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# Understanding the Myth and Reality of the Lost Generation

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#### **Abstract**

The term 'lost generation' evokes both the gilded decadence of the 1920s and the pulsing undercurrent of post-war disillusion, themes dominating seminal literary works of the 20th century. The writers of the lost generation were artists and intellectuals, standing on the outskirts of culture, while simultaneously creating what would become epitomes of the modern condition. For this reason, many historians argue that the lost generation is a myth. However, this claim overlooks the fact that many of the writers indeed felt 'lost.' In truth, the term is a broad generalization that erases the complexity of the collective mood among many people, including the writers, during an age of tumult. This essay attempts to clarify the ambiguity surrounding the term Lost Generation. It begins with a documentation of the term's origins and evolution, followed by an analysis of the autobiographies, fiction, and lives of three Lost Generation writers: Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and T.S. Eliot. The exploration of their literary works, alongside their lives, offers an insight into understanding their worldview and whether the term 'Lost Generation' accurately encapsulates their sentiments. This essay further reveals nuances layered in our current understanding of the Lost Generation and shows how it is a truth in abstraction, having some resonance with the 20th century, without taking full account of the experience of American intellectuals.

## Evolution of Meaning from WWI Youths to Expatriate Intellectuals

The origins of the term 'lost generation' lie in Europe. It was first mentioned in 1912 by Franz Pfemfert in the German literary and political magazine *Die Aktion*. It is difficult to know whether the connotations of disillusionment attached to this generation existed in reality because the term was not created by the masses but the intellectuals: Franz Pfemfert was a German expressionist, and therefore, according to historian Robert Wohl, implicated with "twentieth-century generationalists...members of a small elite...keenly aware of their uniqueness." Adding to this ambiguity is the fact that the supposedly singular generation was composed of multiple and that each European country had its understanding of the term's meaning. The American meaning, introduced in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, held many of these European connotations, perhaps because Hemingway's famous conversation with Gertrude Stein, which inspired his epigraph "you are all a lost generation" in *The Sun Also Rises*, took place in Paris.

As we see from Hemingway's account of the conversation in his memoir A Moveable Feast, neither he nor Stein created the phrase, but they added further nuance in using it. Gertrude Stein overheard the 'patron' of a garage scolding the young man fixing her car, who had served in the war, exclaiming "You are all a génération perdue." Ashe then repeated the phrase to Hemingway: "That's what you are... All of you young people who served in the war," adhering to the European usage of the phrase meaning the war youth. However, over the course of the conversation, the term evolved from being the shared experience of war to an attitude of insolent indifference as Stein added, "You have no respect for anything. You drink yourselves to death." At this moment, she no longer referred to the young soldiers of World War I but to her and Hemingway's social circle. Stein explained her understanding of the lost generation further in her work Everybody's Autobiography, published before A Moveable Feast. Here, the young war generation was lost because of their immaturity, without 'the influences of women of parents and preparation.'5 Hemingway took offense to Stein's implication of his shiftlessness, believing himself to be more disciplined than her and her

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Marc Dolan, "The (Hi)story of their Lives: Mythic Autobiography and The Lost Generation," *Journal of American Studies* 27, no.1 (April 1993): 52.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Wohl, The Generation of 1914, 5.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast: The Restored Edition* (New York: Scribner, [1964] 2010), 61.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> As quoted in Craig Monk, Writing the Lost Generation: Expatriate Autobiography and American Modernism (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2008), 28.

contemporaries. However, despite his condemnation of Stein's 'lost generation talk and all the dirty, easy labels,' the idea of a shared experience resonated with him when he wondered whether 'the boy in the garage...had ever been hauled in one of those vehicles when they were converted to ambulances,'6 as he had done during the war.

