

Ernest Hemingway

The Sun Also Rises



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INTRODUCTION: THE SUN ALSO RISES

BY ALBERT KWAN

FOR MANY people in America, the years immediately following World War I and World War II were characterized by anger, discontent, and disillusionment. Society had been devastated by a global conflict that resulted in unprecedented death, destruction and resentment. Survivors who came of age during these eras—termed the Lost Generation after WWI and the Beat Generation after WWII—were left disjointed and alienated from both the world before and the new world that emerged after. Unable to identify with either pre- or postwar values, both of which, after the war, seemed deceptive and perverted, these social exiles were abandoned by their country and left to rediscover and redefine themselves in a world that had stifled their hopes, dreams and beliefs.

It was during these times that literature emerged in an attempt to capture the attitudes, emotions and opinions of their generations. The works of the most successful writers literally became bibles to those who thought they had lost their identity but had rediscovered themselves in these books. To such people, these novels became their defining elements, and by resurrecting their individualism, they had found a point of departure from which they could finally rebuild their lives. In each of the periods following the world wars, one novel emerged as the dominant literary work that best captured the disorder felt by the common man. Both are semi-autobiographical, written by two individuals who



felt as disillusioned and abandoned by society as the rest of their generations did. Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and Jack Kerouac's *On the Road* (1957) have been considered the essential prose of the Lost Generation and the Beat Generation because their common theme of alienation and detachment reflected the attitudes of their respective times.

The term "Lost Generation" was originally coined in conversation by Gertrude Stein, a member of the expatriate circle in 1920's Paris. While spontaneous and meaningless when first spoken, the expression would unwittingly go on to become the label for the expatriates from the United States and England who had rejected traditional American and British conventions for the more appealing lifestyle of Left Bank, Paris. Congregating in cafés located along the Boulevard Montparnasse to drink, talk and watch the crowds pass by, the Lost Generation was comprised of exiles who had spurned the pre-war values of love, romanticism, optimism, prosperity and hope that they had grown up believing in, all shattered by the war, as well as the glitter and potential of the Great Boom of the 1920's, which they now saw as American-based, and therefore corrupt and insincere. Unable to reconcile themselves with their past beliefs, and unwilling to accept those of their present mainstream society, the Lost Generation was left morally bankrupt and spiritually sterile, with only the fleeting pleasures of alcohol and sexual promiscuity as comfort. Many Americans in Paris became bohemian writers and artists as a reactionary protest to the business- and consumer-based culture in the United States, their days spent lounging in cafés and their nights hopping from one meaningless



relationship to the next. For the Lost Generation, love, hope and religion were foreign concepts after WWI, replaced by a world of sexual liberty and moral indifference.

In 1926, Ernest Hemingway wrote *The Sun Also Rises*, a semiautobiography based on his adventures in France and Spain in 1924-25. Despite having already received moderate critical acclaim for his prior works, it would be this novel that would gain him international success and make him the leader of the so-called Lost Generation. Focusing on the events that took place between a group of American and English expatriates traveling from Paris to Pamplona, *The Sun Also Rises* was an immediate success and almost instantly became a bible for many disillusioned individuals after it was published because it was the first piece of fictional literature that had fully captured the feelings of moral decay and social alienation shared by the Lost Generation: “You’re an expatriate. You’ve lost touch with the soil... Fake European standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed with sex. You spend all your time talking, not working. You’re an expatriate, see? You hang around cafés.”

The satirical portrayal of the Robert Cohn, the last chivalric hero and defender of an outworn faith, and his absurd willingness to endure public humiliation for Lady Brett Ashley’s unforthcoming affection, served only to reinforce the Lost Generation’s belief that love had died in WWI, as did all the other prewar values that Cohn unwaveringly stood for. While tragic in that the source of Cohn’s persecution came exclusively from those who simply could not understand his obstinately idealistic outlook, the fact that his mere existence was nonetheless a painful reminder to the



expatriates of America's betrayal was enough to justify their racist and spiteful actions.

