
How the Lost Generation is Represented in the Great Gatsby and Stoner

The American Avant-Garde poet Gertrude Stein once commented that “You are all a lost generation!” in reference to post-World War One society. Immortalized in Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*, the phrase has come to symbolize a unique generation in America that came of age in the 1920s. After the war, previous social norms and values were shattered and quickly replaced by this generation, allowing America to be a hotbed for cultural, political and economic change, as epitomized by the greater equality for women during the jazz age. This tumultuous period provides the setting that encompasses the protagonists of both *The Great Gatsby* and *Stoner*. Defined by their lack of purpose, those that were a part of the lost generation are often presented as directionless and emotionally empty, due to the widespread loss of life that they had recently experienced. However, some may argue that the characters within these two American novels do not adhere to such narrow personality descriptions, but instead offer an ageless comment on the depth and shallowness of human nature, and resilience in times of rapid change. They may reject the idea that the characters within *The Great Gatsby* and *Stoner* grew up to ‘find all Gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken’ like in Fitzgerald’s first novel, *This Side of Paradise*. Ultimately, this brings into question the relevance of such novels to a 21st century society. Are the characters within these novels simply a reflection of a specific time in American history? Or do they perhaps offer an insight into how to live an emotionally fulfilling life?

A sense of purpose is central to living a fulfilling life however, the motivations of the individual characters are not always clear in the two novels. In *The Great Gatsby*, Gatsby is unique in that he is one of the only characters in the novel who has a clear incentive. When Jordan informs Nick that Gatsby bought his house in order to be near Daisy, he states that Gatsby ‘came alive to me, delivered suddenly from the womb of his purposeless splendour.’ Fitzgerald use of metaphorical language evokes imagery associated with birth in order to symbolically represent Gatsby’s transition from an archetypal mysterious man, to a fully independent character in the mind of the narrator. Gatsby’s clear motivation to enter a romantic relationship with Daisy provides him with a sense of direction throughout the novel that seems to be absent in his counterpart. Daisy’s lack of purpose is clear from her introduction, where she describes how she has ‘been everywhere and seen everything and done everything’. Fitzgerald’s use of polysyndeton not only highlights Daisy’s childlike excitement, but is also used as a testament and reassurance of her knowledge of the world. As Daisy is a part of a privileged social class, limitations preventing her from living certain experiences or going certain places have been removed. Readers may initially regard the statement with contempt, as it seems that she is

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boasting about her material wealth, however they might come to realize the absurdity of the claim as it is simply impossible to experience everything that exists. Fitzgerald therefore uses this phrase to allow readers to recognize the superficial interaction Daisy has with life and her absence of purpose. Marxist critics might determine that Daisy's absence of purpose is an inevitable outcome of America's social stratification and class boundaries. These critics might agree with the idea that characters in *The Great Gatsby* are a reflection of their time. Contrasting with the 'ash-grey men' who 'swarm' to do their work, Daisy is able to freely socialize and party at any time she wants. The dehumanizing aspects of working in the valley of ashes, highlights the juxtaposition between the working class and upper class. Ironically, despite the privilege and freedom that is offered to Daisy, she has lost touch with both the environment around her and her own human nature.

Unlike *The Great Gatsby*, purpose in *Stoner* is usually contained within the parameters laid out by a character's duty rather than leisure. The most obvious example of this is Stoner himself, who 'from the earliest time he could remember...had his duties.' Similar to the workers in the valley of ashes, Stoner relies on his diligence and work ethic to provide a living for himself and his family. The idea that Stoner has worked from 'the earliest time that he could remember' seems to suggest that Stoner is an embodiment of blue-collar values. However, these values are able to transition from the manual labor he completed in his younger years, towards his search for meaning through literature in later life. Under the guidance of Arthur Sloane, Stoner's search for meaning becomes clear when in his loneliness, the shadows cast the 'insubstantial shape of what he had been reading.' Characters and stories appear to offer Stoner a comfort and creativity that he struggles to find elsewhere. Stoner's purpose to learn about literature is not the only method in which he finds meaning. Katherine believes "Lust and learning...that's really all it is, isn't it?" after her relationship with Stoner becomes more intense. Readers may initially think that Katherine is undermining the wide variations in which people could find meaning, as supported by Williams' use of rhetorical question. However, they may realize that all of the ways Stoner finds purpose is within these two concepts. Similar to *Gatsby*, Stoner is motivated by an extramarital affair that he has with a woman. Williams' use of the concept of 'the affair' is not only used to juxtapose Stoner's stale relationship with Edith to his passionate affair with Katherine, but is also a literary technique used to create suspense out of the fear of discovery. Williams' inflates this tension when Katherine states that "Most affairs end badly". Foreshadowing is also used in *The Great Gatsby* in the opening of the scene in which Gatsby is murdered, where Nick describes how '[He] felt that [he] had something to tell [Gatsby], something to warn him about, and morning would be too late.' Affairs in both novels are used to display the consequences of transgressing social norms through adultery. As the source of purpose in both novels is centered around the affairs that the protagonists have, readers may interpret the demise of the affair as the demise of purpose, as characterized by the Lost Generation.