Hemingway's depiction of the lost generation in The Sun Also Rises adds another important association to the term: expatriation. When the protagonist Jake Barnes and his friend Bill Gorton retreat to a fishing trip, Bill accuses Jake of being 'an expatriate:' "You've lost touch with soil... You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed with sex. You spend all your time talking, not working... You hang around cafés." 'Expatriation' here is conflated with 'lost generation.' It is easy to see Stein's influence on Hemingway's understanding of both ideas. Expatriation to Europe was a trend among many of the lost-generation writers. However, leaving America was not simply a 'rejection of homeland,'8 as Donald Pizer terms it, but a way for them to participate in the international modernist movement, to form connections with other established artists while living cheaply and comfortably, something that was impossible in the US.9 In this way, expatriation was not symbolic of alienation from a former culture; many writers, such as Stein<sup>10</sup> and Pound,<sup>11</sup> still considered the US their home. Rather, it was an attempt to find a foothold in the artistic world to inspire their work and make a name for themselves. Bill's description of expatriates misses their vital motivations for the fulfillment, turning the association between being 'lost' and being an expatriate into a cliché.

#### Intellectual Dramatization

It was the intellectuals after the 1920s that dramatized the writers' existential attitudes. In *After the Lost Generation*, written in 1958, Aldridge believed that the 'lost generation,' living with the trauma of war and the modern uncertainty that gave way to Dada, surrealism, and existentialism, 'understood only the immediate present and past...[worshipping] only the gods of sex, liquor, violence, and art...because they had known nothing else.' Aldridge's metaphors

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Hemingway, A Moveable Feast, 62.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises: The Hemingway Library Edition* (New York: Scribner, [1926] 2014), 24.

<sup>8</sup> As quoted in Monk, Writing the Lost Generation, 28.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Monk, Writing the Lost Generation, 38.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Warren Susman, "A Second Country: The Expatriate Image" *Texas Studies in Language and Literature* 3, no.2 (Summer 1961): 180.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Susman, "A Second Country," 177.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> Aldridge, After the Lost Generation, 14.

exaggerate the carelessness of the writers' lives and remove their individuality. Along this same line of thinking, Charles Glicksberg claimed that "they [defied] death; they [courted] danger; they [made] a ritualistic cult of bullfighting and of hunting big game in Africa; they [committed] 'gratuitous' crimes; they experiment[ed] with suicide." In one fell sweep, Glicksberg compared Hemingway's hobbies of bullfighting and hunting to the murder committed by Leopold and Loeb in the name of Nietzsche and existentialism, tying them indelibly to their modern surroundings and making the lost generation a caricature of what they were.

## **Constructed Autobiographies**

After the 1920s, many expatriate writers published autobiographies which, despite their inaccuracy, played an important role in shaping the public's understanding of the lost generation.<sup>14</sup> As Hugh Kenner noted, the story of their movement was written 'by the canonized themselves, who were apt to be aware of a collective enterprise, and repeatedly acknowledged one another.' The 1920s saw the beginnings of fandoms, 15 where people began finding identity in celebrities rather than the influences in their own lives, and the autobiography fulfilled a desire to uncover the façade of Parisian life. Most likely, the lost generation writers accrued fame not because of their work but because of their celebrity status. Therefore, it is not surprising that Gertrude Stein's only bestseller was *The Autobiography of Alice B*. Toklas. Written through the eyes of her companion, the work defies the traditional guise of objectivity in an autobiography. Self-consciously, it describes its conception: "About six weeks ago, Gertrude Stein said, it does not look to me as if you were ever going to write that autobiography... I am going to write it as simply as Defoe did the autobiography of Robinson Crusoe. And she has and this is it."16 Following her precedent, Hemingway confesses in his memoir A Moveable Feast that "this book contains material from the remises of my memory and of my heart. Even if the one has been tampered with and the other does not exist,"17 while his manuscript states that "this is a book of fiction and should be read as such."18 The memoir, mostly written in first person, frequently switches to second person, a choice which he heavily debated in his manuscripts, crossing out 'you' to

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Charles I. Glicksberg, "The Lost Generation of Literature," *Southwest Review* 38, no.3 (Summer 1953): 4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>14</sup> Dolan, "The (Hi)story of their Lives," 40.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>16</sup> As quoted in Monk, Writing the Lost Generation, 44.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>17</sup> Hemingway, A Moveable Feast, 225.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 232.

