

Literature in America: The Effect of Worldstates on Literary Popularity

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Abstract: How does the impact of historical events which occurred throughout a generation's formative years affect the popularity of stories, and how might this analysis be used for current estimations of literary trends?

English: The examination and study of texts created in the English Language

Peer Personality: a set of collective behavioral traits and attitudes that later expresses itself throughout a generation's life cycle trajectory

Generational Theory: Most popularized by generational theorists Neil Howe and William Strauss, generational theory theorizes that there exists a generational cycle in American History

Lost Generation: Term coined by Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway, represents those born within the year range of 1883-1900

GI Generation: Label for those American Citizens born between the years of 1900-1924

Silent Generation: Label for those American Citizens born between the years of 1925- 1945

Baby Boomer Generation: Label for those American Citizens born between the years of 1946-1964

13er/Generation X: Label for those American Citizens born between the years of 1965-1979

Millennials: Label for those American Citizens born between the years of 1980-2000

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Art imitates life to share experience, articulating thought and emotion where words all too often fail in a way which can be eloquently shared to the masses. In many cases literature is used as a conduit to express to others an experience that the creator wishes to share, with the most popular cases being those which convey relatable characters or events which the audience can resonate with. Though the best art is by definition timeless, as products of their creators who are products of their times, the environment in which they were crafted into being often works similar to a snapshot. In examining this we can find that the literature produced by generations of humans can be emblematic of the experiences shared by the set of people, whether they be on a national or global scale. Taking a closer look at these literary trends shaped by their current worldstates implies the ability of perhaps being able to predict which types of stories might be popular in the coming future, which could make for higher rates of profitability from publishing companies and television studios. In order to examine this theory further, an American timeline from 1900 to 1999 has been chosen as a lense for examination, with the generations being divided according to generational theorists Neil Howe and William Strauss's labels of the GI, Silent, Baby Boomer, 13er and Millennial generational cohorts. By scrutinizing the effects of worldstates upon popularized literature trends the central aim is to determine key historical events which occurred throughout the childhood of the stated generation and draw identifying lines of correlation between their most highly favored literature, in an attempt to then apply these precedents to current events and determine what this may entail for the coming future.

The majority of Neil Howe and William Strauss's research upon generational theory can be found in their 1991 book "Generations," which provides the first instance of their comprehensive list breaking up the American people into, at the time, eight chronological groups. Though they are largely accredited with coining these terms, Gertrude Stein and Ernest Hemingway each refer to the 1883-1900 group as the "Lost Generation" in their own literature, a term which is later implemented by Strauss and Howe. The 1991 book stops with the most recent generation of children being Millennials (1981-1999), though the current most recent one, Generation Z is mentioned in their later works and works to serve as a blank canvas to apply any predictions and generalities learned throughout the course of this thesis paper. Howe and Strauss divide the year ranges in approximate twenty year gaps, claiming that "the generational constellation establishes our snapshot impression of the American lifecycle at the moment." (Howe and Strauss, p. 32) It is their belief that each division in time sets a generational mindset for whom those who share an age location in history can be influenced by, whether it is one in which they agree with or do battle against. In setting these age locations the resulting product is known as "a "peer personality"-- a set of collective behavioral traits and attitudes that later expresses itself throughout a generation's life cycle trajectory." (Howe and Strauss, p. 32) These peer personalities make up the audiences for which popularized literature is geared towards, acting as a general consensus for which messages and events most clearly resonate for the generation as a group.

The beginning generation for this lense of study starts with the GI (government issue) generation, those born throughout the years of 1900-1924. Named as such for their largely military upbringing growing up throughout the first world war and rising to adulthood

throughout the second, this crop of adults were quickly brought to terms with their own mortality while surrounded by the harshness of war and as such underwent massive social overhauls throughout their time. Key historical events which helped to shape their growth involve the advent of the telephone, the aftermath of World War One, Prohibition and its resulting climate as well as the women's suffrage movement. These events help to sow the seeds of globalization, making for a culture far more united than ever before as women begin to gain a far greater hand in politics, acting as the driving force for prohibition and finally gaining the right to vote in 1920.

This politically charged climate was likely possible through the intense feelings of patriotism garnered through the aftereffects of America's stepping onto the global stage as a military might. The economic windfall resulting from the first World War allowed the "By the Bootstraps" ideology of America to flourish, making it seem as though the American dream was just as, if not more, attainable than ever and adding to the numbers of "newly rich." That sense of patriotic optimism would become increasingly critiqued by authors and citizens alike, who, being followed by their preceding "lost" generation, rapidly became disenchanted with their romantic view on life in the face of the perils of war and the societal stigmas instituted by the culture of wealth and prosperity already in place. This odd climate of activism and social disillusionment made for the perfect environment for which stories like Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises," (1926) Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" (1925) and Addams's "20 Years at Hull House" (1910) to flourish in as a microcosm for the GI Generation experience.

