World War, such as Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald.

Broadly speaking, the Lost Generation refers that in the years after World War I, people began to rebel against previous ideas and values, but could only replace them with despair or cynicism. It also included the young English and American patriots, as well as the men and women captured in the war. Because their ideas were not in line with the new age, they were also called the Sad Young Men, which was created by F. Scott Fitzgerald in his book *All the Sad Young Men* in 1926.

2. The background of the Lost Generation

The rebellious behavior of the young generation is the inevitable outcome of that age. Their rebellion began with the First World War, and they went to the battlefield with the ideal of "make the world safe for democracy", but they witnessed the massacre and death during the war, which was contrary to their original ambition and the American spirit. In particular, with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, these young men, who had experienced life and death on the battlefield, suddenly realized that it was only an inhumane division of the imperialists hidden under the "democratic belief" and they were "accomplices" to this evil.

The war aroused their spirits and destroyed their innocence. From triumphant war heroes to victims fooled by politicians, these young men were at a loss because of the futile bloodshed on the battlefield and the shattering of once unswerving values.

Economically, the United States made a fortune in World War I, and became the most economically powerful country in the world. The domestic economy was booming: the rapid development of transportation, construction industries, and the sudden rise of electrical appliances and automobile manufacturing. The unprecedented industrialization has brought great opportunities to the development of America.

At the same time, material prosperity greatly reflects spiritual emptiness. After returning home, the war-torn generation could no longer integrate into their original lives. They became world-weary and rebellious, hoping to break the Victorian morality and attempted to rouse themselves in stimulating

activity. They followed the trend, splash money for momentary novelty, indulge in revelry, and seek sensual stimuli—sex, drugs, alcohol. They also scoffed at the hypocritical benevolence prevailing at the time, such as Prohibition, and patriotism that made money from war.

Against this background, a group of cultural youth came to Greenwich Village, at the junction of Fifth Avenue and West 14th Street in New York. Because it was far from the city center and houses were cheap.[1] Therefore, here came many young and promising writers, filled with hatred and anger against war and Puritan moral cultivation. They vented their anger through creating works to destroy the old world.

However, the imitation of non-intellectuals made this rebellious behavior popular and fashionable. They did not experience the war and not really experience the real sense of destruction and loss, but pretended to be a pair of naughty drunk accident appearance, escaping from reality, and pursued of excitement. These behaviors, of course, aroused the intellectuals' dissatisfaction. Moreover, intellectuals pursued an America which were more sensitive to art and less avid for material.[1] However, this pursuit has been totally ignored, so they became more unbearable and moved to Europe. Fitzgerald and Hemingway were among them.

3. Representatives of the Lost Generation and their works

Hemingway and Fitzgerald, as the eminent representatives of the Lost Generation, their works directly or indirectly reflected the writer's own life, and were also the true reflection of that age. "Different from the realistic novels in the 19th century, the lost Generation no longer takes reflecting and copying the reality of the external world as its task, but turns to the exploration and excavation of people's subjective world or mental state." [2]

(1) Fitzgerald and *The Great Gatsby*

He was one of the representative writers of the Lost Generation and the poet laureate of the Jazz Age. For his age, in Fitzgerald's own words, "It was an age of miracles, it was an age of art, it was an age of excess, and it was an age of satire."

As he was also passionately involved in the glitz and glamour of society, he was keenly aware of the yearning for romance and the emptiness and hopelessness behind the superficial luxury, so he reflected these emotions in his work. In his writing, the subtle emotional entanglement of the upper-class youngsters in golf courses, country clubs and luxury mansions are an eternal theme. Their frustration and melancholy, which cannot be dispelled by money, were pervasive. His work was often about youthful aspirations and idealism, but also about the fickleness of relationships and the sense of loss.

During his writing career, Fitzgerald published novels such as *the Great Gatsby* and *Tender is the Night*, as well as more than 160 short stories, among which *The Great Gatsby*, published in 1925, was the culmination of Fitzgerald's writing career. This novel portrayed the unfulfilled desires under the cover of wealth and success, reflected the disillusionment of the American Dream in the 1920s, and profoundly revealed the contradictions and inner conflicts of the characters.

The Great Gatsby tells the story of Gatsby's relentless pursuit of love, money and status in the Jazz Age, which eventually led to his own tragedy.

Born in a poor peasant family, Gatsby fell in love with Daisy when he joined the army. As the First World War broke out, he was transferred to Europe. However, Daisy married Tom, who came from a prominent family but behaved rudely. Gatsby was in great pain and he firmly believed that it was money that made Daisy betray her chastity, so he was determined to become a rich man at any cost. He challenged the Prohibition, and became a successful person by smuggling alcohol. He built his mansion opposite where Daisy lived. Gatsby spent a lot of money holding parties all night, trying to get Daisy's attention and save his lost love. After meeting Daisy, he naively thought that Daisy had never changed, and had always been the pure girl he knew. Even after discovering Daisy's changes, he still pursued her without hesitation.

