

The Theme of Lost Generation: A study of Hemingway's "For Whom the Bell Tolls"

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Abstract- This paper primarily examines the theme of lost generation in Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) and the physical and psychological desperation faced by the protagonist, an American volunteer, Robert Jordan. This paper attempts to find the reasons behind this emotional crisis and Hemingway's notion of describing the mental trauma of Postwar effected generation. Coming to a very close grip with harsh realities and brutalities of wars, Hemingway along with his characters adopt a strong tendency to denounce war which induces abominable sense of emptiness. The novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) serves to epitomize the post-war expatriate generation. The "point of the book" was not so much about a generation being lost, but that "the earth abideth forever". The characters in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) may have been "battered" and "lost" No study of Ernest Hemingway's literary work can be completed without an understanding of the author's life because he is one of those authors whose life and works are interdependent. Hemingway made the term 'Lost Generation' famous by using it permanently in his novels. All his protagonists are lost generation, wandering aimlessly in the post-war world and had refused to look at the world through rose-coloured glasses. They cut a sorry figure in terms of moral, social and religious values.

Keywords- Lost generation; Disillusion; war and death; violence and brutality; solidarity

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Origin of the term "LOST GENERATION"

Seeking bohemian lifestyle and discarding the Puritan ethic, a number of intellectuals, poets, artists and writers fled to France in the post World War I years. The Lost Generation writers gained prominence in 20th century literature by their innovations and challenged assumptions about writing and expression as they paved the way for coming generations of writers.

American poet Gertrude Stein coined the expression "lost generation." Speaking to Ernest Hemingway, she said,

"That is what you are. That's what you all are ... all of you young people who served in the war. You are a lost generation."

The term stuck and the mystique surrounding these individuals continues to fascinate us. It signified the postwar generation and the literary movement produced by the young writers of the time. Their writings reflected their belief that *"the only reality was that life is harsh"*.

Full of youthful idealism, these individuals sought the meaning of life in a world which they do not understand, drank excessively, had love affairs and created some of the finest American literature to date. There were many literary artists and intellectuals connected to the group known as the Lost Generation. They rebelled against the traditional values and ideals, but could replace them only

by despair or a cynical hedonism. F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and John Roderigo Dos Passos are among the three best known. Others included among the list are: Sherwood Anderson, Kay Boyle, Hart Crane, Ford Maddox Ford and Zelda Fitzgerald.

Ernest Hemingway became the spokesman of the "Lost Generation". The depression in America and the Spanish Civil War woke his social conscience so he wrote from the perspective of an individual who feels disillusioned and abandoned by the society. Hemingway's novel, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), skillfully details the pertinent 1920s issue of the "Lost Generation", prohibition, expatriates and effects of World War I. These war time experiences laid the groundwork of his novel, *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). It records brilliantly the ethos of that time. Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) was a naturalistic and shocking expression of post-war disillusionment. Most importantly, it explored the physical and psychological wounds that the war caused in the protagonist. It altered the entire pattern of the lives of its characters because they had a harrowing experience of suffering.

John Roderigo Dos Passos had also seen the savage violence and bloodshed in the war and questioned the meaning of contemporary life. His novel *Manhattan Transfer* (1925) reveals the extent of his pessimism as he indicated the hopeless futility and meaninglessness of life in an American city. It is a panoramic view of the frustrations and defeats of contemporary urban life. The

novel details an oppressive image of human calamity and defeat; fires, accidents, brawls, crimes, and abound suicides.

F. Scott Fitzgerald is known as the representer of the spirit of the 'Jazz Age'.¹ Fitzgerald's *This Side of Paradise* (1920) which showed the same young disillusioned generation, masking their general depression behind the forced exuberance of the Jazz Age. Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925) does the same, to a degree, where the illusion of happiness hides a sad loneliness. The impact of the war on the group of writers in the Lost Generation is appropriately demonstrated by a passage from Fitzgerald's *Tender is the Night* (1933):

"This land here cost twenty lives a foot that summer...See that little stream--we could walk to it in two minutes. It took the British a month to walk it--a whole empire walking very slowly, dying in front and pushing forward behind. And another empire walked very slowly backward a few inches a day, leaving the dead like a million bloody rugs. No Europeans will ever do that again in this generation."