replace with 'I,' then changing it back.<sup>19</sup> When he describes what it is like to walk through the Luxembourg Gardens, "you were accustomed to see the bare trees against the sky," "you walked on the fresh-washed gravel paths," and "you were reconciled to [the trees]."<sup>20</sup> The effect of using a direct address to the reader is to fully immerse them in his reality and establish his experiences as universal facts, true not only for himself but for anyone who reads his book. Similarly, Fitzgerald uses 'we' in his autobiography *Crack-Up*. In this way, despite their fictional nature in the case of Stein and Hemingway, these lost generation writers inadvertently used the autobiography as a way to mold the public's perception of their personal lives and the idea of a 'Lost Generation.'

#### The Lives and Literature of the Lost Generation Writers

Within their literature, general themes are adhering to the idea of a lost generation, but each writer nevertheless had their conception of the modern human condition. As for their personal lives, the 'myth' of the lost generation is in some ways true, as Hemingway, Fitzgerald, and T.S. Eliot, among other writers, struggled with anxiety and disillusionment as a result of the war, their difficult love lives, and creative unfulfillment.

## Hemingway and Loss

Hemingway's protagonists, including himself in A Moveable Feast, are lost in the sense that their loss has pushed them to disillusionment with their agency. Although they are often detached from society and themselves, it is not because of indifference, as Stein suggests, but skepticism. The characters of The Sun Also Rises feel out of control, 'sick,' and 'miserable.' They distract themselves with escapades across France and Spain to drink and watch bullfights but are ultimately unable to escape the shadow of war and the difficulty of love. Jake Barnes cannot be with the girl he loves because of his impotence from a war injury and he doesn't know what he lives by or for. At the beginning of the book, he thinks about the world in transactional terms, slipping into Hemingway's characteristic second person: "Enjoying living was learning to get your money's worth and knowing when you had it... It seemed like a fine philosophy."<sup>21</sup> Later, he re-evaluates this belief, then resolves that "I did not care what it was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it; only then could you [maybe learn]...what it was all about." Religion offers him no solace. After an attempt to pray in a church, he

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>19</sup> Hemingway, A Moveable Feast, photo insert.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>20</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>21</sup> Hemingway, The Sun Also Rises, 37.

concludes that "I was a little ashamed, and regretted that I was such a rotten Catholic, but realized there was nothing I could do about it...and I only wished I felt religious and maybe I would next time."22 His halfheartedness in these cases stems from his belief in his lack of control over his internal and external experiences. His reality becomes a monotonous blur of traveling, drinking, bullfights, and socializing only broken into two scenes: fishing with Bill and his trip to San Sebastian. There, immersed in nature, he reclaims inner peace and a romantic vision of fulfillment. However, the tranquil moments in San Sebastian where he spends his days swimming in the ocean are shattered in the final chapters of the book upon his return to Brett, his love interest. The book ends when Brett laments "Oh Jake...we could have had such a damned good time together," to which Jake replies "Yes... Isn't it pretty to think so,"23 a final line encapsulating his disillusionment in love. As writer William Adair observes, the characters are defined by their "emotional and spiritual longing, a 'hunger' for love, order, meaning, intensity, purpose" and therefore are characterized by lack. Moreover, within the frame of the epigraph from Ecclesiastes, "one generation passeth away, and another generation cometh; but the earth abideth forever..."24 their emptiness perhaps stems from the awareness of the transience of their lives.

These themes are carried over in many of Hemingway's later works. A Farewell to Arms, published in 1929, is about a young American ambulance driver, Frederick Henry, fighting on the Italian side in World War I. His role in the war and his later experiences of becoming injured in an explosion and being nursed to health by the nurse he falls in love with mirror Hemingway's own life. Unlike Jake, Frederick's love for the nurse, Catherine, gives him a new meaning and purpose; as Catherine says to him, "You're my religion. You're all I've got." But just as the war looms in the background, death inevitably takes her away from him. When Catherine dies after giving birth, Frederick gets no sense of closure, as "it was like saying good-by to a statue." A Moveable Feast reveals that much of Catherine and Frederick's story is Hemingway and Hadley's rather than Hemingway and the nurse's. Hemingway and the memoir is an 'account of the people and the places when Hadley and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>22</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>23</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>24</sup> Ibid., epigraph.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>25</sup> Ernest Hemingway, Farewell to Arms, 49.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>26</sup> Ernest Hemingway, A Farewell to Arms: Kindle Edition (New York: Scribner, [1929] 1997), 142.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>27</sup> Hemingway, A Moveable Feast, 230.

