



Fickle Relationships in *The Sun Also Rises*, *Great Gatsby*, *The Sound and the Fury* and T.S Eliot's *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*

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Abstract

In the essay "Different Themes Rendered with Similar Approaches — A Comparison between *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Great Gatsby*," the author examines thematic similarities between Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, highlighting the decadence, disillusionment, corruption, and failure of the 1920s (Shen). This essay provides valuable background for understanding the Lost Generation's literary history and societal context. However, using Harold Aram Veese's New Historicism framework, our study narrows the focus to fickle relationships and chronic dissatisfaction in the post-WWI generation. By comparing *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Great Gatsby*, alongside *The Sound and the Fury* and works by T.S. Eliot, our research explores how unstable relationships reflect the broader existential crises of the era.

Keywords: Fickle relationship, *Great Gatsby*, *Sound and the Fury*

1. Literature Review

In the research paper, "The Identity Issue in *The Great Gatsby* and *The Sun Also Rises*," the author examines how the characters of Jay Gatsby and Jake Barnes represent the turbulent post-WWI years, focusing on their struggles to form new identities amid the era's changes (Žalac). This study provides an important background for understanding how significant events like industrialization, urbanization, and the war impacted American society and values, highlighting the characters' quests for new identities in a changing world. However, our study differs by specifically focusing on the theme of fickle relationships and chronic dissatisfaction in the post-WWI generation. Using Harold Aram Veese's New Historicism framework, our research delves into how these novels' unstable romantic and social relationships reflect broader existential crises. This approach offers a more focused analysis of personal and societal struggles, emphasizing the interconnectedness of literary and historical contexts.

In the essay "The 'American Dream' in F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* and Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*," Poulter examines how both works challenge traditional notions of the American Dream, proposing alternative lifestyles that emphasize individual autonomy. While this essay focuses on the more positive aspects of the post-WWI generation, our study reveals the destructive effects of WWI, particularly the fickleness of relationships and the dissatisfaction that followed.

Herlihy-Mera in the article "When Hemingway hated Paris: Divorce Proceedings, Contemplations of Suicide, and the deleted chapters of *The Sun also Rises*" discusses the struggles and challenges that were faced by Ernest Hemingway when he lived in Paris in post- World-War 1 era. This article reveals the reality of that difficult time in his life. "Hemingway blames the extreme provinciality of the French people for the poor judgement of talent" (Herlihy-Mera53). He felt a sense of desolation and disappointment that led to his alcoholism. Herlihy-Mera delves into the complexities that accompany living abroad as it can have devastating impacts on mental health.

"Those who live abroad have higher rates of alcoholism, domestic abuse, admission to psychiatric hospitals, and suicide compared to their cohort, who remained in the place of origin" (Herlihy-Mera 51). The feeling of displacement snatches any sense of belonging that a person may have, leading thus to a chronic dissatisfaction in all areas of life.

The article "Unraveling Disillusionment: An Examination of Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*" by Muhammad Ilham Ali highlights the disillusionment of relationships in the context of the characters of the novel *The Sun also Rises*. Ali points out that the characters try to search for fulfillment through making relationships but they realize that the root of the dissatisfaction lies inside of them. "Ernest Hemingway wants to convey that seeking satisfaction and happiness through a temporary romantic relationship is only futile if we do not face and fix the real problems within ourselves" (Ali 85). The despondency of the characters is because of society, their personal struggles and the aftermath of World War 1. "Traumatic memories from the war haunt them and affect their mental and emotional state, creating a sense of hopelessness, instability, and dissatisfaction in their lives" (Ali 85). The need for introspection and resolving of inner conflicts is lacking in the characters, the condition thus leads to their disillusionment.

