

TASK:

Do a walk'n'talk and read the article aloud. Take turns reading one or two paragraphs. Come back to class.

Write a list that includes the 10 most important pieces of information from the article.

Robert Longley: "The Lost Generation and the Writers Who Described Their World", Thoughtco.com, 2022, <https://www.thoughtco.com/the-lost-generation-4159302>

The Lost Generation and the Writers Who Described Their World



Actress Betty Field Dances in Party Scene From "The Great Gatsby". Bettmann Archive/Getty Images

By **Robert Longley**, History and Government Expert, B.S., Texas A&M University

Updated on March 02, 2022

The term “Lost Generation” refers to the generation of people who reached adulthood during or immediately following World War I. In using the term “lost,” psychologists were referring to the “disoriented, wandering, directionless” feelings that haunted many survivors of what had been one of the most horrific wars in modern history.

In a deeper sense, the lost generation was “lost” because it found the conservative moral and social values of their parents to be irrelevant in a post-war world. In the United States, President Warren G. Harding’s “back to normalcy” policy calling for a return to the way of life before World War I, left the members of the lost generation feeling spiritually alienated from facing what they believed would be hopelessly provincial, materialistic, and emotionally barren lives.

Key Takeaways: The Lost Generation

The “Lost Generation” reached adulthood during or shortly after World War I.

Disillusioned by the horrors of war, they rejected the traditions of the older generation.

Their struggles were characterized in the works of a group of famous American authors and poets including Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and T. S. Eliot.

Common traits of the “Lost Generation” included decadence, distorted visions of the “American Dream,” and gender confusion.

Having witnessed what they considered pointless death on such a massive scale during the war, many members of the generation rejected more traditional ideas of proper behavior, morality, and gender roles. They were considered to be “lost” due to their tendency to act aimlessly, even recklessly, often focusing on the hedonistic accumulation of personal wealth.

In literature, the term also refers to a group of well-known American authors and poets including Ernest Hemingway, Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and T. S. Eliot, whose works often detailed the internal struggles of the “Lost Generation.”

The term is believed to have come from an actual verbal exchange witnessed by novelist Gertrude Stein during which a French garage owner derisively told his young employee, “You are all a lost generation.” Stein repeated the phrase

to her colleague and pupil Ernest Hemingway, who popularized the term when he used it as an epigraph to his classic 1926 novel *The Sun Also Rises*.

In an interview for The Hemingway Project, Kirk Curnutt, author of several books about the Lost Generation writers suggested that they were expressing mythologized versions of their own lives.

Said Curnutt:

“They were convinced they were the products of a generational breach, and they wanted to capture the experience of newness in the world around them. As such, they tended to write about alienation, unstable mores like drinking, divorce, sex, and different varieties of unconventional self-identities like gender-bending.”

Decadent Excesses

Throughout their novels *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Great Gatsby*, Hemingway and Fitzgerald feature the decadent, self-indulgent lifestyles of their Lost Generation characters. In both *The Great Gatsby* and *Tales of the Jazz Age* Fitzgerald depicts an endless stream of lavish parties hosted by the main characters.

With their values so completely destroyed by the war, the expatriate American circles of friends in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Moveable Feast* live shallow, hedonistic lifestyles, aimlessly roaming the world while drinking and partying.

Fallacy of Great American Dream

Members of the Lost Generation viewed the idea of the “American Dream” as a grand deception. This becomes a prominent theme in *The Great Gatsby* as the story’s narrator Nick Carraway comes to realize that Gatsby’s vast fortune had been paid for with great misery.

To Fitzgerald, the traditional vision of the American Dream—that hard work led to success—had become corrupted. To the Lost Generation, “living the dream” was no longer about simply building a self-sufficient life, but about getting stunningly rich by any means necessary.

The term “American Dream” refers to the belief that everyone has the right and freedom to seek prosperity and happiness, regardless of where or into what social class they were born. A key element of the American dream is the assumption that through hard work, perseverance, and risk-taking, anyone can rise “from rags to riches,” to attain their own version of success in becoming financially prosperous and socially upwardly mobile.

The American Dream is rooted in the Declaration of Independence, which proclaims that “all men are created equal” with the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.”

American freelance writer and historian James Truslow Adams popularized the phrase “American Dream” in his 1931 book *Epic of America*:

“But there has been also the *American dream*; that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position.”

Since the 1920s, the American Dream has been questioned and often criticized by researchers and social scientists as being a misplaced belief that contradicts reality in the modern United States.

Gender-Bending and Impotence

Many young men eagerly entered World War I still believing combat to be more of a chivalrous, even glamorous pastime than an inhumane struggle for survival.

However, the reality they experienced—the brutal slaughter of more than 18 million people, including 6 million civilians—shattered their traditional images of masculinity and their perceptions around differing roles of men and women in society.

Left impotent by his war wounds, Jake, the narrator and central character in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, describes how his sexually aggressive and

promiscuous female lover Brett acts as the man, trying to be “one of the boys” in an effort to control the lives of her sexual partners.

[...]

In the first chapter of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby’s trophy girlfriend Daisy delivers a telling vision of her newborn daughter’s future.

“I hope she’ll be a fool—that’s the best thing a girl can be in this world, a beautiful little fool.”

In a theme that still resonates in today’s feminist movement, Daisy’s words express Fitzgerald’s opinion of his generation as spawning a society that largely devalued intelligence in women.

While the older generation valued women who were docile and subservient, the Lost Generation held mindless pleasure-seeking as the key to a woman’s “success.”

While she seemed to bemoan her generation’s view of gender roles, Daisy conformed to them, acting as a “fun girl” to avoid the tensions of her true love for the ruthless Gatsby.

[...]

A New Lost Generation?

By their very nature, all wars create “lost” survivors.

While returning combat veterans have traditionally died of suicide and suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) at much higher rates than the general population, returning veterans of the Gulf War and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are at an even higher risk. According to a 2016 report from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, an average of 20 of these veterans a day die from suicide.

Could these “modern” wars be creating a modern “Lost Generation?” With mental wounds often more serious and far more difficult to treat than physical trauma, many combat veterans struggle to reintegrate into civilian society. A report from the RAND Corporation estimates that some 20% of returning veterans either have or will develop PTSD.