1.2 Objectives of the research:

- to define and to penetrate the true essence of the notion of "lost generation."
- to examine the problems raised by Hemingway through the theme of lost generation.
- to analyze socio-political and literary situations in Ernest Hemingway's novel and the concept of lost generation.

1.3 Research Questions:

- How Hemingway reveals the true essence of the notion of "Lost Generation"?
- What are the problems raised by Hemingway through the theme of "Lost Generation"?
- How Hemingway relates the socio-political and literary situations with concept of "Lost Generation" in his novel "For whom the bell tolls"?
- How the protagonist Robert Jordan is portrayed by Hemingway as representative of "Lost Generation"?
- How Hemingway exposes the futility of wars through the theme of "Lost Generation"?

2. REVIEW LITERATURE:

2.1 Interpretation of the term "Lost Generation"

Hemingway made the phrase "The Lost Generation" famous by displaying it on the title cover of *The Sun also Rises* (1926). Hemingway attributed the phrase to Gertrude Stein who expanded the remark to describe all the disillusioned young men who had survived World War

I and who seemed to end up in France with no real purpose and direction in life.

"Lost Generation" defines a sense of moral loss or aimlessness. It seemed that World War had destroyed the idea that good things would happen if one acted properly. As so many good young men went to war and died, or returned wounded, either physically or psychologically, that their faith in the moral guideposts that had given them hope before, were no longer valid...they were "Lost". The old pre-war values cannot give them the direction that they are looking for and in this lost world they are all lost souls.

According to Max Westbrook, they

"awake to a world gone to hell. World War I has destroyed belief in the goodness of national governments. The depression has isolated man from his natural brotherhood. Institutions, concepts, and insidious groups of friends and ways of life are, when accurately seen, a tyranny, a sentimental or propagandistic rationalization."

The Lost Generation is a term used to describe a group of American writers who were rebelling against what America had become by the 1900's. The Lost Generation writers felt that America was not such a success story because the country was devoid of a cosmopolitan culture. They rejected the American role as peace-maker in the world. Their solution to this issue was to pack up their bags and travel to Europe's cosmopolitan cultures, such as Paris and London. Here they expected to find literary freedom and a cosmopolitan way of life.

2.2 Background of For Whom the Bell Tolls:

In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, the novelist tries to capture the historical mood of the time and is determined to capture the climate of the Spanish Civil-war society. This novel in spite of the heroic fight of its hero, Robert Jordan is an elegy of a dying man. It celebrates victory of dissolution, destruction and death of all that is good, pure and sacred. To understand the initial factor of troubles or obscurities of the protagonist, one must look back at the historical background of WWI period. This will help us to realize why Hemingway portrays the "Lost Generation" in his novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

The years immediately following WWI were filled with anger, dissatisfaction and disillusionment. During this era the survivors who came of age are termed as the "Lost Generation", since they are left alienated from both the world that is vanished and the new world that has emerged afterwards. Many of them leave their homes in search of a better and meaningful life, it becomes so difficult for them to identify themselves either with pre- or with post-war values, after the war, both of which seem false. They are left to rediscover and redefine themselves in a world that has shattered their dreams, hopes and beliefs. To them, the new world appears to be superficial, hollow and is based only on money. It is during this time that literature makes attempts to capture and penetrates to the depth of the existential dilemma of the lost generation.

¹ "Fitzgerald coined the phrase, "the Jazz Age" to describe the flamboyant—"anything goes"—era that emerged in America after World War.

The novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* emerges as the dominant literary work that best captures the disorder felt by the common man. Hemingway has deeply felt what he has written in this novel, for it embodies a brusque tenderness and compassion of the author for Civil War down trodden and suffering Spanish masses who became involved in this human crisis. *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is the story of a lost youth, Jordan who has risked his life for those people he has come to love. He is destined to die according to the logic of Hemingway's vision of the world. Nemi D'Agostino (1962) believes that

'Hemingway's art, penetrated by a tragic sense of loss, seems to represent the dilemma of all contemporary humanity. Now the world, which has been so desperately lost to his heroes, suddenly appears to be lost to him. From extreme disillusion and distrust of all values Hemingway swings round to the exaltation of the beauty of violence and death' (p. 152).

