

## *Time of great change. Literature output of the “Lost Generation”*

### *Czas wielkiej zmiany. Literatura „straconego pokolenia”*

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#### **Keywords**

“Lost Generation”, Hemingway, World War I, modernism, Stein

#### **Słowa kluczowe**

„stracone pokolenie”, Hemingway, I wojna światowa, modernizm, Stein

#### **Abstract**

The theme of the paper is a literary and cultural output of the artist included in the “Lost Generation”. The article presents the main problems raised by the writers of this genre in the context to a decisive moments in 20th-century history with a special focus on the first three decades.

#### **Abstrakt**

Tematem artykułu jest spuścizna literacka i kulturowa artystów należących do “straconego pokolenia”. Tekst przedstawia najważniejsze problemy poruszane przez wybranych pisarzy należących do wspomnianej grupy na tle przełomowych wydarzeń historycznych pierwszej połowy XX wieku.

## Time of great change. Literature output of the “Lost Generation”

*My aim is to put down on paper  
what I see and what I feel  
in the best and simplest way.*  
Ernest Hemingway

The first definition of the social and cultural phenomenon known as a “Lost Generation” was given at the beginning of the last century by Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) –an American-Jewish writer and scholar which spent most of her life in Paris. Indeed, in the 1920s. France was a very cosmopolitan place where a lot of young American writers chose to live. We learn about the relatively incidental genesis of the phrase through a member of that generation – Ernest Hemingway, who describes his meeting with Stein in his novel *A Moveable Feast*:

It was when we had come back from Canada and were living in the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs and Miss Stein and I were still good friends that Miss Stein made the remark about the lost generation. She had some ignition trouble with the old Model T Ford she then drove and the young man who worked in the garage and had served in the last year of the war had not been adept, or perhaps had not broken the priority of other vehicles, in repairing Miss Stein’s Ford. Anyway he had not been *sérieux* and had been corrected severely by the *patron* of the garage after Miss Stein’s protest. The *patron* had said to him, «You are all a *génération perdue*». «That’s what you are. That’s what you all are», Miss Stein said. «All of you young people who served in the war. You are a lost generation»<sup>1</sup>.

Noticeable, in the extract, semantic reference of the term is similar to its present meaning. It signifies a generation of writers who were born during the last decade of 19th century and participated in World War I in many different ways. Based on this to *génération perdue* includes Ernest Hemingway, as mentioned earlier, who was enlisted as an ambulance driver in Italy and who used the term “Lost Generation” for the first time in the novel *The Sun Also Rises*, published eight years after war, John Doss Passos (1896-1970), who served in a medical corps in France and Italy; Francis Scott Fitzgerald (1896-1940) of Minnesota, who dropped out of the Princeton University in 1917 and joined the United States Army, William Faulkner (1897-1962), born in the South, who did not take part in a battle of “Great War” because

<sup>1</sup> E. Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, New York 1964, p. 30-31.

of the armistice in 1918<sup>2</sup>, Edward Estlin Cummings (1894-1962), who was a poet and ambulance driver in Normandy and arrested by his own superiors for demonstrating a pacifistic attitude, Archibald MacLeish (1892-1982), who was a poet and playwright and worked in medical corps after the American entry into the war; Edmund Wilson (1895-1972), who was a literary critic and writer enlisted as a military translator; and finally Thomas Boyd (1898-1935), who served in United States Navy.

Besides the writers indicated (regarded as the main part of the group) the “Lost Generation”, for various reasons (mostly ideological), also includes: Thomas Stearns Elliot (1888-1965), Ezra Pound (1885-1972), Sherwood Anderson (1876-1941), Henry Miller (1891-1980), John Steinbeck (1902-1968) and Thomas Clayton Wolfe (1900-1938)<sup>3</sup>. As it seems, all of these artist were born slightly earlier or later than the others and did not have military experience.

On the other hand, Malcolm Cowley (1898-1989), an American poet, journalist and, primarily, literary critic and theorist is a person worth noticing. His activity greatly contributed to the popularization of ideas proclaimed by artist of the new wave. What is more, it allowed them to present their writing to numerous group of readers<sup>4</sup>.

As Grzegorz Gazda rightly claimed, common formative qualities world views of the members of the *génération perdue* were: “lost faith in the humanistic ideal, existential frustration and despair, as well as a distrustful and cynical attitude to the post-war reality [translated by M.B.]”<sup>5</sup>. Obviously, the major cause of their disappointment was connected with the traumatic and pointless cruelty of war. What is interesting is that the responsibility for the military conflict was assigned to the earlier generation. An additional element that incited the quarrel between the generations was ordering the United States to enter into war as soon as possible to rescue endangered western European culture.

