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Sine doctrina vita est quasi mortis imago

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The Saved Generation

by Joe Ben House

In the early 1920s, Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald were dubbed ‘the lost generation.’ During these years, they lived for a time in France, formed a friendship, nurtured each other’s literary careers, and traveled about Europe. Across the channel from Hemingway and Fitzgerald, J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis were beginning their careers as teachers and scholars at Oxford University. In time, their famed literary friendship began around an informal group called the “Koalbiters,” where they gathered to read Old Norse myths in the original languages.

Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Tolkien, and Lewis all enjoyed popularity from the books they wrote. Most of their works remain in print with sales remaining quite high. The influence of these authors and their books lives on.

Even though all four men were contemporaries, several factors separated Hemingway and Fitzgerald from Tolkien and Lewis. While the first pair were Americans and the second British, more than geography and history separated them. And while the first two devoted themselves almost entirely to being writers (aided with lots of pretty heavy drinking), the second two were primarily university professors whose writing careers were secondarily pursued amidst lectures and grading exams. But more than academic robes separated the two pairs.

The main gathering spot for Hemingway and Fitzgerald was the apartment of a writer named Gertrude Stein. More remembered for her influence than for her actual writings, Stein influenced the writers, poets, painters, and other artists—mostly American—who found a literary comradeship in post-World War I France. She directly affected much of modern 20th century literature and art (Picasso, for example). It was Stein who told Hemingway, “You are a lost generation.” Hemingway used the phrase in the opening of *The Sun Also Rises*. The phrase became a description of the entire group.

The main gathering spots for Tolkien and Lewis were a pub called “The Eagle and Child” and their rooms at Magdalen College. As Lewis once put it, “My happiest hours are spent with three or four old friends in old clothes tramping together and putting up in small pubs—or else sitting up ‘til the small hours in someone’s college rooms talking nonsense, poetry, theology, metaphysics, over beer, tea, and pipes.”²¹ It was in these gatherings that Tolkien and Lewis shared their faith and fiction. It was here that they came to be called “the Inklings.”

The Contrast

Living in the same era, having literary camaraderie, and penning their early works, these two sets of friends developed two entirely different modes of writing. Hemingway and Fitzgerald were both known for their realism,

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for the tragic bent of their plots, and for the uprooted, cynical, modern, this-is-all-there-is-to-life heroes who sought some type of this-worldly grace to live under the pressure of existential meaninglessness. Hemingway's heroes faced war and the loss of loved ones; they accepted death or life on its own terms with resignation and stoicism. Fitzgerald's heroes struggled to find life in the parties and opportunities for wealth during that era known as the 'Jazz Age.' Their heroes usually died with the same vigor with which they lived. These were fictional characters without roots, for the past was irrelevant. They were characters without futures, for the future was lost somewhere out on the battlefields of the First World War.

Tolkien and Lewis rejected modernism and realism in literature. The main characters in the fiction of Lewis and Tolkien—children, talking animals, Hobbits, and elves—fought against magical and mystical forces in fantasy worlds.

The issues were clear, the battle lines plainly drawn: Lucy and Edmund, Bilbo and Frodo all faced evil forces and battled for the good. They battled

for Narnia and Middle-earth, found strength in the supernatural and fantastic, and faced death with courage and honor.

To read *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* and then pick up *A Farewell to Arms*, to read *The Return of the King* and then read *The Great Gatsby*, to try to find a common thread between these two sets of writers is most disconcerting. One is reminded of G.K. Chesterton's comments about fantasy. He said that fantasy reminds us that 'the universe is wild and full of marvels. Realism means that the world is dull.... In the fairy tale, the cosmos goes mad, but the hero does

not go mad. In the modern novels the hero is mad before the book begins, and suffers from the harsh steadiness...of the cosmos.'"

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To assess the importance of these writers, one must go beyond style; they were all master stylists. One cannot demean Tolkien and Lewis by saying that they wrote 'children's stories.' As a matter of fact, I read a fair bit of Hemingway and Fitzgerald in my teenage years, but did not read Tolkien and Lewis until many years later. Some critics see realism as superior to fantasy because it is more representative of life; that is, as Aristotle talked about literature as imitation, so realism is imitation. The problem is that Samwise Gamgee acts more like people we know than does Jay Gatsby.

