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Bildungsroman within Hemingway’s *In Our Time*

Ernest Hemingway was an author during the literary period Modernism. The literary period Modernism immediately followed World War I (1914-1918) and due to this, works of the time were influenced. World War I, specifically, had an immense impact on the mentality of America’s youth because there was this pressure from the older generations for young men to participate in “The War to End All Wars.” While the young men preparing to enter the war were eager, they were not fully aware about the war’s brutality nor what would become of their lives following the war’s conclusion. The group of individuals that returned from the war were considered The Lost Generation. The primary reason they were part of The Lost Generation was because while those at home went through college, got jobs, and continued their lives, those at war were forced to come back and have the realization that life continued. Thus the soldiers returning from war were stuck in the routine prior to the war. Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time* focuses on the Lost Generation, specifically a young man named Nick Adams and several other Lost Generation cases. Throughout *In Our Time*, the reader receives stories following Nick Adams from adolescence into adulthood where the character developments and a type of coming of age occur. The stories regarding Nick Adams describe an abundance of encounters through which Nick’s perception evolves and is ultimately created. The coming of age observed throughout *In Our Time* focuses on the naïve perspective of a child shifting to a disillusioned outlook of an adult that was exposed to the brutality of World War I. The maturation within Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time* funnels in on a character’s mental coming of age from adolescence into adulthood, although being a part of the Lost Generation serves as a contradiction due to the individual resorting to their pre-war physical and somewhat psychological state.

In adolescence children typically have an innocent perception of the world surrounding them. Within Nick Adams’ childhood, he received a lot of exposure to particular experiences that most individuals do not encounter until later in life. These aforementioned experiences usually allow the situation to leave an impression on an individual’s perspective. Ernest Hemingway utilizes “in medias res” to project the reader into the middle of a situation and makes them figure it out. “In medias res” depicts how Nick Adams’ childhood occurred. Nick’s father was a doctor and would bring his son along for his medical cases. In the opening story of the novel, Nick’s father is going to an Indian Camp to aid in the delivery of an infant. There is a chaotic scene upon the arrival to the household of an injured man and a woman screaming because she is in labor (Hemingway 15-16). The father does not grasp the concept that this atmosphere is not suitable for his son and continually informs Nick of every procedure in order to deliver the infant. He questions Nick on whether he wanted to watch and in response to the invitation “Nick did not watch. His curiosity had been gone for a long time” (Hemingway 17). This indicates that Nick Adams is still young and frightened due to the situation, and not watching made the memory easier to suppress. This particular incident represents Nick’s adolescence as being naïve in nature, and also shows that being ignorant about a situation only makes the individual want to preserve their ignorance.

Within adolescence, children also misinterpret the influx of information given to them. Following the chaos with the woman giving birth, Nick witnesses the woman’s husband commit suicide. After witnessing this, Nick questions his father about why somebody would kill themselves and if dying was difficult. His father’s response was realistic, but relatively suitable for a young child. The parental response and Nick’s juvenility gave him a false perception of life. The naïve and juvenile perspective obtained is observed when Nick is comfortably streaming his fingers through the lake because “he felt quite sure he would never die” (Hemingway 19). Nick Adams’ naïve mindset continues through his teenage years and results in his inability to carry out actions based off of his own decisions due to his unawareness and causes him to resort to the oblivious norm of society.

During the developing years of World War I, the older generations provided encouragement to the young men in America to join the war because it was the “The War to End All Wars.” The encouragement provided these young men with an urge to enter the war. Entry into World War I was not only encouraged, but appealed to young men due to the constant conversations regarding the heroic and glorified aspects of war as opposed to the reality. This misconception resulted in an ignorance within the mentality of the young adults preparing to enter the war. This was not a harmless misconception and is observed within Hemingway’s description of the war, following Nick and Rinaldi’s injuries. Within the vignette Nick states “ ‘Senta Rinaldi. Senta. You and me we’ve made a separate piece’… ‘Not patriots.’… Rinaldi was a disappointing audience” (Hemingway 63). Hemingway includes this to make it apparent that Adams notices the realistic atrocities of the war which left a sensation of disillusionment, but also served as a reality check. Nick’s statement about “Not patriots”, also served as mockery of the glory of the war when in reality it was flooding with atrocities (Hemingway 63). Nick Adams’ psychological shift from adolescence into adulthood occurred within the war because the encounters left indelible marks that were impossible to suppress. This inability to suppress memories made Nick more aware and accepting of the past so he was no longer ignorant and naïve.

The individuals in the Lost Generation often return from war disoriented due to the social shock received. This social shock refers to the influx of people bombarding soldiers with questions about their experience during the war and informing them of everything that changed. In “Soldier’s Home”, Hemingway describes a soldier named Krebs who returns home and feels pressured to lie about his experiences because society wanted to hear of “apocryphal incidents” that made him feel as if “he lost everything” (Hemingway 70). Krebs “wanted his life to go smoothly… [but realized the likelihood of that occurring] was all over now” because his maturation through the war was lost when he returned home to a state of unawareness which resulted in feeling naïve (Hemingway 77). This feeling of being disoriented also appears in “Big Two-Hearted River: Part I” and “Big Two-Hearted River Part II”. Within these chapters the reader observes Nick coping with the trauma from the war and attempts to exemplify grace under pressure. Nick does not fully resort to a state of childlike dependency, but rather attempts to embrace his fear. Within the final chapters, Adams escapes his actual home to cope and felt as if “He was in his home where he had made it” (Hemingway 139). This represents that Adams embraced his fears and became independent. However, Nick still felt relatively disoriented due to the post-traumatic stress from the war which made him irritable, similar to a child. The difference between Krebs and Nick, is that Nick exemplified grace under pressure and “did not want to rush his sensations any” (151). His coming of age took a leap from adolescence into adulthood because of the war, and upon his return he almost resorted back to the vulnerable state, but handled it maturely and established independence.

Ernest Hemingway’s *In Our Time* was written after World War I and follows a member of the Lost Generation from adolescence into adulthood. Throughout the novel the protagonist, Nick Adams, undergoes a coming of age. This coming of age refers to Nick Adams’ psychological maturation observed through his shift from a naïve perspective in adolescence to a disillusioned perspective after war exposure. In Nick Adams’ youth, he was exposed to various overwhelming experiences and as opposed to understanding and allowing the experiences to develop a valid perspective, he suppressed the memories to preserve his ignorance and misinterpreted information due to his juvenility and ignorance. During the years approaching World War I, the older generations encouraged young individuals to enter the war due to the heroic aspects, but neglected to inform the youth of the war’s brutality. This false assurance resulted in a feeling of disillusionment and revealed the horrid truth of the war, thus providing Nick Adams with a matured and somewhat pessimistic mentality. The coming of age within *In Our Time* is inhibited due to Nick Adams being in the Lost Generation, because he could potentially resort to the naïve and dependent perspective that he acquired prior to the war, when he returned home. However, while Nick Adams suffered from a minor setback in his coming of age, he managed to redeem himself and experience grace under pressure to maintain his psychological stability.

Work Cited

Hemingway, Ernest. *In Our Time*. New York: Scribner, 1958. Print.