



## American War Fiction in 1920's and 1930s

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### Abstract:

The history of English and American novels is undoubtedly very vast and interesting. My paper will attempt to cover the most important period of American literature, which is the 1920s and 1930s post-World War I. This is the period of American fiction where various influential writers emerged and bagged Nobel prizes for their works. The works produced during this period are remarkable for their wartime settings. Novelists like Ernest Hemmingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, John Dos Passos, and William Faulkner are some of the major names of the period. The most important thing about these authors was their shared conviction that it was possible for an American to write directly about their experience. A sense of dislocation was felt in America, and it had a huge impact on American thought and development. My paper will thoroughly discuss the period and some important writers.

**Keywords:** *The Great Depression, Realism, Naturalism, European Modernism*

### Introduction:

World War I has brought destruction that generations have paid off. Every sphere of life had given something to the war. War is something that nobody wants but couldn't help when it broke. In this paper, I am here to discuss the devastation and chaos created by World War I and how literature immediately after the war got affected by the war. Yes, I am pointing to the period of American history that produced not just writers but Nobel Laureates like Earnest Hemmingway, William Faulkner, John Dos Passos, and T. S. Eliot. These were the revolutionary writers of the era. They once served one way or another in the military. They saw the war very closely and therefore could write intense war scenes in their novels. Wars never bring pleasure to anyone's life. Even the soldiers who kill opponents on the battlefield feel the pain that their families may experience after losing their loved ones. American fiction of the 1920s and 1930s has a significant role in literature. American writers of this age not only dominated fiction but the whole age and set wonderful trends in the art of fiction.

It was only because of the First World War that Americans were forced to realize that they were responsible for Western civilization. And there were many who believed that they were not satisfied with the shallowness of American civilization, and because of this, they ended up living somewhere else. Harold Stearns, in 1921, edited a symposium called "Civilization in the United States," and when this symposium ended, there were many participants who made their point clear that there is very little civilization here. Following him, there were many writers who did the same thing. The Americans were moving without direction because of the World War. The war left a huge number of people with nothing in their hands. People were shattered and broken emotionally, mentally, physically, and economically. The war had brought destruction on a very large scale. The war produced war novels and barrenness and sterility in poetry. The theme of growing disillusion can be seen in John Dos Passos' *One Man's Initiation: 1917*, *The Three Soldiers*, E. E. Cummings' *The Enormous Room*, and most importantly, *A Farewell to Arms* of Earnest Hemmingway.

### The Post War Novelists and Novels:

The novels that came out after the war were mirrors of society. In the war autobiography, one can say these novels reflect scenarios that can be depicted because the major writers were the real heroes of the war in a direct or indirect way. John Dos Passos, E. E. Cummings, Earnest Hemmingway, and Edmund Wilson worked in the ambulance corps. F. Scott Fitzgerald finished officer training; Earnest Hemmingway was injured on the Italian front, and because of this, he was honoured with bravery; and Faulkner got training with the Royal Canadian Force, and because they had been part of the war, they could pen down the exact happenings of the war intensely. When we read the novels of these writers, we feel ourselves alienated to some other place where there is no hope, no positivity, no enthusiasm, no life left but only pain. The postwar novels had a huge impression on the American twenties and became a metaphor for a world twisted beyond recognition. *Sun Also Rise*, Earnest Hemmingway's 1926 novel, is an example of the emasculating wounds of war, where we can see the theme of sterility or impotence. The novel is pervaded by darkness and

barrenness. This is not the story of just *The Sun Also Rises*, but a virtual version like this can be witnessed in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922), Hugh Selwyn Mauberly's *Ezra Pound*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and *Soldier's Pay* by William Faulkner (1926).

It is no doubt that the second decade of America was a moderate period, as pointed out by Wilson's Versailles Treaty. This particular period of American history caused major changes in America that brought turmoil to the U.S. New opportunities, new techniques, and new thought processes came forward, and everywhere, whether in cinema, machines, science, art, or literature, they expanded and flourished. Most importantly, this decade brought a terrible change in the lifestyle of the people. American writers attempted very successfully to pen down the suffering and devastation caused by the war through their novels. F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemmingway are two of the best representatives of the period. In 1914, one of the most pointless wars happened that destroyed the young generation and seemed like an endemic. This war had resulted in nothing but the loss of a whole young generation; one would refer to it as the "LOST GENERATION". F. Scott was a young and self-obsessed poet and author who had an opinion for himself that he was the best of his time. The New Yorker staff writer Susan Orleans wrote in her summary of Fitzgerald that "I didn't know till I was fifteen that there was anyone in the world except me, and it costs me plenty". One of the major reasons that shaped his literary career was World War I. His most famous novel, *This Side of Paradise*, was published immediately after the war in 1920. *This Side of Paradise* was a cultural sensation and brought him huge success. His second novel, *The Great Gatsby*, is in fact his most admirable work even today. To date, everyone has adored this novel. The contemporary of Fitzgerald is Ernest Hemmingway, who, like him, endured to describe the real face of war to future generations and its readers through his various novels. There are critics who believe that the works of Fitzgerald and his characters don't reflect the issues of the war, but Hemmingway's does. The characters, the places, the emotions, and the dialogues in his novels justify the war front more convincingly than Fitzgerald's. Hemmingway did full justice to his works. We have seen the dream sequence in *A Farewell to Arms*, *Baran Land*, etc. These scenes intensify the reader's mind. Soldiers bathed in blood; the bleeding wounds all contributed to the fear of war.