2. Analysis and Discussion

Written only a year apart, *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway and *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott Fitzgerald, highlight the fickleness of relationships and the chronic dissatisfaction that follows. Both novels show how affairs and promiscuity reflect the decline of moral standards after WWI. In *The Sun Also Rises* Brett Ashley, engaged to Mike, sleeps with several men, including Cohn, Count Mippipolous, and Pedro the bullfighter. Despite her engagement, Brett and Jake Barnes flirt and kiss, illustrating the destructive nature of their relationship. Similarly, in *The Great Gatsby*, Tom Buchanan cheats on his wife Daisy with Myrtle Wilson, highlighting the adulterous behavior of the time. Gatsby's past love for Daisy reignites upon his return, but their reunion, filled with superficial pleasure, ultimately exposes the tarnished nature of their love and the moral decline. Both Hemingway and Fitzgerald use these relationships to depict the instability and dissatisfaction of the post-WWI generation.

In *The Sun Also Rises*, Bill's comments at breakfast in Burguete sharply criticize the expatriate lifestyle: "Fake European

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standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your time talking, not working. You are an expatriate, see? You hang around cafés.” (128) This observation underscores how the characters' lives are filled with excessive drinking and fleeting sexual encounters, devoid of true love or meaningful work. Similarly, in *The Great Gatsby*, Jay Gatsby throws extravagant parties filled with alcohol superficial merriment to mask his chronic dissatisfaction. These parties symbolize the emptiness of his pursuit of happiness. The novel also highlights the adulterous behavior of Tom and Myrtle, both of whom engage in affairs despite being married. Nick Carraway, the narrator, condemns the moral decay around him by saying, “They’re a rotten crowd.” (164) This reflects his disapproval of the superficial and corrupt lifestyle of Gatsby and his circle.

In *The Sun Also Rises* and *The Great Gatsby*, the characters Jake and Brett, Gatsby and Daisy, experience love but are unable to maintain relationships due to significant barriers. For Jake and Brett in *The Sun Also Rises*, Jake's physical injury from the war prevents him from fulfilling Brett's physical needs, causing her to approach other men. Jake's frustration is evident when he says, “Send a girl off with one man. Introduce her to another to go off with him. Now go and bring her back. And sign the wire with love.” (Hemingway 272) This highlights the lack of stable love in their lives, with physical needs taking precedence. In *The Great Gatsby*, the barrier between Gatsby and Daisy is money. Despite loving Gatsby, Daisy marries Tom because of his wealth. This is echoed in the words of Mrs. Wilson: “All they think of is money.” (Fitzgerald 34) Daisy's choice reflects the superficial values of the time, where financial security is prioritized over true love. Both novels depict a post-WWI generation that places more importance on material needs than on genuine emotional connections, showing a deep sense of dissatisfaction and moral decay.

T.S Eliot wrote *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* in 1915 and is considered one of his most significant modernist works. *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* is a dramatic monologue that delves into the psyche of the eponymous character, Prufrock, who is a middle-aged, insecure, and introspective man. It runs parallel to Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun also Rises*. In the novel, Bill Gorton says, “You’re an expatriate. You’ve lost touch with the soil. You get precious. Fake European standards have ruined you. You drink yourself to death. You become obsessed by sex. You spend all your time talking, not working. You are an expatriate, see. You hang around cafés.” (Hemingway 118). Bill criticizes the lifestyle of American expatriates living in Europe. As the expatriates have lost touch with their roots, they don't really belong anywhere. This absence of a sense of belonging is projected into their relationships too. They can't belong and relate to one person, so they keep switching partners. They have hedonistic habits, and they are interested in talking rather than working. They cannot work on relationships to keep them alive and intact. Eliot in the poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* reflects similar notions of fickleness of relationships and chronic dissatisfaction in the Post-World-War 1 era. “In the room the women come and go” (Eliot 13). J. Alfred Prufrock points out the fact that women keep entering and leaving his life and he is not able to achieve the permanence he desires through them. Eliot uses the imagery of fog and smoke to symbolize impermanence. Smog and fog linger outside but they do not stay for long. Eventually, they disappear as weather clears out. Smog and fog bring haze and blurriness to the atmosphere. It conceals the truth and presents disoriented images to eye. It deceives the person into seeing something which is not real and the truth is revealed when the fog or smoke clears away. “The yellow fog that rubs its back upon the window-panes, / The yellow smoke that rubs its muzzle on the window-panes,” (Eliot 15-16).