<sup>2</sup> Faulkner served in a military corps (Royal Air Force), where he trained. Armistice in 1918 between Germany and the Triple Entente indisposed him to get the pilot license and take part in combat.

<sup>3</sup> Actually, to the *génération perdue* also included non-American writers like Erich Maria Remarque – a German novelist, Louis-Ferdinand Céline – a French writer; and two English authors – Aldous Huxley and James Joyce.

<sup>4</sup> Malcolm Cowley was also a poet. Inter alia, he is an author of two collection of poems – *Blue Juniata* and *A Dry Season* – both written in the spirit of the ideas of the “Lost Generation”.

<sup>5</sup> G. Gazda, *Słownik europejskich kierunków i grup literackich XX wieku*, Warszawa 2009, p. 649.

Although the American participation helped to the Triple Entente, Krzysztof Andrzejczak noticed that “soldiers returning from overseas (among others, Hemingway, Dos Passos, e. e. cummings, Edmund Wilson) were marked by knowledge about the savagery of modern war and unparalleled scale of suffering [translated by M.B.]”<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, their lore was not only imagination and was highly different than the rhetoric of the older generation.

For the writers of the new wave, World War I proved that all military conflicts were pointless and void of thought or ideology, an occurrence which forced men to dispose of morality and their own convictions. It was presented as a kind of machine, without any pathos or heroism, where courage was mingled with crime and the only aim was to survive. Tragic struggles between each nations were seen as the invention of greedy politicians who did not care about the soldiers fighting on the front. For those soldiers, returning to normal life did not seem to be possible.

This way of thinking was shown in the first pacifistic novels written by Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos, William Faulkner and Thomas Boyd, respectively, *A Farewell to Arms*, *Three Soldiers*, *Soldier's Pay* and *Through the Wheat*, all of which presented the life of recruits fighting in western Europe for whom the war experience determined their further existence. For example, Frederic Henry, the main character of *A Farewell to Arms* tries to forget about the war nightmare and runs away to Switzerland with his true love. However, his happiness does not endure for long; Henry's pregnant wife gives birth to a dead child (symbol of lost tranquillity and harmony) and dies. What is more, the character created by William Faulkner, lieutenant Donald Mahone, wounded and mentally broken, cannot find himself anymore among people living in his family town. Also, three soldiers (representatives of three different social states) from Dos Passos's novel – Dan Fuselli, John Andrews and Chris Chrisfield – realize that their sacrifice has no meaning in the political games between conflicted empires. In turn, Boyd's protagonist, William Hicks, loses his faith into romantic ideals and, as a consequence, accepts emotionlessly a tragedy which befell his division.

The same elements can be founded in the only novel written by Edward Estlin Cummings. Published in 1922, *The Enormous Room* shows a horrible scenes from a military detention camp in France. The story about B.<sup>7</sup> includes some autobiographical elements through the use of specific language and without a chronological timeline. Furthermore, the well-known poem

<sup>6</sup> K. Andrzejczak, *Opowieści literackiej Ameryki. Zarys prozy Stanów Zjednoczonych od początków do czasów najnowszych*, Kraków 2012, p. 82.

<sup>7</sup> The source of this character was a Cumming's friend – William Slater Brown – American biographer and translator.

written by Thomas Stearns Elliot, *The Waste Land* is known as a manifest of “Lost Generation”, similar to the lesser-known works of Archibald MacLeish.

In contrast to the mentioned writers, Francis Scott Fitzgerald created his protagonist Amory Blaine. In a debutant collection of novels titled *This Side of Paradise*, young Blaine (formerly a student of Princeton University) returns from the army and totally changes his life. Trying to fill an existential emptiness, he throws himself into the motions of life marked by fast luxury cars, spending money, casual affairs and drunkenness. The character described by Fitzgerald is a single reflection of all young Americans entering adulthood. Furthermore, *This Side of Paradise* is a great example of literature which raises an issue about a specific period in the United States history known as the “Jazz Age”<sup>8</sup>.

The problems appearing in Fitzgerald’s first novel return in the others. Vision of society included in *The Beautiful and Damned* and *The Great Gatsby* once again revolve around presenting a reach American coterie and have an extremely pessimistic message. Anthony Patch and Jay Gatsby realize that the new and seemingly fascinating reality was based on lies and motivated by profit. Due to this, all of the moral values have gone.