However, we cannot deny the fact that the role of war is very important in the literary careers of both writers. The characters of both writers suffered from a life full of chaos and disturbance. They live in a constant dilemma. The impact of war is different for everyone. Not everyone can relate in the same way. The novels of Hemmingway have a European setting during the war, a special scenario that is basically more conducive to liberation than that of Fitzgerald. Hemmingway's settings are deep, horrifying, base, and, moreover, very romantic, while his characters are more blessed and favoured as they find liberation in complete chaos. On the contrary, the locations of Scott Fitzgerald's novels are not directly from the war settings, but they are evident as war settings. The impression of war is still visible in his novels, even though there are no direct war settings. The world created in his novels had all the features that are real and that man needs to learn how to sustain or survive in a post-war world. His characters try to find some peace, order, and a sense of civilization after the war. Scott Fitzgerald's characters are striving to attain liberation. Scott was influenced by Oscar Wilde, an English decadent.

The next important name on the list is John Dos Passos. We know John Dos Passos for his notable works like *1919*, *Adventures of a Young Man*, *Manhattan Transfere*, *42nd Parallel*, *The Big Money*, and *U.S.A.* John Dos Passos belongs to a very wealthy family who was attracted by World War I and went to France and Spain, especially to experience war, and also joined the ambulance corps. His first novel, *One Man's Initiation: 1917*, tells the story of a person who sees the war as a violation of his roots and traditional values. After producing his first war novel, his second war novel, published in 1921, *Three Soldiers*, depicts the war as a crushing machine that crushes the people and their individuality as well.

Coming towards our next valuable writer, John Steinbeck. He became a popular name in American literature for his masterpiece. *The Grapes of Wrath*, published in 1939, is a novel that was written after the Great Depression and depicts the hardships of people who had nothing in their hands. People became poor, and to exploit these people, there were many well-established businessmen. *The Grapes of Wrath* is such a story of those migrants who had to leave their homes to have a better future, but in vain. The Great Depression is the outcome of war.

### **Realism and Naturalism:**

Novels of the twenties were without debate realistic and natural. Ernest Hemmingway was undoubtedly the first writer to add a realistic element to his novel "*A Farewell to Arms*". The novel depicts the story of a soldier without any artificiality or artificial elements. The realist element of Hemmingway was commendable and worth appreciating. In literature, realism and naturalism yielded place to the avant-garde, the bohemian, and the experimentalist, which synchronized with the many American writers moving to Paris. Stein and Pound were very popular for their experimental techniques, which paved the way for other writers to break with traditional styles of writing. Other writers also started writing the same way. The writings of Stein and Pound made remarkable contributions to already established European modernism. Realism and naturalism flourished in the 1930s. Realists presented life in their fictional works through realistic elements. If we talk about naturalistic, they present things by observing things scientifically under proper laboratory conditions.

Naturalists in America like Jack London, Theodore Dreiser, and Frank Norris were influenced by European naturalists. So, the job of the novelist is to examine matters of society and life scientifically. Historical facts, living conditions, and genetic systems are all part of their study. And therefore, we can say that naturalism is scientific and systemized realism. Writers like Ernest Hemmingway are known for keeping their work realistic. His novels are autobiographical. He took his characters for novels from his real-life experiences. One such character is Fredrick Henry in A Farewell to Arms. This literary technique of Hemmingway made him a star author.

### Conclusion:

This is an attempt to give the reader an idea of how the literature of the 1920s and 1930s was dominated by World War I and how important writers emerged out of it. The war has shaped not only their careers but also their personalities. The literature of war has had a very vast history since the very first literary texts were written. Since then, wars have become common in society. War literature and war history both establish new cultures in society. The major war novels are The Enormous Room (1922), A Farewell to Arms (1929), A Fable (1954), Soldier's Pay (1926), 1939 (1932), and It's a Great War (1929). These are the best war novels one can read to understand war literature.

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