I believed we were invulnerable'<sup>28</sup> before Hemingway's affair that unraveled his marriage. Like Jake, Hemingway experienced a lack of fulfillment: "I was getting tired of the literary life if this was the life that I was leading...and I felt the death loneliness that comes at the end of every day that is wasted in your life."<sup>29</sup> Like Frederick, he lost the love that made him happiest and gave him the courage to face life. His own experiences made him well acquainted with loss, from the traumatic suicide of his father; his war injury, which took away his 'great illusion of immortality;'<sup>30</sup> and his experiences of love with the nurse that left him and Hadley who divorced him. Because of these fictional and nonfictional experiences, Adair aptly characterizes Hemingway's work as 'loss, the fear of loss...and the aftermath of loss.'<sup>31</sup>

## Fitzgerald and Identity

On the other hand, Fitzgerald's vision of disillusionment is one of material delusion. Hemingway's characters may not have a God, but they do have a moral code.<sup>32</sup> Fitzgerald's characters, however, lack both values and identity. The Beautiful and Damned, published in 1922, describes the tragedy of Anthony Patch and Gloria Gilbert, painfully aware of their mortality and their dissipating love beneath the façade of their glamorous lifestyle. This Side of Paradise, the book where Fitzgerald seems most selfconscious of ideas of disillusionment and lostness, follows Amory Blaine, a Princeton student who enlists in the war and falls in love with a young debutante, who ends up breaking off their engagement upon realizing Amory cannot financially support her lifestyle – a series of events resembling Fitzgerald's experiences with his wife, Zelda Sayre. Amory realizes both an individual and collective emptiness: "For the first time in his life, he rather longed for death to roll over his generation, obliterating their petty fevers and struggles and exultations. His youth seemed never so vanished as now in the contrast between the utter loneliness of this visit and that riotous, joyful party of four years before. Things that had been the merest commonplaces of his life then, deep sleep, the sense of beauty around him, all desire, had flown away and the gaps they left were filled only with the great listlessness of his disillusion."33 Adding Jay Gatsby to the pair, these three protagonists are

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 221.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>29</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>30</sup> Thomas Putnam, "Hemingway on War and its Aftermath," *Prologue Magazine* 38, no.1 (Spring 2006), accessed April 24, 2022,

https://www.archives.gov/publications/prologue/2006/spring/hemingway.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>31</sup> Adair, "The Poetics of Loss," 17.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>32</sup> Aldridge, After the Lost Generation, 236.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>33</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*, (New York: Scribner, [1920] 2008), book 2 ch. 4, Project Gutenberg.

initially propelled by all-consuming desires for love, money, or status. When they lose these objects or realize their unattainability, all they are left with is themselves: Anthony appears to two observers to have gone crazy and realizes how 'he had been alone, alone – facing it all;' <sup>34</sup>Amory, walking through the Princeton campus, initially triumphs that "I know myself" but concludes 'but that is all;' <sup>35</sup> and Jay Gatsby, now Fitzgerald's most famous protagonist, dies trapped in his illusion of the green light, a representation of the unattainable dreams built around his ill-fated love of Daisy Buchanan.

