

**Fitzgerald and Hemingway**  
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by Fred Coppersmith

"All of you young people who served in the war," Gertrude Stein reportedly told a young Ernest Hemingway. "You are a lost generation....You have no respect for anything. You drink yourselves to death." Her words act as more than a mere catch phrase or all-encompassing label for a school of American, postwar literature; indeed, they are an indictment of a generation of expatriates, of a disenchanting youth living abroad beyond their means and drowning in the drunken excesses of Jazz Age revelry. That F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway himself have subsequently come to in many ways personify, for readers and critics alike, this so-called lost generation seems only fitting, as both authors were inexorably tied to the period, reflecting its norms and conventions in their prose and embellishing them with their lives. Neither can be divorced entirely, if at all, from the work they produced in their respectively short and troubled lifetimes, nor can one man be adequately discussed without an examination of the other. Whether friends or rivals, compatriots or adversaries, Hemingway and Fitzgerald were, more importantly, defining elements of their literary era, as the posthumous immortality of their published work can attest. In effect, they *are* the lost generation of the 1920s and '30s in its flawed entirety, sharing an umbilical connection to each other and to the world in which they wrote.

That world, for the most part, was one of bitter disappointment, of unsatisfied hopes and unfulfilled dreams. Veterans like Hemingway and Fitzgerald returned to America's cities and shores after World War I -- the war, supposedly, to end all wars -- disillusioned with their nation's policies and politics, their faith in God and country shattered. The war in Europe had not given them the glory they had so desperately wanted, but had instead substituted bloodshed for heroism, destruction for adventure. "...I had seen nothing sacred," wrote Hemingway in *A Farewell to Arms*, "and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it." While their exposure to combat may have been limited, Fitzgerald and Hemingway both witnessed firsthand the senselessness of the war itself, and while as a world power America had emerged victorious, as a people that victory came at too high a price.

In the aftermath of such a war, then, many Americans looked towards Europe as a means of escape, a chance to immerse themselves in frivolous drinking and decadence amid fellow expatriates, whether in Montmartre or Paris or along the French Riviera or in Spain. "France was a land," wrote Fitzgerald, "England was a people, but America, having about it still that quality of the idea, was harder to utter -- it was the graves at Shiloh and the tired, drawn, nervous faces of its great men, and the country boys dying in the Argonne for a phrase that was empty before their bodies withered." The American dream had proved bankrupt for this generation, leaving little reason to invest in the future.

And so, in Fitzgerald's own words, "the hangover became a part of the day as well allowed-for as the Spanish siesta." Drunkenness, often for its own sake, became the norm, and it is this ultimately shallow existence to which Hemingway and Fitzgerald (and consequently the characters they created) belonged. "Modern life..." wrote Hemingway in a letter to critic and poet Ivan Kashkin, "is often a mechanical oppression and liquor is the only mechanical relief." The Jazz Age, as Fitzgerald called it, was a world constructed around the hope that "champagne dinners and long luncheons that began at two and ended in a blurred vision" might, perhaps inexplicably, provide a panacea for all societal ills, or at the very least consign those ills to the oblivion of the bottle.

Yet, as both Fitzgerald and Hemingway repeatedly showed in their respective bodies of work, this idea is built upon a faulty foundation, whose inherent flaws cause it to crumble. One false ideal has been substituted for another, in the vain hope that a little whiskey, gin and wine will quell the fears and heartaches of the war. "You're an expatriate," Bill Gorton tells Jake Barnes in Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. "You've lost touch with the soil. You get precious. Fake European standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your time talking, not working. You are an expatriate, see? You hang around cafés." To this, Jake can only halfheartedly reply, "It sounds like a swell life." The decadence and downward spiral of this lost generation was self-evident -- to Gertrude

Stein, to Hemingway, and to Fitzgerald -- yet drowning this realization in alcohol and parties past dawn proved easier than publicly acknowledging it. Even the most cursory examination of the lives these authors led shows men who were often immature and overindulgent; they were not infallible, but, in Hemingway's words, "isn't it pretty to think so?"

The stock market crash of 1929 and subsequent onset of the Great Depression, however, provided a rude awakening of a sort to these young Americans. The Jazz Age had ended with a whimper, revealed as the decade of senseless acts and excessive drinking it had always been -- facts that Hemingway and Fitzgerald had remarked on in works like *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Great Gatsby* and had tried to ignore in the private lives that produced such books. However, while drastically affecting the American social climate, the Great Depression did not, for Hemingway, Fitzgerald and others, cork every bottle or end every party. The Jazz Age had been spent in the pursuit of emptiness, in a state of cynicism and disappointment, and at its close these Americans were perhaps even more lost as a generation. Perhaps the only dream or ideal not completely forsaken with the approach of the 1930s was the "mechanical relief" Hemingway had found in liquor.

Yet, as Fitzgerald wrote in 1931: "Though the Jazz Age continued it became less and less an affair of youth. The sequel was like a children's party taken over by the elders." Both Fitzgerald and Hemingway reflected this change in their later work, even if their personal lives still echoed the sentiments of the decade before. Though like Charles Wales in "Babylon Revisited," Fitzgerald may have "suddenly realized the meaning of the word 'dissipate' -- to dissipate into thin air; to make nothing out of something" and understood that "all the catering to vice and waste" he had witnessed and been part of had been "on an utterly childish scale," he was not entirely willing to leave it behind. Nor was Hemingway, who continued to write taut, precise prose about the disillusioned, the disenchanting, and who continued his affair with the bottle. As Fitzgerald wrote: "On I plod -- always bored, often drunk, doing no penance for my faults." Ultimately, this intemperance contributed significantly to the death of each author -- to both Fitzgerald's heart attack and Hemingway's later suicide.

Despite their admitted unwillingness to relinquish the past (notwithstanding its self-destruction) and despite their flaws -- or perhaps because of them -- Hemingway and Fitzgerald exemplified everything we have since come to classify as the Jazz Age (in Fitzgerald's words) or the lost generation (in Stein's). For that very reason, then -- the fact that their novels and short stories often portrayed a modern America many (including, often, themselves) were happy to ignore -- their work was not always well received by their contemporaries. In 1920, Fitzgerald had a great success with *This Side of Paradise*, his first novel of the Jazz Age that erupted in the postwar boom, but *The Great Gatsby*, which is today considered his masterpiece, failed miserably. Fitzgerald had deigned to expose the emptiness of his age -- and, thus, his own actions -- and the reaction was for the most part negative.

Hemingway, almost inexplicably as he wrote along many of the same lines as Fitzgerald, received a more favorable reception. "I talk with the authority of failure," wrote Fitzgerald, "Ernest with the authority of success. We could never sit across the same table again." Yet, as Hemingway reportedly said, "If you have a success, you have it for the wrong reasons. If you become popular it is always because of the worst aspects of your work." A novel like *The Great Gatsby*, with its unflattering depiction of its spoiled, self-indulgent players and consequently the Jazz Age itself was unlikely to have many admirers among that crowd. Yet perhaps, as Fitzgerald himself acknowledged late in his brief life, "No decent career was ever founded on a public."

Hemingway and Fitzgerald have remained popular and have achieved literary success for one very simple reason: their own lives, warts and all, are presented on the page. While in their own individual lives, they may have hidden in alcohol and the excesses of the Jazz Age's lost generation, in their novels and stories -- from *This Side of Paradise* to "Babylon Revisited" and from *The Sun Also Rises* to *A Farewell to Arms* and others -- they remain exposed. Their lives mirror those of their characters; they indeed *are* their characters. For that reason, Fitzgerald and Hemingway share a connection to their work and time that few other writers have achieved.

