

# The great war's toll: veterans' experiences in the sun also rises



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World War I had a devastating effect on all of its participants, transforming and disillusioning them permanently. Ernest Hemingway, himself a participant, clearly illustrates this concept in *Sun Also Rises* through his protagonist Jake Barnes as well as Jake's circle of close friends. Their aimless, empty post-war lives exemplify Gertrude Stein's assertion that "You are all a lost generation." Bill Gorton is one member of Jake's coterie of fellow war veterans. Upon being first introduced to the reader, Bill is depicted as a traveler, wandering from New York to Vienna to Budapest and finally back to Paris. This wandering between America and Europe-home and place of military service-indicates that Bill feels split between the two, unable to fully identify himself in either. When Bill shares his impressions of Vienna, he comments that it was "Not so good. It seemed better than it was" because he was "Tight, Jake. I was tight" (76). This just begins to demonstrate how alcohol (and oftentimes alcohol abuse) goes hand-in-hand with just about all the aspects of daily life for Bill and other veterans. In fact the reader can easily observe that, even as he is telling Jake about his experiences being drunk, Bill actually is drunk, speaking in short, broken ideas. After experiencing the horrors of war, Bill resorts to alcohol as a buffer against the harshness of a sober reality. Bill eventually drunkenly commences to talk about buying a stuffed dog: "Simple exchange of values. You give them money. They give you a stuffed dog" (78). Here he calls to mind an ideal, logical, and fair exchange system that enjoins giving and then getting what you paid for. The reality of war and post-war times, however, summarily disproves Bill's wishful thinking. Bill's very anecdote right before he makes this point precisely illustrates this idea. The anecdote describes an incident where a black boxer is chased out of town just for knocking out the

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local white boy in a boxing prize-match. Another incident which elucidates this concept is when Jake and Bill are trying to get places for lunch on a train to Pamplona. Bill tells Jake to bribe the waiter with ten francs; after pocketing the money, however, the waiter simply reiterates that all the places have been reserved and that they should make do with some sandwiches. The reader quickly realizes that post-war reality in this novel is not about fair exchanges. Shortly after this bribing incident, when Bill and Jake discover that the lunch services are being claimed by a Catholic pilgrimage, Bill heatedly remarks, " It's enough to make a man join the Klan" (93). And although, on the surface, Bill's animosity toward the pilgrims is food-related, his differences with them also occur on the most fundamental levels. For one, the Catholic Church embodies the pillars of stability, faith, and moral order, while Bill's experiences in World War I have taught him that in fact chaos, uncertainty, and immorality dominate life. Bill's ordeals made his outlook on life considerably darker and more cynical. Finally, an illuminating moment occurs while Bill is shaving. He initially comments: " It's an honest face. It's a face any woman would be safe with." However, just moments later he turns on himself and exclaims, " My God! Isn't it an awful face?" (108). This sudden self-loathing and ambiguity in self-regard is indicative of how Bill (and so many other veterans) can no longer feel that same about himself because of the terrible things he has done and seen in the war. War transforms its participants down to the very way in which they perceive themselves. Another member of Jake's set of war veterans is Mike Campbell. He tells a war story about getting " fixed up" with medals for a military dinner where the medals turn out to be unneeded and he ends up giving them away at a night club, illustrating his cynicism about the war. The very <https://assignbuster.com/the-great-wars-toll-veterans-experiences-in-the-sun-also-rises/>

fact that Mike chooses to tell a war story in which there is no fighting is demonstrative of his repulsion toward all the blood and guts which conventionally constitute a “glorious” war story. He elects instead to exploit the pointlessness of the medals and-in association-the futility of the valor and heroism that these medals represent. In Mike’s eyes, a war so barbaric has no place for medals. Moreover, the fact that Mike’s medals did not even belong to him further illustrates the downfall of the system of fair exchanges: nothing in war, down to the medals, is fair. Like Bill and so many other veterans, Mike resorts to alcohol (in his case, full-blown alcoholism) as a coping mechanism against the tribulations of life. After finding out that his fiancée Brett has left Pamplona with the bullfighter Pedro Romero, Mike turns to alcohol and a constant state of drunkenness to dull his pain: “I’m rather drunk. I think I’ll stay rather drunk. This is all awfully amusing, but it’s not too pleasant. It’s not too pleasant for me!” (207). From these words, the reader can see that alcohol in fact does not completely shield Mike from his pain; one even wonders if it intensifies his sufferings. Furthermore, the reader can also see that alcoholism is taking its toll on Mike, slowly but indubitably killing him: “Inside the room was in great disorder. All the bags were opened and clothing was strewn around. There were empty bottles beside the bed. Mike lay on the bed looking like a death mask of himself” (214). A good friend not within Jake’s circle of war-veteran friends is Montoya, who helps illustrate the Lost Generation by acting as a foil to its members. Montoya is the proprietor of a hotel, itself a demonstration that unlike the veterans Jake, Bill, or Mike he is a settled man with a clearly defined place in his community and society. He does not feel the alienation and lack of definite belonging which the veterans, as expatriates, so often experience. Montoya represents

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the ideal, traditional system of “afición.” As an aficionado, he has a pure, unbridled passion for the art of bullfighting. He identifies and shares a strong bond with others, like Jake, who also have afición. Jake feels an obvious, special connection with Montoya through this commonality: He always smiled as though bull-fighting were a very special secret between the two of us; a rather shocking but really very deep secret that we knew about. He always smiled as though there were something lewd about the secret to outsiders, but that it was something that we understood. (136) Montoya translates this pure passion for bullfighting into the strictest expectations for his bullfighters. These strict standards are therefore the reason why Montoya is so disappointed, almost heartbroken, when he sees that Jake has violated and rendered meaningless their shared afición by allowing Pedro to be permanently blemished by impurities like alcohol, women, and bad company. The lives of Hemingway's characters, which the “Great War” rendered aimless and empty, remind us that war continues to take its toll long after the fighting ends.