It is no surprise that Fitzgerald writes of these themes, for they were reflections of the world he knew. His time at Princeton paralleled the popularity of what Piper calls "the cult of the 'new disillusion" 36 on college campuses, beginning around 1912 before the Great War. His correspondence with friends reveals a shared existential hopelessness about the war, the loss of their youth, and their inability to return to when their life had been simpler.<sup>37</sup> One of his friends contemplated suicide, and later in his life, Fitzgerald noticed that 'by this time contemporaries of mine had begun to disappear into the dark maw of violence,'38 referring to the series of suicides at the end of the 1920s including that of Harry Crosby.<sup>39</sup> His reckoning came when he experienced a mental break-down at 'this side of forty-nine,'40 which he called his 'crack-up.' He "realiz[ed] that for two years my life had been drawing on resources that I did not possess, that I had been mortgaging myself physically and spiritually to the hilt...every act of life from the morning tooth-brush to the friend at dinner had become an effort." As a result, he felt "a vast irresponsibility toward every obligation, a deflation of all my values" and found that "there was not an 'I' any more – not a basis on which I could organize my self-respect – save my limitless capacity for toil it seemed I possessed no more."41 Fitzgerald felt that he didn't have an identity of his own: his 'intellectual conscience' was Edmund Wilson's; his moral compass was an unnamed friend living in the Northwest; his 'artistic conscience' was another contemporary, perhaps Hemingway; his public and social life was 'dictate[ed]' by an

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>34</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Beautiful and the Damned*, (New York: Scribner, [1922] 2004), book 3 "No Matter!", Project Gutenberg.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>35</sup> Fitzgerald, *This Side of Paradise*, book 2 ch.4.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>36</sup> Henry Dan Piper, "Fitzgerald's Cult of Disillusion," *American Quarterly* 3, no.1 (Spring, 1951), 72.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>37</sup> Piper, "Cult of Disillusion," 76-78

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>38</sup> F. Scott Fitzgerald, *The Crack-Up*, ed. Edmund Wilson (New York: New Directions Books, [1945] 1993), 20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>39</sup> Monk, Writing the Lost Generation, 8 and Aldridge, After the Lost Generation, 20.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>40</sup> Fitzgerald, The Crack-Up, 72.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 79.

agent; and his 'political conscience' was mostly nonexistent.<sup>42</sup> At this moment, Fitzgerald was the epitome of a lost generation figure whose unsteady values, along with modern cultural changes, led to a crippling sense of self.<sup>43</sup> His experiences mirror those of his characters, though he conceived of them eleven or more years earlier, suggesting that the feelings that came to a breaking point in 1936 ran beneath the surface during the earlier periods of his life.

## The Unusual Example of Eliot

T.S. Eliot too was keenly aware of the spiritual and cultural breakdown of his time, but unlike Fitzgerald and Hemingway, he reflected this not within a particular generation, but in the world as a whole. His seminal poem The Waste Land, written in 1922, continues to be interpreted within the scope of the collapse of Western culture after World War I even though Eliot himself was adamant that the poem was only inspired by personal experiences. In his essay Thoughts After Lambeth, he declared, "I dislike the word 'generation,' which has been a talisman for the last years; when I wrote a poem called *The Waste Land* some of the more approving critics said that I had expressed the 'disillusionment of a generation,' which is nonsense. I may have expressed for them their illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention."44 In The Waste Land, he explores themes such as the relationship between death and rebirth, dysfunctional love, war, and destruction. The poem is truly modernist in the way it is a fragmented kaleidoscope of different characters, voices, allusions, metaphors, and even languages. However, the overarching theme is that of the waste land where nothing grows for lack of water. From the beginning, April, a month of spring and rebirth, becomes the "cruelest month, breeding/ Lilacs out of the dead land, mixing/ Memory and desire."45 The only rebirth possible in the waste land is forced and artificial. Moreover, like its people, the landscape cannot reach any plane of security: "What are the roots that clutch, what branches grow/ Out of this stony rubbish? Son of man,/ You cannot say, or guess, for you only know/ A heap of broken images, where the sun beats,/ And the dead tree gives no shelter, the cricket no relief/ And the dry stone no sound of water."46 Eliot has reversed the biblical image of the lush, fertile promise-land described in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>42</sup> Fitzgerald, The Crack-Up, 79.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>43</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>44</sup> T. S. Eliot, "Thoughts After Lambeth," The Imaginative Conservative, accessed April 24, 2022, https://theimaginativeconservative.org/2012/05/lambeth-conference-1930.html.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>45</sup> T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land and Other Writings* (New York: The Modern Library, [1922] 2002), 38.