But for Daisy, she only regarded their ambiguous relationship as a thrill. After a heated argument, Daisy killed her husband's mistress when driving Gatsby's car, but Gatsby took full responsibility to protect her. Finally, under Tom's provocation, his mistress's husband shot Gatsby. Gatsby became a victim completely, and in the end, there was only indifference and betrayal to him.

Gatsby was great, because in the age of "money is paramount", he never forgot his love for Daisy.

Daisy, as the embodiment of his ideal, only had a beautiful body. Although he later clearly recognized that her voice was full of money, he still did not change his original intention and stubbornly pursued to relive the old dreams. "Gatsby's tragedy was caused by the poor family condition, the distorted social values and his own blind pursuit of love, money and status. At the same time, Gatsby symbolized the blind social outlook and life values of a large number of young people struggling for a better life after the war." [3]

(2) Ernest Hemingway and *The Sun Also Rises*

Hemingway was the embodiment of the Lost Generation and his life is the epitome of the whole Lost Generation. Hemingway personally participated in the first World War during which he showed great bravery. He was hit by more than 20 pieces of shrapnel, and his body was irreversibly hurt. Like many soldiers who returned home after the war, he was extremely unaccustomed to the calm and dull life in his hometown. He felt depressed and even wanted to die. In 1922 he went to Paris as a journalist and travelled around Europe, watched bullfights, took part in skiing, boxing, fishing, drinking and writing.

Set in Paris from 1924 to 1925, *The Sun Also Rises* focused on the dissolute life of a group of British and American young men and women who suffered serious emotional trauma or serious mental illness in the war, and the emotional entanglements that happened between them. It reflected the painful and sad mood of this generation who felt that there was no way to go after awakening their consciousness.

War is the background and an obscure theme in this novel, and its influence on the protagonists runs through the novel. There is a passage in the novel, which Bill said to Barnes. Basically, it can be used to explain why these young people always have a bad mood: "You're an expatriate. You've lost touch with the soil. You get yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your precious. Fake European have ruined you. You drink around cafes." [4]

In this novel, the protagonists Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley are the typical representatives of the characteristics of the Lost Generation.

Jake Barnes was one of the main characters in the novel. He was seriously injured in World War I and lost his sexual ability. This trauma not only hurt his body, but also made his spirit incomplete. He loved Brett. However, because of his injury, they could never really come together. He could only be extremely calm and restrained to love her and even helped her to have a relationship with his friends. This terrible war destroyed Jake's life and his love. He had to bear the physical and mental trauma brought by the war.

In this novel, the heroine Brett showed the spiritual emptiness caused by the war thoroughly and vividly. As soon as Brett appeared, she was full of personality and charms. She had short hair, wore short clothes, and had graceful figure. During the war, she worked as a nurse in the hospital. Her lover died in the war. Although she married again, her marriage was unhappy. Later, she met Jake, although she liked Jake, because of his injury, they could never really get together. Brett's spirit was empty, so she kept finding spiritual comfort from men, smoking, drinking, hanging out in bars and cafes, and living an exciting life. She tried to extricate herself through this unorthodox, unruly way of life, but she couldn't do it.

The story ends in the conversation between Jack and Brett.

"Oh, Jake," Brett said, "we could have had such a damned good time together."

Ahead was a mounted policemen 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?" [4]

This dialogue gives people a calm and even some warmth after experiencing the carnival and confusion of life, but it is still full of helplessness, pessimism and sentimental pain. The two of them can't be together in the end, they are victims of war.

4. Conclusion

The Lost Generation highlights the spiritual world of the characters, and most of their works revolve around the protagonist's love stories, but as Mark Spilka said, "one of the most enduring themes of the 1920s is the death of love in World War I." The protagonists of *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises* are all tortured by the death of their love because of the war.

The Sad Young Men and the Lost Generation are the products of the age. Are they really lost? No.

They were not lost. As Rod W. Horton and Herbert W. Edwards said in the *Sad Young Men*: “For actually the ‘Lost Generation’ was never been lost. It was shocked, uprooted for a time, bitter, critical, rebellious, iconoclastic, experimental, often absurd, more often misdirected—but never ‘lost’”. [5] Under the influence of the times, they have formed unique views. They were brave and dare to resist and struggle. For this reason, in a short period of 20 years, they added a brilliant page to the history of American literature.

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