Though any traumatic event leading to a loss of life will inevitably result in a great deal of pensive thinking about one's own mortality, the brutal severity of World War One's "modern warfare" left its young soldiers brutally scarred mentally and physically from the memories of

trench warfare. Hemingway's "The Sun Also Rises" (1926) attempts to articulate that sense of aimlessness resultant from the end of a life at war and a return to a normal civilian's life, and the despair over the degradation of morality such an overwhelming amount of violence can leave upon a society. World War One additionally saw the use of trench warfare, meaning that such violence on both ends was widely impersonal, with soldiers perishing from thrown bombs, gas or illness rather than traditional forms of combat. It marked the start of man versus machine, a dilemma which would only strengthen as time went on and impressed upon Hemingway in particular an acute impotence in his sense of masculinity, as shown by the main character's impotence resulting from his experiences as a soldier in the war. "Of all the ways to be wounded. I suppose it was funny." (Hemingway, 19) Jake, the novel's main character, describes nights with his friends "as in a nightmare of it all being something repeated, something I had been through and that now I must go again." (Hemingway, 33) Mankind's place in the world was shaken by these experiences, leading to the rest of the characters in the novel traveling aimlessly and indulging in a decadent lifestyle filled with various means of escapism; writing, reading, binge drinking and intense love affairs, all of which with the intent being to forget oneself in the heat of the experience. Though their experiences of debauchery offer a small amount of reprieve from the hauntings of the characters memories, it is never one which lasts long enough, adding a drifting, directionless atmosphere to the group of characters very much lost in the light of the destruction of their traditional values blown apart by war.

Focusing more on the economic windfalls resulting from World War One, Fitzgerald's "The Great Gatsby" (1925) follows the tragic demise of an American self-made man, taken down by the complications of social nuances and the unattainability of the American Dream. Jay

Gatsby, born to his parents as James Gatz, adopts his wealthy persona as a boy in his attempt to climb his way into wealth and power, propelled into upwards mobility through a combination of the bustling economy and the dangerous but highly profitable bootlegging game. His obsession with Daisy, the wealthy (now married) woman of his past who descends from an old money family extends far past that of reality, building her up in his mind as a symbol of proof for his success. The class distinction, which dominated so much of the GI generation's social structure, comes out in a series of motifs and themes, most famously so with the green light kept at the end of Daisy's dock across the bay. Gatsby's nightly strolls often took him to this dock, where he "stretched out his arms toward the dark water. . . . I . . . distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far way. . . . When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished. . . ."

(Fitzgerald, 24) Gatsby's demise is accredited to the cruel rigidity of social structure fate seems to favor throughout the book, ultimately ending with his death as the misdirected blame for a death Daisy had inadvertently caused whose consequences would bring about the end of his life. This tragically grim ending acts as Fitzgerald's commentary on the disparity between the GI generation's new money and old money elites, describing those of old money as "careless people... they smashed up things and...then retreated back into their money... and let other people clean up the mess they had made." (Fitzgerald, 191) This almost mindless disregard for the newly rich showcases the flaw in the prevailing "by the bootstraps" ideology currently at an all time high in America, indicating the hypocrisy of elitism and a growing movement towards disillusionment in regards to the keystones of American culture.

Perhaps due to the ongoing culture of militarism, the GI generation marked the beginning of successful political activism from marginalized groups in society, the most successful being

that of American women. The addition of the eighteenth amendment implementing prohibition throughout the country was largely championed by wives and daughters hoping that by eliminating the consumption of alcohol they could make for a far safer and more economically sound family and environment. Perhaps most emblematic of these successes was Jane Addams's "20 Years at Hull House," (1910) a novel made up of the author's own experiences fighting against the poverty and abuse rampant throughout the Industrial Revolution as she fought to unionize female workforces and provide a place for working mothers to leave their children throughout the day so that they might bring an additional paycheck to the family and develop some potentially lifesaving independence. Addams's successes would eventually net her a Nobel peace prize, making her the first woman to receive the honor in 1931. This book offered a sense of empowerment to a growing group of women who, in the wake of the World Wars, had to do the majority of the work upholding the national economy and filling up the workforces with replacement workers who would later stay on as independent career woman after their fathers, husbands and brothers returned from the warfront. The feminist movement sparked in the vacuum left behind the chaos of war made for the perfect wakeup call for many newly empowered women, with Addams herself claiming "I had confidence that although life itself might contain many difficulties, the period of mere passive receptivity had come to an end, and I had at last finished with the ever-lasting "preparation for life," however prepared I might be." (Addams, 88). The novel's success represents the turn of the century for many marginalized groups within America who watched the victories of the feminist movement and would later be inspired to enact further change.