For Whom the Bell Tolls represented a fatalistic world in which an elegy is sung in praise of the lonely rebel, serving in a foreign country with a foreign army, though now with the illusion of a 'cause'; a lost man whom the war overwhelms without changing him. The book is a monument to the confused thinking of a man who really belongs to "no man's party". Hemingway's vision of Nada_nothingness indicates the dilemma that man is lonely and sees the world as purposeless and that action is to be performed for its own sake. There is no meaning man gives to his life and no superhuman agencies or no gods that will support in an hour of crisis.

According to Malcolm Cowley, "Robert Jordan, in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is the soberest of Hemingway's heroes, the child, as it were, of middle age". He is fighting against the loyalist cause in Spain; for he has a strong urge to serve mankind.

3. METHODOLOGY

This research was descriptive and analytical. It is also called textual analysis intrinsic approach which deals with an attempt to analyze literary works focusing only on the text of the literary works, in order to get good interpretation of the literary work. In collecting data to support the analysis the researchers applied library research. Data was collected from primary and secondary sources.

4. ANALYSIS

4.1 Meaning of the title of the novel

*"No man is an island, intire of itself; every man
Is a piece of the continent, a part of the maine;
If the clod bee washed away by
the sea, Europe is the lesse,
as well as if the promontorie were,
as well as if a manor of thy
friends or of thine owne were;
any mans death diminishes me,
because I am involved in mankind;*

*and therefore never send to
know for whom the bell tolls;
it tolls for thee."* (John Donne)

The epigraph of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, which was taken from John Donne ,a 17th century English poet's sermon and gives the novel its title, points clearly to Hemingway's reevaluation of the role of death in life and interdependence of all human beings. Hemingway placed it at the front of this novel to emphasis that no man is an island, entirely on his own as we all are connected, one with another, as members of the human race; and the fate that touches one individual touches all. Donne's epigraph is related to the war_and_death_theme, and the love theme which indicates lost generation and can be better understood in the following lines from Donne's "Phoenix riddle":

*Our two souls, therefore, which are one,
Though I must goe, endure not yet,
A beach, but an expansion,
Like Gold to avery thinsse beate.*

The paradox indicates the oneness of mankind as well as the individual's obligation to society like the bridge which joins the two sides of gorge and makes them one in the novel.

Hemingway subjects of personal death, love, courage, loyalty, self sacrifice, war and the human will to endure but also his growing concern with the broader social implications of individual action. One example of the many layers of meaning contained in the novel is the Civil War framework, which leads the reader to not only see the conflict of social forces in Spain but also understand that its analogue is the "civil war" in Jordan's spirit.

Hemingway says with delight that the passage pointed up the theme of tragic loss and human solidarity which he had been developing in the story of Robert Jordan. This bell doesn't toll only for Robert Jordan. It tolls for every single man who loses his life in a man-made catastrophe, that is, war. He does focus on the melancholic lives of his heroes which represent youth of that time and he seems to strive for this purpose that he could prove his heroes' death purposeful. It can be felt as he had found something for his protagonists to live properly in the world of violence, disorder, misery, and die - a death of dignity, in case of unavailability of dignified life; and enable them to conduct themselves well in the losing battle that is life. As it can be shown in Hemingway's famous phrase for it, "grace under pressure" where winner takes nothing, he attains dignity in the manner of his losing like Robert Jordan.

Leo Gurko remarked that "the motive behind Hemingway's heroic figures is not glory, or fortune, or the righting of injustice, or the thirst for experience. They are inspired neither by vanity nor ambition nor a desire to better the world. They have no thoughts of reaching a state of higher grace or virtue. Instead, their behavior is a reaction to the moral emptiness of the universe, an emptiness that they feel compelled to fill by their own special efforts."

4.2 War, killing and Death

In *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, death is nearby in every scene, a fact suggested first by the image of the bell in the novel's title and epigraph, the bell that's tolling is a death knell. In 1930s, Hemingway takes up the problems of war, killing and death which dominate in the postwar period. He has described these with his infinite capacity to capture the cynicism of war in '*For Whom the Bell Tolls*'. His description of war, violence, death, man's alienation to society, man's place in this universe and the drastic effects of war are the themes, on which he spent a great deal of time as an author. His characters hate killing human beings unless it is a part of their duty. Perhaps the most important in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Robert Jordan's choice to die as he does come from his reflections on the heroic death of his grandfather compared with what he sees as the cowardly suicide of his father. The cruelties and casualties of Spanish Civil War disillusioned Robert Jordan's vision. He becomes unable to withstand the violence and death all around him. His inner conflict makes him realize that his cause is merely a mirage.