It was also the universal quality of Hemingway's other characters, which reflected every type of individual in the Lost Generation from the defeated exiles who had accepted their empty, meaningless lives to the expatriates who had acknowledged the moral and spiritual decline of society but were unwilling to surrender themselves to the hollow existence that it offered, and the actions of these individuals that made *The Sun Also Rises* so appealing to its audience. While some readers found themselves in the characters of Bill Gorton, Mike Campbell and Count Mippipopolous, who had resigned their lives to ethical stagnancy and the superficial pleasures of cynical humor, casual indifference and expensive wine, many others associated with the characters of Lady Brett Ashley and Jake Barnes, the American expatriate whom Hemingway had originally based on himself. Jake's quest to rediscover his moral bearings through his pilgrimage to Burguete and Pamplona, as well as Brett's moral redemption in the final act at Madrid, were echoed by the thousands of expatriates in Europe who were desperate to find their lost hope and values. Furthermore, unlike his passive companions, Jake's unwillingness to accept his disconnection from God ("I was a little ashamed, and regretted that I was such a rotten Catholic, but realized there was nothing I could do about it, at least for a while... I only wished I felt religious and maybe I would the next time.") and his inability to love ("Oh, Jake, we could have had such a damned good time together." "Yes, isn't it pretty to think so?"), was a source of inspiration for Hemingway's generation, a sign that there was a possibility of salvation for



a group that seemed destined to be lost forever.

Just as WWI had created an irreconcilable gap between society and the Lost Generation, WWII produced a similar effect on those who came of age during its time—the group that would later become known as the Beat Generation. However, there was a key difference in the latter era that contributed to their distaste of traditional societal standards. Unlike the Lost Generation, the Beats were not raised in an optimistic, flourishing environment like that of the Roaring Twenties. Far from the financial boom of the early twentieth century, the decade prior to WWII had been monopolized by the Great Depression, which had suffocated America and had left the nation with its spirit drained and its morale broken. The years following the war were no better in offering any atonement to the individuals who would later identify with the preachings of the Beat Generation. Postwar society, although freed from the shackles of the Depression, was obsessed with commercialism and demanded that its public adhere to the model of either the clean-cut soldier or the mild-mannered businessman. The Beat Generation was unwilling to conform to either. Like the Lost Generation before them, the Beats felt abandoned by orthodox American society, especially after having come of age during the Great Depression, a time when every citizen felt deserted by their nation. The sudden postwar emphasis on consumption and production did little to warm their hearts to the United States, and if anything, served to alienate them even further from the complacent mainstream. As a term used initially to label a small group of avant-garde, bohemian writers including William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg, Lucien Carr, and Jack Kerouac, but later applied to any disillusioned and



alienated individual in 1950's America, the Beat Generation referred to characters of a special spirituality who were dedicated to finding valid beliefs and creating a new vision of art and life through bebop jazz, sex, experimental drugs and spontaneity. Having existed without inspiration throughout their dispirited lives, which had only been marked thus far by the worst financial and social depression in the history of the United States followed by the most destructive war in the history of the world, the Beats emerged as a movement determined to find a new set of values, meanings and truths that had eluded them throughout their lives: "...they stand uncertainly underneath immense skies, and everything about them is drowned. Where go? What do? What for?—Sleep. But this foolish gang was bending onward."

Jack Kerouac's novel, *On the Road*, was written over a span of twenty drug-filled days in 1949, as a single paragraph on a roll of paper one-hundred-and-twenty feet long. If nothing else, the method in which he produced the book was a manifestation of the generation—impulsive, spontaneous and narcotic-filled. Not published until eight years later, but having already achieved cult status long before that, the semi-autobiographical travelogue of four cross-country trips by Kerouac and his friend, Neal Cassidy, under the names Sal Paradise and Dean Moriarty, offered its disillusioned readers little in terms of traditional literary devices, such as symbolism and character development. Where *On the Road* appealed to the Beat Generation was in its description of the spontaneous and reckless adventures of Sal and Dean, which captured the essence of what the Beats attempted to achieve—spiritual enlightenment through the complete abandonment to instinct and impulse. The entire novel itself



was an exercise in spontaneity, from its run-on sentences and rambling, digressive prose style to its errant, drifting plotline. Like the Beats, Sal and Dean could not remain in one place for an extended period of time before boredom settled in and forced them to roar off once again, with no particular direction or destination, in a continual search of greater truth and spiritual illumination. Prior to Sal's first hitchhiking expedition across the country in Part One of the novel, he complained about the "staleness" of New York and praised the "Promised Land" of the West and the "greater vision" of San Francisco, the headquarters of the Beat movement. However, soon after arriving in California, he quickly grew tired of the surroundings and decided to return home, introducing a pattern that would be repeated throughout each trip across the country: "I thought all the wilderness of America was in the West till the *Ghost of the Susquehanna* showed me different. No, there was a wilderness in the East..." Constantly on the move, and unable to settle down and accept society's so-called "traditional" responsibilities of holding a steady job and raising a family, the Beats were on a continual quest for what they believed to be "the remembrance of some lost bliss." In part, Sal and Dean's trips across the expanse of the United States were taken in an attempt to escape from the consumerism that permeated any location that they remained in for an extended period of time, whether it be the bustling metropolis of New York or the cotton plantations of California. Moreso, however, the pair's cross-country adventures provided what the Beat Generation strove to reach—an opportunity to discover a new vision of their surroundings that was free of the complacent, mundane and empty lifestyle that society attempted to force upon



them. Even while recounting a spiritual revelation during a drug-induced hallucination on the streets of San Francisco, Sal seems to be addressing the entire Beat Generation moreso than simply narrating the events:

And for just a moment I had reached the point of ecstasy that I always wanted to reach, which was the complete step across chronological time into timeless shadows... the potent and inconceivable radiancies shining in bright Mind Essence... I felt sweet, swinging bliss, like a big shot of heroin in the mainline vein... I thought I was going to die the very next moment.

Dean's character also epitomizes "beatness" with his erratic, unpredictable demeanor and his rantings about the spirituality of life: "God exists without qualms. As we roll along this way I am positive beyond doubt that everything will be taken care of for us—that even as you drive, fearful of the wheel... the thing will go along of itself and you won't go off the road and I can sleep." It was this unorthodox, seemingly irrational behavior that resulted in Sal and Dean—and on a greater scale, the Beat Generation—being alienated by the more conservative society around them: "I sensed some kind of conspiracy in the air, and this conspiracy lined up two groups in the gang: it was Chad King and Tim Gray and Roland Major, together with the Rawlinses, generally agreeing to ignore Dean Moriarty and Carlo Marx." Unlike the Lost Generation, who were alienated because their degradation of morals conflicted with the standards of post-WWI America, the Beat Generation became detached from society because they were unwilling to conform to the complacent consumer values prevalent at the time, and

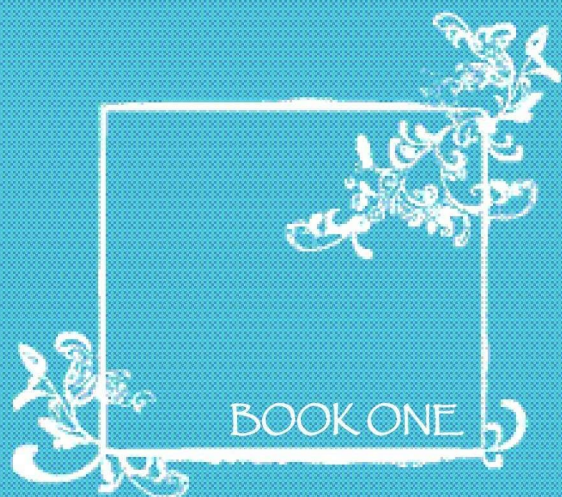


instead, chose to view the world in a new, experimental light and discover a new system of morals that they could believe in.

Unlike any other books of their times, *The Sun Also Rises* and *On the Road* became the bibles of their respective generations due to their ability to connect with their readers' deepest emotions and beliefs. They captured the hearts of their readers, not through engaging characters or enticing plot devices, but through the honest portrayal of the themes prevalent at the time. For the Lost Generation, who, after the First World War, had suffered a seemingly irrecoverable plunge in their moral and spiritual gauges, *The Sun Also Rises* was a beacon in the darkness, a source of direction and inspiration from which they could resurrect their condemned lives. For the Beats, *On the Road* was more than a travelogue; it was a road map that directed them along a spontaneous, inspired path towards the truth and enlightenment that they desperately sought after enduring through the Great Depression and WWII. These books became essential to the expatriates and the Beats because they were the first to deal with the generations' alienation and detachment from the rest of society and more importantly, because they offered the people something that had been taken away by the horrors of the world wars: direction and hope in a corrupt, disillusioned world.

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ROBERT Cohn was once middleweight boxing champion of Princeton. Do not think that I am very much impressed by that as a boxing title, but it meant a lot to Cohn. He cared nothing for boxing, in fact he disliked it, but he learned it painfully and thoroughly to counteract the feeling of inferiority and shyness he had felt on being treated as a Jew at Princeton. There was a certain inner comfort in knowing he could knock down anybody who was snooty to him, although, being very shy and a thoroughly nice boy, he never fought except in the gym. He was Spider Kelly's star pupil. Spider Kelly taught all his young gentlemen to box like featherweights, no matter whether they weighed one hundred and five or two hundred and five pounds. But it seemed to fit Cohn. He was really very fast. He was so good that Spider promptly overmatched him and got his nose permanently flattened. This increased Cohn's distaste for boxing, but it gave him a certain satisfaction of some strange sort, and it certainly improved his nose. In his last year at Princeton he read too much and took to wearing spectacles. I never met any one of his class who remembered him. They did not even remember that he was middleweight boxing champion.