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These more modest and conservative values in American society that were transgressed, were also broken by the large-scale loss of life caused by World War One. American writers during the time placed a specific focus on the rampant hedonism and decadence that appeared to prevail in the 1920s. This is more prevalent in Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* than in Williams' *Stoner*. Nick Carraway integrates the reader to upper class social circles and environments, and invites them to suspend their belief by the complete disillusionment between members of these circles and the rest of America. The most obvious physical manifestation of this wealth is Tom and Daisy's grandiose 'Georgian Colonial mansion' with 'French windows' and a 'sunken Italian garden'. Similarly, *Gatsby's* mansion is described as casting a 'feudal silhouette'. Not only do the physical properties of these mansions replicate the architecture of middle ages Europe, but the very idea of a 'silhouette' appears to imply that the new world America is living in the shadow of old order Europe. Post-colonial critics might concentrate on this connection and relate it to the country's revolutionary split from imperialist Europe. With this in mind, it is ironic that Fitzgerald seems to suggest that modern aristocrats in the 1920s US mimic old world examples when attempting to display their social success. Readers may conclude that Americans felt just as lost as Europeans did after the devastation caused by the war and due to such a large reminder of their mortality, resorted to spending their money quickly while they were young.

In contrast, while the lavish lifestyle of the 1920s is epitomized in Fitzgerald's modernist novel, the gritty realism of Williams' *Stoner* provides an emotional richness and humility that is often not present in *The Great Gatsby*. Contrary to Nick, who was born into a family of wealth, *Stoner's* childhood was remarkably bare and barren. His childhood 'household...was bound together by the necessity of its toil' and was 'sparsely furnished' with 'a kitchen where the family spent most of little time together'. Unlike *The Great Gatsby*, where houses are simply a symbol of decadence, partying and wealth, houses in *Stoner* are symbolic of family values. Rather than using very lyrical and poetic vocabulary, Williams uses sparse language in order to convey a sincerity to the humble lifestyle he lives with his family. However, it can also be inferred that the desolate nature of the household extends beyond its physical appearance and into the relationships *Stoner* has with his family. *Stoner's* family is seemingly bound together by their collective duty to one another, as implied by the word 'necessity'. On the other hand, when *Stoner* buys a house with Edith, one of the first decisions she makes is that 'she wanted a party – a housewarming, she called it' and the announcement was made 'as if it were a new beginning.' Similar to *Gatsby*, Edith attempts to host parties in order to appear more stable than she actually is and offer a sort of temporary refuge from the dullness and inadequacy of day-to-day life. This attempt of Edith's to conform to the decadent lifestyle of upper class America, while they struggle to pay for the house, only serves to make her and her actions appear

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absurd. Since Edith's lifestyle contrasts so blatantly with Stoner's modest upbringing, and her actions throughout the novel make her appear as an antagonist of sorts, Williams may be trying to suggest that decadence is simply a mask for instability. The chaos that is revealed behind the characters who hold parties and live in expensive mansions in Fitzgerald's novel, perhaps implies a similar idea. So, although decadence is clearly a concept that is more obvious in *The Great Gatsby* than in *Stoner*, both novels seem to warn the reader about the negative impacts of decadence. They both suggest that it acts as an illusion to true character and is used to hide the extent to which people are lost. As decadence is more conspicuous in *The Great Gatsby*, readers may therefore conclude that the characters in *The Great Gatsby* are a greater victim of their generation than the characters in *Stoner*.