Alfred Prufrock believes that he would have enough time to change his decisions and the paths he has taken. “There will be time to murder and create,” (Eliot 28). Prufrock is referring to relationships that can be broken and new ones can be built to replace them. The reason that one might break a relationship is that they are not satisfied with what they have. They are not happy and content with it. Thus, they break it off in the hopes of finding a better one. “And time yet for a hundred indecisions, / And for a hundred visions and revisions,” (Eliot 32-33). Prufrock believes that such decisions are not supposed to be permanent like a word on a rock.

There is always time to rethink and revise these decisions. One can take a step back and change whenever he wants to.

Jake and Brett are shown as a potential true couple throughout *The Sun also Rises*. It is hinted that they might have had the perfect relationship if Jake had not been impotent. To this, Jake replies, “Isn't it pretty to think so?” (Hemingway 259). But there is a possibility that Brett could have dumped him like the rest of her lovers even if he had not been impotent. Because it was the sort of dissatisfaction that could not be erased from them. The poem *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock* depicts similar dissatisfaction in the character of Prufrock. The speaker of the poem has lot of doubts. It is clear that J. Alfred Prufrock is not a man of guts to take a bold step and stick by it. That is the first requirement of a permanent relationship that is absent in his case. He keeps questioning and procrastinating, and this overthinking fills his head with anxiety about everything he plans to do. “And indeed there will be time / To wonder, “Do I dare?” and, “Do I dare?” / Time to turn back and descend the stair,” (Eliot 37-39). In these lines, Prufrock clearly decides to step down the stairs because he does not dare to move forward and see what is at the top. It takes immense courage, patience and hope to steer a relationship to the top. It is not an easy climb. The speaker does not have the courage the task requires. The speaker says that he is aware of his failings. “No! I am not Prince Hamlet, nor was meant to be; / Am an attendant lord, one that will do / To swell a progress, start a scene or two,” (Eliot 121-123). He knows that he does not have the aura of the main character. He can only play the role of an attendant lord who appears in a few scenes. He does not have the consistency of the main character who has to stay on the stage for the entire play. “I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled” (Eliot 131). The fact that the speaker would wear his trousers rolled insinuates the idea that he would be prepared to run when needed. He would not even waste time in rolling his trousers and would be willing to get out a relationship with someone.

The fickleness of relationships depicted in *The Sun also Rises* can also be located in William Faulkner's novel *The Sound and the Fury*. *The Sound and the Fury* was published in 1929. The fickle relationships are portrayed through the deterioration of the aristocratic Compson family. The first part of the novel is narrated by Benjy who is a mentally disabled man. He cannot make sense of time, and he keeps on jumping between the past and the present. Benjy keeps repeating “Caddy smelled like trees,” (Faulkner 28). Trees represent roots and permanence at a single place which the Compson family lacked. Benjy kept longing

for stability but Caddy's absence did not let him achieve that stability. Besides Caddy, he had no one to look after him and be his family in the right way. A similar absence of permanence and constant travelling could also be observed in Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun also Rises*.

Quentin's relationship with his sister Caddy turns out to be very fickle as it gets destroyed by Caddy's promiscuity. Caddy was not able to accept her sexual desires and freedom. He had immense despair over her actions that drove him to giving up on their relationship altogether. "I give you the mausoleum of all hope and desire; I give it to you not that you may remember time, but that you might forget it now and then for a moment and not spend all your breath trying to conquer it," (Faulkner 96). Mrs. Compson's relationship with her family was also very fickle and empty. She was never really a mother to her children. They were raised by a black servant, Dilsey Gibson. Mrs. Compson was a self-obsessed hypochondriac who could not think of anyone other than herself. She always believed that she was not feeling well and that the kids were giving her stress and making her sick. "I know I'm nothing but a burden to you," (Faulkner 264). Her self-pity and lack of maternal affection greatly contributed to the fickleness of the family's relations.