Robert Jordan is deeply concerned with the problem of killing as he makes no distinction between the killing of animals and human beings and even mourns the death of a Fascist cavalryman. He recognizes the futility and absurdity of war. Yet, he prefers to die and not leave his mission incomplete. The Hemingway heroes have developed fearlessness and have a courage and strength in the face of struggle as they prove life cannot be separated from death. The novel is replete with the accounts of death, slaughter, bombardment, war and brutality. Robert Jordan has been severely wounded and dies in despair and frustration. The novel is concerned with what happens between "two supine postures" —Jordan lying on the floor of the forest in the beginning of the novel, and then at the end of the novel.

Nemi D'Agostino (1962) remarks,

"The utter uselessness of the attempt on the bridge, upon which the future of the human race might depend, is made clear from the start, as is the uselessness of the pathetic heroism of that group of solitary eccentrics which Hemingway selects as his chief characters. The sky overhanging the sierra is without depth and beyond the mountains there is no crusade but only the confused movements of heterogeneous crowds, a massacre, a betrayed land. Jordan is a new Frederic Henry, who finds a code of behavior by which to endure life in the exact fulfillment of his mission, and in the end is driven to 'sacrifice' more by desperation than by any certainty. His drama is too oppressive and restricted to reflect the so much wider and more complex tragedy of Spain."

As the part of lost generation because of war Hemingway had convinced his heroes that the world was an inhuman

place where sorrow and sadness dominated and the happiness of love was just a brief interlude as the ultimate reality of death was inescapable. The violent death caused a great imbalance, increased the anguish and futility in the life of man in the post-war period.

Kashkin, the Russian authority on Hemingway, remarks that in the middle years (1928-38) his activity,

"was the purposeless activity of a man vainly attempting not to think, that his courage was the courage of despair, that the obsession of death was taking hold of him, that again and again he was writing of the end—the end of love, the end of life, the end of hope, the end of all."

For Whom the Bell Tolls expresses Hemingway's growing distaste for modern warfare. He explains this perspective using objects that can be easily associated with war. Hemingway's stereotypical study of male character: the guy faces the cruel truth of the situation, leaves his love, and sacrifices himself to buy his friends some time. Robert Jordan has throughout the book reconciled himself to his own death and to killing others (directly, or indirectly) by the importance it might have for "the cause."

4.3 Solidarity

Hemingway has shown through this novel, the universal brotherhood of man, of the inter-relationship of human life and its indivisibility. A new Hemingway made his appearance, a new theme emerged, Whereas in his short stories and in two previous novels the author had exasperated his most perspicacious admirers by his inconclusive treatment of the necessity for manliness and the pervasive horror of death, a maturing artist, found another subject—the problem of making a living, the necessity of human solidarity.

They are Hemingway and Hemingway alone, in their (say rather his, for Jordan is the mainspring of the narrative, and the girl Maria is only lightly sketched) morbid concentration upon the meaning of individual death, personal happiness, personal misery, personal significance in living and their personal equation is not so deeply felt or understood as to achieve wide significance. For all this groping, the author of the Bell has yet to integrate his individual sensitivity to life with the sensitivity of every living human being (read the Spanish people); he has yet to expand his personality as a novelist to embrace the truths of other people, everywhere; he has yet to dive deep into the lives of others, and there to find his own.

5. CONCLUSION

Hemingway as a spokesman of the 20th century is at his best, when he transforms the valueless human life into worth-dying death. His novels are the precious contribution to the kernel of American Literature. Hemingway as a representative of the 20th century 'Lost Generation' feels for everyman's death as he was involved with humanity. The world today, is in a dire need of another Hemingway, who could expose the futility of

wars, going on in the world and could bring the atrocities of these wars to the forefront, so that no one do feel the need to ask 'For Whom The Bell Tolls', everyone must know, *it can toll for thee*.

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