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The real point of demarcation between these two sets of writers concerns their different worldview, or you could say philosophies or even religions. Both Tolkien and Lewis were

dedicated Christians whose theologies permeated their fiction. While Lewis was more obvious with his Christian symbolism and themes, Tolkien was strongly committed to Christian themes and symbols in his fiction.

Besides the events that caused Hemingway and Fitzgerald to abandon the Christian culture of Midwestern America, and the events that caused Tolkien to be a committed Catholic, and the events that would later bring Lewis to the Christian faith, the key event for all of them was participation in the military in the First World War.

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World War I

The experience of World War I and its aftermath impacted them all. The experience of this war is one of the underrated events of the 20th century. World War I, more directly than anything else, caused World War II. It also caused the Great Depression in the US and the world, the rise of Communism in Russia, and the rise of Nazism in Germany. Perhaps even greater than the military and political effects of the war were the social, cultural, philosophical, and theological effects.

The clumsy film images of young men, brightly uniformed, being cheered by huge crowds give a foreboding image of the naivety toward the horrors that would soon face the youth of Europe in the ‘No Man’s Land’ trenches of France. Some particular battles, like the Battles of the Somme and the siege of Verdun, produced casualty counts that exceeded whole wars of the past. In some cases, the first hours of an attack destroyed more young men than whole campaigns from previous centuries.

The grim futility of the war can be found in the anti-war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front* by Erich Marie Remarque. His story takes a group of young men, Germans in this case, and traces their lives in the trenches, their struggles with fear and death, their momentary flings with youthful fun, through the war until the last one dies. In one sense, it would only be “all quiet on the Western Front” when all were dead. The grim futility of World War I still defies explanation.

The causes of World War I were vague. History books might list causes, both immediate and long-term. None of the causes seems to explain the extent of the effects. Some years back Barbara Tuchman’s *The Guns of August*

eloquently described the course of events in the August of 1914 that led to the outbreak of war and the first month of battle that initially saved France. But that was only one month out of a war that would last for nearly four years.

The course of the war was insane, with ever increasing casualties remedied only by the development of ever-more shocking weapons; the results of the war displayed a blinded greed on the part of the winners and guaranteed a desire for revenge by the losers, particularly Germany.

French General Ferdinand Foch rightly prophesied that the peace treaty was nothing more than a twenty-year armistice.

The Wartime Experience

The British went to war in 1914, so Tolkien and Lewis were quickly drawn into it. It was 1917 before America declared war on Germany. Americans went into that war with the idealistic promise that ‘this was a war to end all wars’ and a ‘war to make the world safe for democracy.’ Our comparative casualty count was low, since we entered the war late and at that point in time when the last German offensive was grinding to a halt. The German army was reduced to large numbers of old men and boys. Still lots of Americans died; others survived shell-shocked, gassed, and scarred for life. The optimism of youth, the promise of a bright century, the certainties of life were gone.

Fitzgerald said in his novel *This Side of Paradise* that they returned from the war to find “all gods dead, all wars fought, all faiths in man shaken.” Disillusioned by the war, rejecting belief in God or any creeds, pained over his past and lost youth, Fitzgerald’s character says at the end of the book, “I know myself, but that is all.”

Hemingway’s character Frederic Henry

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...the key event in all their lives that they shared was participation in the military in the First World War.



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faced the death of his lover, Catherine, and her son and of his wartime comrades with the thought, "That was what you did. You died. You did not know what it was about. You never had time to learn. They threw you in and told you the rules and the first time they caught you off base they killed you.... You could count on that. Stay around long enough and they would kill you."

Plenty of British writers experienced the same despair, unbelief, and existentialism. Some like the poet Wilfred Owen

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died in battle; others like Siegfried Sassoon survived to continue his writing career.² It is in this same cultural context that T.S. Eliot published his famous poem *The Waste Land*.

But not all who experienced World War I emerged with philosophies of despair. Both novelist and historian have often written about the unbelief and the existential reaction to World War I. What have been less often explored have been the stories of the boys of 1914-18 who left the war with a greater vision of life. There were many. While he was not converted until some years after the war, Lewis avoided the cynicism of so many. Two Southern literary scholars, John Crowe Ransom and Donald Davidson, returned to Vanderbilt University in Tennessee and proceeded to give the world a great body of Southern literature, especially poetry, and the Agrarian movement. Eugene Rosenstock-Huussy conceived his vision of history at the Battle of Verdun where he was serving in the German army and from that began his work *Out of Revolution*.