The novel *The Sound and the Fury* is set in post-civil war era. The Civil War was fought from 1861 to 1864 between the Northern and Southern states of America. It resulted in the abolition of slavery which resulted in the decline of the Southern aristocratic families like the Compsons. Mr. Compson expresses his despair in the post-war period in the following words, "No battle is ever won...they are not even fought. The field only reveals to man his own folly and despair, and Victory is an illusion of philosophers and fools," (Faulkner 96).

Faulkner's narrative style is another symbol of fickleness as he keeps changing the narrators. He says in his own words, "The book which took the most agony was *The Sound and the Fury*. Took me five years of re-working and re-writing. Never did finish it.....It was going to be a

story of blood gone bad. The story told wasn't all. The idiot child had started out as a simple prop.... Then I thought what the story would be told like as he saw it . . . but it wasn't enough.

So, then Quentin told the storyand it still wasn't enough. Then Jason told the story and it still wasn't enough. Then I tried to tell the story, and it still wasn't enough, and so I wrote the appendix and it wasn't enough I couldn't leave it alone, and I never could tell it right, though I tried hard and would like to try again though I'd probably fail again. It's the tragedy of two lost women..." Thus the fickleness of the narration symbolizes the fickleness of the relationships in the novel.

Amongst supernumerary of reasons that have been accorded to characters of the novel *The Sun Also Rises* by Ernest Hemingway, evincing fickle, transient and brittle relationship, can also be attributed to the mélange of events which described and impacted the era, which, in fact, serves as the background of the novel. We do know that Hemingway, in the said novel, reflects the zeal and of course, along with it, the pitfalls, misgivings and shortcomings of the lost generation. However, the miscellany of the term, the lost generation still does not account for the transient, fickle and almost curt relationships we see emerging in the novel. A cursory look at the novel, exposes how Lady Brett, is gallivanting from one relationship to another and yet she feels an intimate and an almost secure nudge in Jacob Barnes' arms, as can be seen from the last scene, "Oh, Jake," Brett said, "we could have had such a damned good time together." (Hemingway 223). Yet, this sought after permanence in relationship does not reify between them; instead, fickleness continues to define their relationship, which is something Ashley revels and laments equally by attesting, "'You know it makes one feel rather good deciding not to be a bitch.'" (221). This predilection of Brett to be fickle in disposition at the surface also stems and emanates from an abjuring attitude towards religion as well, "'I'm damned bad for a religious atmosphere,'" (187). So, the idea of fickleness in relationship is something that is conspicuous throughout the novel as it progresses. However, since the novel is something of a Roman e'claf, that is to say fictional representation of real-life events. We know Hemingway spent a better part of his illustrious career in Spain and Iberian Peninsula. So, we have to take into account the reasons which pushed the lost generation into the morass of fickleness in their relationships and interactions as is depicted in the novel. At the very outset, it would be germane to say that fickleness of relationships as seen in the novel is in fact a representation of interaction patterns which existed in the time period around the 20's. Before the twenties, a litany of events took place which went on to define humanity well up till the ushering in of the twenty first century. In fact, traces of these mélange of events can be taken back to the nineteenth century as well. Trailblazing events like the propounding of the theory of evolution by Charles Darwin, coupled with exceptional work in psychoanalysis by Sigmund Freud and Friedrich Nietzsche's prognostications about God, destroyed for the Western man would be construed as Essentialism. The said Essentialism, which is usually informed by religious rectitude, is held up to sacrosanct, sanctimonious and numinous evocations by according a touch of infallibility to religious dogma. This essentialism is what came under question during the latter half of the nineteenth century. In "Cambridge Companion to James" by Joyce Derek Attridge, this proclivity is spelled out in mannerism as, "'the transvaluation of all values"; all those who were most self-conscious about it tended to be followers of Nietzsche." (Attridge 67). Hence, when values which were established with a canon were questioned, ways were paved for cutthroat competitions in other realms of life such as social regimentation. The rapacious colonization which began after the Berlin Conference of 1884, was cognizant of the wilting away of these ways (Mahajan 321). From there on, for Western man, everything began to be perceived from the standpoint of that cutthroat competition. This rapacious competition which had alienated dogma altogether, was becoming a precipice for far greater calamities which were to beset humanity at the turn of the century. But the march of this cutthroat competition went ahead and unfurled the Laicite of 1904, separating the church and state altogether in Western civilization, relegating the former to roles of sinecure (234). This denuding and wilting of an institution which preached caution to humanity led to the catastrophe of the first great war, where scores of precious lives were lost, on all sides of belligerents. The French, Germans, English, Japanese, Italians, Americans, Arabs, Turks, all suffered at the altar of the scaffold which the first world war became redolent of (398). This war thereon, brought ancillary changes as well, in this society, such as the women rights in both U.S and U.K, the dissolution of despotic monarchies like those of the Germans, and the Ottomans, prohibition upon alcoholism in the United States, and the promise of a free world, as espoused in the fourteen points of President Woodrow Wilson (410). However, the flipside to it was that all

