Coming of Age in a Lost Generation: Nick Adams, Ernest Hemingway, and the American Bildungsroman Tradition

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My project will be exploring Ernest Hemingway and his influence on the American bildungsroman tradition. Though the bildungsroman is novel-centric in its German origin, through his short stories and memoirs Hemingway’s work is in line with much of the school’s tradition. In 18th century Germany, the term Bildungsroman re-defined itself as the development and maturation of a person into what they are “destined to become” through “interaction with the environment” (Kontje 2). Though there are two or three principal elements consistent in almost all bildung stories (Buckley 18), the genre has changed over time, with an author’s own experiences playing a big part in their work. The first part of my paper will briefly focus on defining the bildungsroman as a genre, from its German origins to the American bildungsroman tradition, which was greatly influenced by Mark Twain—who Hemingway himself proclaimed as the father of American literature (Trites 144). By looking at Twain’s works, particularly Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, I will create a context to review Hemingway’s work within the bildungsroman framework.

From there, I will narrow my scope to Hemingway, who Gertrude Stein described as the voice of “the lost generation” (Hemingway 30). Through his own experiences, Hemingway created his own version of bildung tradition, deviating from previous coming of age works. Because bildungsroman work is “autobiographical…with fact and fiction inextricably intermingled” (Buckley 24), I will engage two primary sources in my study of Hemingway’s bildungsroman, one written at the beginning of his career, the other at the twilight: the Nick Adams’ short stories in the collection In Our Time (1925), and Hemingway’s account of his own coming of age story in the posthumous A Moveable Feast (1964). Through Adams’ coming of age, who’s seen as fictional version of Hemingway’s own self (Lingeman), I will connect Hemingway’s work to the previous traditions of the genre, looking at how Adams fits into coming of age. By connecting Hemingway and Adams, and linking Adams to bildungsroman, I will show how Hemingway’s work was influenced by his own experiences and how his fiction operated under the principles necessary for a work to be considered “Coming of Age.”

I will argue that Hemingway, because of his own experiences and the cultural context in which he wrote, created a “Lost Generation Bildungsroman.” Hemingway’s version, coming out of the horror of World War I, emphasized trauma and recovery in moving from childhood to adulthood. By comparing the Nick Adams post-war short story, “Big Two-Hearted River” with A Moveable Feast, Hemingway’s own tale of post-war adjustment written 40 years later, I will consider how Hemingway depicted trauma in his bildungsroman. In both accounts, Hemingway proposed a way to move past the trauma: craft or spiritual practice—both as a fisherman and a writer—which can aid the traumatized victims of war in finding peace and maturing into the next phase of life.