I mistrust all frank and simple people, especially when their stories hold together, and I always had a suspicion that perhaps Robert Cohn had never been middleweight boxing champion, and that perhaps a horse had stepped on his



face, or that maybe his mother had been frightened or seen something, or that he had, maybe, bumped into something as a young child, but I finally had somebody verify the story from Spider Kelly. Spider Kelly not only remembered Cohn. He had often wondered what had become of him.

Robert Cohn was a member, through his father, of one of the richest Jewish families in New York, and through his mother of one of the oldest. At the military school where he prepped for Princeton, and played a very good end on the football team, no one had made him race-conscious. No one had ever made him feel he was a Jew, and hence any different from anybody else, until he went to Princeton. He was a nice boy, a friendly boy, and very shy, and it made him bitter. He took it out in boxing, and he came out of Princeton with painful self-consciousness and the flattened nose, and was married by the first girl who was nice to him. He was married five years, had three children, lost most of the fifty thousand dollars his father left him, the balance of the estate having gone to his mother, hardened into a rather unattractive mould under domestic unhappiness with a rich wife; and just when he had made up his mind to leave his wife she left him and went off with a miniature-painter. As he had been thinking for months about leaving his wife and had not done it because it would be too cruel to deprive her of himself, her departure was a very healthful shock.

The divorce was arranged and Robert Cohn went out to the Coast. In California he fell among literary people and, as he still had a little of the fifty thousand left, in a short time he was backing a review of the Arts. The review commenced publication in Carmel, California, and finished in Provincetown, Massachusetts. By that time Cohn, who



had been regarded purely as an angel, and whose name had appeared on the editorial page merely as a member of the advisory board, had become the sole editor. It was his money and he discovered he liked the authority of editing. He was sorry when the magazine became too expensive and he had to give it up.

By that time, though, he had other things to worry about. He had been taken in hand by a lady who hoped to rise with the magazine. She was very forceful, and Cohn never had a chance of not being taken in hand. Also he was sure that he loved her. When this lady saw that the magazine was not going to rise, she became a little disgusted with Cohn and decided that she might as well get what there was to get while there was still something available, so she urged that they go to Europe, where Cohn could write. They came to Europe, where the lady had been educated, and stayed three years. During these three years, the first spent in travel, the last two in Paris, Robert Cohn had two friends, Braddocks and myself. Braddocks was his literary friend. I was his tennis friend.

The lady who had him, her name was Frances, found toward the end of the second year that her looks were going, and her attitude toward Robert changed from one of careless possession and exploitation to the absolute determination that he should marry her. During this time Robert's mother had settled an allowance on him, about three hundred dollars a month. During two years and a half I do not believe that Robert Cohn looked at another woman. He was fairly happy, except that, like many people living in Europe, he would rather have been in America, and he had discovered writing. He wrote a novel, and it was not really such a bad



novel as the critics later called it, although it was a very poor novel. He read many books, played bridge, played tennis, and boxed at a local gymnasium.

I first became aware of his lady's attitude toward him one night after the three of us had dined together. We had dined at l'Avenue's and afterward went to the Café de Versailles for coffee. We had several *fines* after the coffee, and I said I must be going. Cohn had been talking about the two of us going off somewhere on a weekend trip. He wanted to get out of town and get in a good walk. I suggested we fly to Strasbourg and walk up to Saint Odile, or somewhere or other in Alsace. "I know a girl in Strasbourg who can show us the town," I said.

Somebody kicked me under the table. I thought it was accidental and went on: "She's been there two years and knows everything there is to know about the town. She's a swell girl."

I was kicked again under the table and, looking, saw Frances, Robert's lady, her chin lifting and her face hardening.

"Hell," I said, "why go to Strasbourg? We could go up to Bruges, or to the Ardennes."

Cohn looked relieved. I was not kicked again. I said good-night and went out. Cohn said he wanted to buy a paper and would walk to the corner with me. "For God's sake," he said, "why did you say that about that girl in Strasbourg for? Didn't you see Frances?"

"No, why should I? If I know an American girl that lives in Strasbourg what the hell is it to Frances?"

"It doesn't make any difference. Any girl. I couldn't go, that would be all."