

Understanding Hemingway's Writing About World War I

A central part of understanding the characters of Hemingway's stories about World War I is understanding what is meant by the Lost Generation.

-World War I was supposedly fought to save Western Civilization, but the terrible human costs of The Great War and the materialism of the 1920s caused much disillusionment among writers, artists and people at large.

-One result of the war was a pervasive feeling of doubt and cynicism in all that once was valued by society. It was this that caused fellow writer Gertrude Stein to comment to Hemingway that those who survived the war were, "a Lost Generation."

-In *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) Frederic Henry says in Hemingway's novel, "I was always embarrassed by the words *sacred*, *glorious*, and *sacrifice* and the expression *in vain*. We had heard them...and read them...and I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards in Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it."

-The following fictional letter from the novel *Company K*, by William March of Alabama also captures the feelings of the Lost Generation. "Dear Madam", it begins, "your son, Francis died needlessly in Belleau Wood," and "at the time of his death he was crawling with vermin," his "feet stank," and he was living "like a frightened animal, cold and hungry," until "a piece of shrapnel hit him and he died in agony, slowly," suffering for "three full hours screaming and cursing by turns," with "nothing to hold on to," since he had already learned that everything you "taught him to believe...under the meaningless names of honor, courage and patriotism, were all lies."

-To understand the characters of these stories you must understand that the war had made these people without an ethical and/or moral foundation that still had meaning. Did Christmas change for you when you found out there was no Santa? Imagine if all of the values you believed in were like Santa. How would your motivations and purposes in life change?

-However, Hemingway's characters don't end up being **nihilists**, believing in nothing. Hemingway thought the answer to the death of the old values was that people had to find meaning in what they could and face the unavoidable suffering and eventual death of all of us with dignity and purpose.