Tolkien and World War I

Most important from our perspective, from the experience of the Battle of the Somme and the trenches of France, J.R.R. Tolkien resolved to fulfill the vision of his

university chums, most of whom perished in battle, and he put together vital pieces of his epic creation of Middle Earth. The way the war made Tolkien the man and ultimately how it affected the creation of Middle-earth is the theme of an important new book on Tolkien, called *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth* by John Garth. The

author says, "Without the war, it is arguable whether his fictions would have focused on a conflict between good and evil; or if they had, whether good and evil would have taken a similar shape."³

This story begins with the comradeship and scholarship of four young men at King's College. These men were certainly among Britain's finest. Their education embodied the best of the older Classical education model—a later casualty of the 20th century. They performed Greek plays in the original; they fellowshipped together as members of the Tea Club and Barrovian Society (TCBS); they played spirited games of Rugby against school rivals; they pursued various academic disciplines, with Tolkien being ever drawn to the field of Philology and the writings of Norse legends.

This fellowship was disrupted by the outbreak of the war. College educated men were prime candidates for the officer corps. Off they went to training and later to battle, carrying along copies of *Paradise Lost* along with their own poetry and dreams of bright future lives as men of letters. As officers, their risks were great, and their casualty numbers were high. Like the characters in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, they soon began to die in battle.

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After the first member of this fellowship was killed (Rob Gilson was his name), another one, G. B. Smith wrote to Tolkien, "I am safe but what does that matter... Now one realizes in despair what the TCBS really was. O my dear John Ronald what ever are we going to do?"⁴ Gilson was not the only one to die. Looking back years later, Tolkien said, "To be caught in youth in 1914 was no less hideous an experience than in 1939...by 1918, all but one of my close friends were dead."

As the scythe of war swept more men away, Tolkien was providentially blessed by contracting trench fever. This disease, fatal for some, was life saving for Tolkien.

Victor Davis Hanson points out in his new book *Ripples of Battle* that battles produce consequences far beyond the immediate effects on the battlefield. Garth's book certainly illustrates some of the far-reaching ripples of the Battle of the Somme. As Tolkien created the battles for Middle-earth, he used his visual memories of WWI to construct the settings. Garth says, "Middle-earth, I suspect, looks so engagingly familiar to us, and speaks to us so eloquently, because it was born with the modern world and marked by the same terrible birth pangs."⁵

Tolkien was not unique in falling back on his war experiences for his fiction. Tone, subject, and attitudes from the war affected the literature of the next generation. But what was unique about Tolkien was the perspective he had on the war. In the last

chapters of Garth's book, he brilliantly examines the ways different writers reacted to the war. This portion is worth the price of the book. Garth says, "...writers such as Graves, Sassoon, and Owen saw the Great War as the disease, but Tolkien saw it as merely the symptom."⁶ A bit earlier he pointed out, "In a century when revolutionaries dismissed the whole concept of good and evil as a delusion of the weak or deviant, this became a substantial issue, and already during the Great War it was an urgent one. For Tolkien's mythology, 'the memory of good and evil' is the keynote."⁷

So the battlefields of France merge into the fictional battle for Middle-earth. A real war with indefinite causes and unclear moral realities helps create a mythical war with an all-powerful ring as the cause and good and evil as the unmistakable alternative outcomes. A historical human tragedy becomes a fantastic epic.

Tolkien ended the war with a pen in hand and a vision in mind. Unlike the Lost Generation, for Tolkien, God was very much alive; for him, faith was strengthened; and for him, all wars were not fought—there would be more wars, the shires would need scouring, but the ultimate victory was sure. Gertrude Stein was more right than she realized in referring to Hemingway and Fitzgerald and company as 'the lost generation.' What we can now see is that they have been surpassed by their contemporaries who were or were to become 'the saved generation.'

¹ Walter Hooper, *Through Joy and Beyond—A Pictorial Biography of C.S. Lewis*. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1982) p.73

² God was gracious: Sassoon's conversion is chronicled in Joseph Pearce's book *Literary Converts*.

³ John Garth, *Tolkien and the Great War: The Threshold of Middle-earth* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 2003.) p. 309

⁴ *ibid.*, p.168

⁵ *ibid.*, p.309

⁶ *ibid.*, p.300

⁷ *ibid.*, p.292



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