of the aforementioned was taking place in the spirit of competition.

Whenever scales took a bit of a nudge, the opposing tendency took over immediately. This is exactly what happened to the promises of Woodrow Wilson's liberal world order as well. His strength and his cadre proved to be a fickle one after 1918, as prejudicial conservative forces themselves took over in United States and began to retract everything which Wilson had promised (411). From thereon, the idea of the Lost Generation spawned, a generation betrayed by high flown ideas which in the end proved to be absolutely meretricious and gave rise to the element of distrust in interaction patterns.

One of the central templates which push relationships towards being fickle both in the novel and also for the larger, lost generation, is the idea of trauma which became absolutely entrenched and deep seated in the said generation. The Western civilization in the 20's of the twentieth century had endured the great world war, which again represented and brought to surface from the visceral realm, a permeating sense of pain, anguish and trauma. Language, thereto appears to be confronting constriction, dithering anxiety and a loss as well, wherever, it is defined and supplemented by pain/trauma as well. Elizabeth Outka, in her book, *Viral Modernism The Influenza pandemic and interwar literature* attests, quoting Elaine Scarry, "Pain unmakes language: "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (Outka 67). Language, is the first thing that fails whenever, a relationship is to be construed as fickle and rudimentary. Hence, we can attribute to the superfluity of pain and trauma, which the lost generation endured during the traumatic 20's, which were the aftermaths of Great war to begin with and weaned them to the praxis of fickle interactions. This pain to be precise is something which we find in related works like *Mrs.*

Dalloway as well, wherein Septimus perennially bearing the hardships of the war has to yelp out, "Kill me" (Woolf 12). The same ploy remains at work in *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller as well, where pain and anguish resulting from the war completely obliterates stable interaction patterns.

So, to sum it up, we can adduce here, that the likes of Lady Brett Ashley, Robert Cohen and Jacob Barnes exhibit fickle relationship patterns owing to the trauma, the loss and distrust of language which had been foisted upon them as a result of the great war. Same can be said for works such as *The Sound and the Fury*, *The Great Gatsby* and T.S Eliot's *Love Song of Alfred J Prufrock*. The war and the attendant trauma it brought, inculcated something anterior to language, which again is a sine qua nun for fostering a successful, intimate and healthy romantic and fidelity driven interaction. Where thereof, language fails and lapses, as we have seen in the three works analyzed in this paper, fickleness and blandishing façade necessarily and ultimately replaces it.

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