One of the most important occurrences in the history of the United States was the Great Depression, which took place during the 1930s. Krzysztof Andrzejczak noticed: “The United States of America turned into a country of poverty and unemployment [...]. For the writers, poverty, injustice, moral crisis and the vicious struggle for employment become the most important tasks [translated by M.B.]”<sup>9</sup>.

For example, John Steinbeck, in his finest novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, presents a story about the Joad family – poor farmers from Oklahoma who leave their home state and move to California. Unfortunately, the new reality turns into grey. The world is ruled by cupidity and exploitation. Steinbeck’s novel includes a criticism of a capitalistic system focused on manufacturing in which fair work is not appreciated. What is more, it is also a great study on American society during the Great Depression.

Fascination with ordinary people’s lives appears in Steinbeck’s other works. *Of Mice and Men*, *East of Eden* and *The Pastures of Heaven* include similar elements. All of the above-mentioned novels are set in Salinas city (near San Francisco), surrounded by wide gorges and valleys. The characters are farmers and proletarians – representatives of the working class fighting for a better future.

<sup>8</sup> The “Jazz Age” is the unofficial name of the 1920s. One of the most popular music genre of this time was jazz, invented in New Orleans. The “Jazz Age” in United States ended with the Great Depression.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem, p. 95, 96.

In the third decade of the 20th century, Ernest Hemingway, John Dos Passos and William Faulkner created their most significant works. Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), *The Sanctuary* (1931), *Light in August* (1932) and, written in the second half of the 1930s, *Absalom, Absalom!* took place in a fictional land called Yoknapatawpha (real Lafayette county). All of these novels discuss the same problem – the social and political changes in the United States South after the American Civil War (1861–1865). In contrast to the other writers of this period, Faulkner looked to the past as a fundamental factor which has an impact on the present. The author of *The Sound and the Fury* timidly watches a new reality forming in the South of America, where old traditions are quickly coming to an end. For these reasons, the main subject in almost all of his literary output is associated with the problem of evil and its activity, existence or functioning. Faulkner portrays in detail families living in Yoknapatawpha county: the Compsons, the Bundrens, the Sartoris and the Sutpens. He also shows their obsessions and passions, which are the results of belonging to a specific place and the frailty of human nature.

On the other hand, Ernest Hemingway created his two important works during this time. The first, published in 1935, *Green Hills of Africa* includes the author's memories from a visit to Africa; and *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (1936), presents the story of Harry Street – a broken man who lives by his own code of behaviour (composed of simple, indisputable rules) and defends his beliefs to the end. The characteristic element is Hemingway's protagonist who stays calm even in the face of death. The same model of character was included in a quasi-biographical novel titled *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). Robert Jordan, the main hero of the story, takes part in the Spanish civil war while it was ruled by general Francisco Franco<sup>10</sup>.

John Dos Passos formed his novels during the 1930s in a different way. In a large trilogy called *U.S.A.* (*The 42nd Parallel*, 1919, *The Big Money*) Passos focuses on a detailed analysis of American society between 1900 and 1930. Interestingly, he uses many cinematic techniques (cutting, zooming) and brings in some elements from media (newspapers, advertisements). Furthermore, the characters which appear in that series are created as a kind of collage of real and fictional biographies. Moreover, many of Dos Passos's thoughts are expressed in the trilogy, imparting autobiographical aspects.

The last novel of Francis Scott Fitzgerald's published during his lifetime is a compassionate story titled *Tender Is the Night* (1934), which tells about the miserable marriage of psychiatrist Dick Diver and his wife, Nicole Diver, who is suffering from schizophrenia. Fitzgerald's text contains some autobiographical references to the writer's partnership with Zelda Fitzgerald.

<sup>10</sup> In 1937 Ernest Hemingway went to Spain, where he worked as a war correspondent.

What is more, 1934 is the year of Henry Miller's debut, published initially in Paris. In *Tropic of Cancer*, the author presents himself as a rebellious person despising his reputation and material assets. Miller uses very crude language to criticize the cultural legacy of the United States, which, in his opinion, seemed to be untrue and enslaved by many paradigms. In further novels – *Tropic of Capricorn* (1934) and *Black Spring* (1936) he continues that issue, mentioning year in Paris, describing the decay of an old era and expressing his desire to create a new art, capable of meeting the expectations of its current recipients.

In conclusion, this article presents significant publications of American literature in the first half of the last century, showing the very interesting style of the new wave writers. Although never codified as a formal group, these writers built on common experiences (World War I, the Great Depression). It is suggested that creating literature was a meaningful step to renovating the old and fossilized poetics of the 19th century. Severance with former models of art matched the dynamic socio-political and economic situation. It was also a very significant moment in modernism's history, which would become increasingly important after World War II.

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