<sup>46</sup> Eliot, The Waste Land, 38-39.

texts such as Jeremiah and Isaiah,<sup>47</sup> as well as the necessary climate for faith in Jesus's Parable of the Sower in the New Testament, implying both physical and spiritual barrenness. One reason for this may be war. In snatches of conversation, a young man recognizes a Stetson, a fellow soldier who fought with him at Mylae;<sup>48</sup> a woman, Lil, is told to give her husband a good time' because 'he's been in the army four years;'49 and in a violent depiction of destruction there are "cracks and reforms and bursts/ in the violet air/ Falling towers/ Jerusalem Athens Alexandria/ Vienna London."50 However, these allusions are not specific to World War I, but encompass wars over the course of history: the Battle of Mylae took place during the first Punic War and the 'cracks and reforms and bursts' reverberate across time from the ancient cities of 'Jerusalem Athens Alexandria' to the modern cities of 'Vienna London.' Likewise, the relationships depicted, including the myth of the rape of Philomela, a broken dialogue between an estranged couple, and an affair characterized by 'indifference,' paint a picture of pervading disconnection that metaphorically links to the sterile environment. The image that most evoke lostness is his description of the 'unreal city:' "A crowd flowed over London Bridge, so many, / I had not thought death had undone so many. Sighs, short and infrequent were exhaled,/ And each man fixed his eyes before his feet."51 Here, he alludes to the limbo of Dante's Inferno, where the souls, belonging to neither heaven nor hell, are doomed to mournful discontent.<sup>52</sup> The only relief comes at the end with the thunder that may promise rain, the potential attainment of salvation, and the final line 'shantih shantih' which Eliot translates as 'the peace which passeth understanding,' either some mystical revelation or death.

In his personal life, Eliot struggled to feel fulfilled in his writing and his marriage, leading to a mental breakdown in 1921 when he felt 'neurasthenic,' 'tired,' and 'depressed.' He went to Margate to recover, explaining the lines "On Margate Sands./ I can connect/ Nothing with nothing" in *The Waste Land*. His wife's struggles with mental illness took

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>47</sup> See Jeremiah 2:3-7 and 17:7-8, Isaiah 35:1-2, and Ezekiel 20:15 for examples

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>48</sup> Eliot, The Waste Land, 40.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>50</sup> Ibid., 49-50.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>51</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>52</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, trans. Anthony Esolen (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 23-32

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>53</sup> Jonathan McAloon, "TS Eliot's The Waste Land remains one of the finest reflections on mental illness ever written," *The Guardian* (February, 2018), https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2018/feb/13/ts-eliot-the-waste-land-mental-

illness#:~:text=When%20Eliot%27s%20breakdown%20came%20in,take%20three%20months%20off%20work.

a toll on him, and when the war came, he saw that 'the violence was inseparable from a collapse of common ground in culture, the loss of the mythic substructure that enables the individual to understand his relatedness to anyone or anything.'54 This breakdown, permeating the poem and his life, resembles ideas attached to the lost generation, but as a whole, *The Waste Land*, with its diverse cast of characters and literary references, strives towards a more nuanced and universal picture of the human experience.

#### Conclusion

The idea of a lost generation left a lasting impression on the 20th century. Its origins with the war generation of 1914 and writers of the 1920s marked the beginning of generationism, defining individuals by the generation they were born into. With the Great Depression and World War II came new generations of Americans who were perpetually lost: the Depression youth, the existentialist graduates of the 40s and 50s, the soldiers of World War II, and the Beat Generation. Thus, the lost generation evolved from a select group of intellectuals and writers in Europe and the US to the characterization of an era. As Hemingway observed in *A Moveable Feast*, 'All generations were lost by something and always had been and always would be.'55

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>54</sup> The Poetry Foundation, "T. S. Eliot," *The Poetry Foundation*, accessed April 24, 2022, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/t-s-eliot.

<sup>55</sup> Hemingway, A Moveable Feast, 62.

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