A by-product of the hedonistic and decadent nature of jazz age America, was a skepticism of authority that permeated across many aspects of society. After the enactment of the prohibition in 1919, many members of the Lost Generation were not only frustrated at the institutions that upheld this law, but also towards members of previous generations that supported it. This dissatisfaction by the younger generation extended to morals and beliefs that the previous generation held, including religious values. Rather than focusing on traditional aspects of Christianity in *The Great Gatsby*, the characters are presented as worshipers of a false idol in the form of capitalism. The eyes of Doctor T.J. Eckleburg 'look out of no face' over the valley of ashes. The advertisement acts as a symbol of an omniscient and omnipresent God that is watching over its creations, due to it not being bound to any defining human characteristic, as evident by the fact that it has 'no face'. Similar to the spiritual values that were once prevalent in American society, the advert has also been neglected in a similar fashion. The fact that the eyes have 'dimmed a little by many pointless days' seems to support the idea that intrinsic, spiritual values are absent in this new America. By making this imagery restrained within the form of an advertisement, Fitzgerald may be suggesting that Americans are worshipers of a new found commercialism. The new forms of advertisements, such as billboards and mass circulation magazines, that became popular during the 1920s complimented the growing consumerism in America. However, through the use of the Doctor T.J. Eckleburg advertisement, Fitzgerald presents some of the anxieties about its social and ethical implications. The eyes are not only a symbol of American capitalism but also of moral degradation and corruption. They look down on Tom and Nick, as they travel to New York City in order for Tom to continue his affair with Myrtle, and on Gatsby and Nick when they meet Meyer Wolfshiem, a character based off the real-life gangster Arnold Rothstein. After the death of Myrtle, Wilson reveals that he "don't belong to any" church and in his disrupted believes that "God sees everything", however, Michaelis corrects him by stating "That's an advertisement". Not only is it ironic that Wilson appeals to God in order to execute his revenge, but also displays how characters within *The Great Gatsby* are deceived by false gods that provide a corrupt vision of the world around them. Even though Fitzgerald doesn't present the characters as followers of any formal religion or morality, he still presents them as worshipers of an American

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doctrine. This may suggest that the author subverts general ideas about members of the Lost Generation being skeptical of authority. However, throughout *Stoner* the protagonist displays a continuously contrarian opinion in the face of authority figures. Stoner uses his morality to undermine traditional power hierarchies in the university in order to maintain the institutions integrity. After Walker's oral examination, Stoner paraphrases what Dave Masters said about the university being "an asylum, a refuge from the world" and that they can't pass Walker "for if we do, we become like the world, just as normal." Stoner consistently disobeys the head of department's wishes by refusing to allow Walker to pass in order to protect the status that the university holds as an intellectual 'asylum' or 'refuge'. Williams' use of the royal 'we' suggests that Stoner and Gordon are not simply a contributing factor towards the university but instead are a part of the very structure that makes it have the prestige that it does. From this, Williams' seems to imply that Stoner is a personified version of the university whilst the normalcy offered by the rest of the 'world' is embodied within Walker and Lomax. Instead of disregarding the value systems and beliefs that were put in place by previous generations, such as with the characters in *The Great Gatsby*, Stoner hangs on to these values to retain his sense of morality. The fact that Williams reintroduces Dave Masters towards the end of the novel serves as a reminder to the reader of another moment when Stoner defied authority; when he refused to go to war. A wave of patriotism arose out of America's entry into World War One that was accompanied by propaganda in the form of posters, to encourage young men about Stoner's age to join the war. Men of age who refused to register were termed slackers and were not only viewed as unpatriotic, but also as cowardly by the general public. Stoner explains to Finch that his reason for not going to war was "everything, I guess. I can't say". Although readers may view Stoner's refusal to fight as a passive decision, as supported by the vague and ambiguous language used in his reasoning, it could also be interpreted as an active decision in support of his education, which encompasses "everything" important to Stoner. Defiant in his actions when facing social condemnation, Stoner continuously rebels in order to uphold his moral positions, which cannot be said for characters in *The Great Gatsby*. This may lead readers to believe that the protagonist in *Stoner* more greatly epitomizes the ambivalence towards authority that was present in the Lost Generation.

In conclusion, rather than focusing purely on the Lost Generation, both novels rely on the passage of time to highlight the inevitability of younger generations displaying the traits that characterize the Lost Generation. Fitzgerald concludes the novel describing how 'we beat on against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.' The metaphorical language used emphasizes how humans struggle to move on from the past in order to obtain the 'orgastic future' which we all seek. Fitzgerald presents this endeavor, to reach a future that has purpose and is free from materialistic and shallow urges, as an eternal conflict that all generations have. Similarly, Stoner describes how in the run up to World War Two 'he knew now, in a small way, something of the sense of waste that Sloane had apprehended.' Williams seems to suggest that the same bleakness his generation faced is being faced again by the next generation,

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implying that the defining features of the Lost Generation are in fact a defining feature of all young generations. Rather than succumbing to superficial attributes of a generation, the authors of both novels humbly assert that although time passes, humans stay the same. If this is so, readers may question why the Lost Generation needed to be defined at all if it is exactly like the current generation. The authors of both *The Great Gatsby* and *Stoner* would perhaps reply that we separate and define time periods in order to feel like we will finally be the generation that transcends this bleakness; that we will finally be the generation reaches the 'green light'. Unfortunately, based on these two novels, it seems as if that revelation was never reached.

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