

A generation revisited



Two epigraphs, the first a quotation by American poet Gertrude Stein, and the second a passage from Ecclesiastes, preface Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. Stein's quotation offers a pessimistic view of the forever changed values of the post-World War I generation, while the passage from Ecclesiastes offers a more optimistic view of the restoration of these values. The infamous words of Gertrude Stein, "you are all a lost generation," epitomize the meaningless, unsatisfactory existence of the post-World War I generation that Hemingway depicts in *The Sun Also Rises*. With no faith left in mankind, the value system of the whole generation is turned upside down, leaving them unable to deal with their own feelings. In an effort to struggle through their lives, the characters in *The Sun Also Rises* fill their days with depravity: sex, alcohol, and violence. Jake Barnes, rendered impotent during the War, has a difficult time adjusting to life. Unable to sustain a normal relationship with Brett, the woman he loves, he engages in drunken encounters with prostitutes who do nothing more than temporarily occupy the void in his life. Jake's wound has left him feeling unfulfilled and dissatisfied, as if he is not living up to his potential. He believes that bullfighters are the only ones who "live their [lives] all the way up" (10). He replaces the beauty and excitement of sex with the artistry and passion of the bullfight. While Jake pursues love without sex, Brett pursues sex without love, causing a vicious circle of loneliness and self-deprecation. Brett is a borderline nymphomaniac who uses sex to toy with the emotions of men as a way of entertaining herself. She masks her feelings from others as well as herself by disregarding the social norms of her generation; she drinks and dresses like a man, and is open and unembarrassed about her sexuality. Brett spends all of her time surrounded by men: "[She] like[s] to add them

up” (23) because it makes her feel loved in an otherwise lonely existence. In contrast to Jake and Brett stands the promising Pedro Romero. Romero represents the next generation as prophesied in the passage from Ecclesiastes: as “ one generation passeth away, [and] another generation cometh.” Romero, all of nineteen years old, lives his life by standards that have been lost on the post-World War I generation. He acts like a man is supposed to act, with dignity and sophistication. In the bullring, he lives up to his own expectations as well as those of the spectators: he is poised, artistic, never “ fake”, and always gives a good show. Even when he is sore and badly beaten he performs at his peak, because it is what is expected of him. The lost generation does not live by standards or care about expectations. They live their lives trying to fill the void that the War has left. Even in love, Romero abides by these elevated standards and expectations. Before the bullfight he has his cape delivered to Brett in the stands, but does not want a spectacle to be made of it so he bids her to “ fold it and keep it on [her] lap” (213). He knows that the public will be outraged if he is distracted by a pretty woman, so as a gentleman he keeps things as quiet as possible while still showing his affection for her. The newly appreciated values of the next generation are made apparent when Romero asks Brett to “ let [her] hair grow out” because “ it [will] make [her] more womanly”(242). Her boyish ways are acceptable and even sexy to her peers, but they make Romero ashamed of her. He is a throwback to a time gone by, a time before the War. Even in adversity, such as when Brett forces him to leave, he does so with dignity. He does not get angry; he leaves with his head held high and even pays the bill at the hotel he and Brett shared. He is a true man in every sense of the tradition. The two epigraphs that preface Ernest Hemingway’s

The Sun Also Rises offer an interesting view of the post-World War I generations. Gertrude Stein's quotation, " you are all a lost generation," is a pessimistic view of the fragile values that are barely intact since the War. The passage from Ecclesiastes "[as] one generation passeth away, [and] another generation cometh," is a more optimistic view of the faith and tradition that will be restored with the next generation. Together these two epigraphs offer an understanding of the delicate balance in values and traditions that mankind struggles with every day.