Following after the GI generation comes the Silent generation, made up of those born throughout the years of 1925 to 1945. This time period moves past the gilded glitz of the 1920s and into the gritty reality of the Great Depression as soldiers from World War One return home, injured and disillusioned with many of America's traditional ideals. Children born in this time period must deal with the harsh severity of nationwide poverty in the wake of World War One, with the question of just what you can do for your fellow man when you yourself are in pain testing everyone's sense of morality. These crippling hardships would come to define the growing generation, quieter and far less outspoken than their predecessors for whom activism had flourished so greatly. Though activism still took place where it could, the majority of the generation was content to simply bow their heads and work with what they were given rather than challenge the preexisting system, as their current world state provided enough challenges as is. The economical bailout that was World War Two for the United States of America combined with the government's various New Deal programs then acted to inject a sense of patriotism into a largely dispirited society, adding a fascinating juxtaposition between one's pride for their country against their own personal traumas. America's victory in World War One helped the country to gain a stronger foothold as a growing superpower throughout the world which was rapidly becoming far more globalized with the success of the first nonstop transatlantic flight, forcing Americans to confront how their own ideologies hold up to that of the rest of the world as fascism and socialism become a rising threat to the American promise. It is this climate that makes for the success of Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath," (1939) Huxley's "Brave New World," (1932) and Orwell's "Animal Farm" (1945) to climb the ranks of popularity as they

articulated the Silent Generation's experiences in a manner which was topically relevant to the times.

Perhaps the most emblematic piece of literature to emerge from the Silent Generation is John Steinbeck's "The Grapes of Wrath," (1939) a harrowing tale of humanity weathering the storm of poverty and tragedy. The story follows the journey of the Joads, an impoverished family of farmers from Oklahoma forced off of their land due to lack of work who are traveling towards California in search of employment. Though the rumors of plentiful work prove to be false as the family encounters hardship after hardship, slowly breaking apart along the way, Steinbeck maintains throughout the novel that mankind is practically divine in its nature to be at once destructive and the key to salvation. This theme of man versus man systematically helping and harming one another is best said by Jim Casy, a preacher in the story who "got thinkin' how we was holy when we was one thing, an' mankin' was holy when it was one thing. An' it on'y got unholy when one mis'able little fella got the bit in his teeth an' run off his own way, kickin' an' draggin' an' fightin'. Fella like that bust the holi-ness. But when they're all workin' together, not one fella for another fella, but one fella kind of harnessed to the whole shebang—that's right, that's holy." (Steinbeck, 30) Though the majority of the novel is bleak, the character's undying resolve to continue soldiering on and do as right by others as you can proves to be particularly symbolic of the Silent Generation experience, a group of people whose senses of morality were tested time and again through war and financial hardships and still managed to endure through to the otherside. This message of stalwart endurance proved to be a defining feature of the persevering generation, who would go on to fight yet another World War and cement America's place as a global superpower with the consecutive victory.

Huxley's "Brave New World" (1932) posed the increasingly pertinent question as to whether or not the price of one's individual freedom is worth the pain at which truth and autonomy elicit, building up a seemingly perfect world in which everything from a person's job to their potential is sculpted before birth. Setting the stage for an oncoming generation of science fiction stories inspired by the frightening dystopia of his world, "Brave New World" tells the story of the dichotomy between two worlds, the World State and the Savage Reservation. Within the World State, children are grown from pods and systematically stunted either mentally or physically in order to craft leaders and weaker working classes who will embody the ideals of an all-powerful state. Through lessons whispered to children in their sleep their minds are shaped into vessels for the current world order, "till at last the child's mind is these suggestions, and the sum of the suggestions is the child's mind. And not the child's mind only. The adult's mind too—all his life long. The mind that judges and desires and decides—made up of these suggestions. But all these suggestions are our suggestions... Suggestions from the State!" (Huxley, 30) On the other side of the coin exists the Savage Reservation, in which people are freed from the institutionalized caste system but experience all the pain such freedoms induce through negative emotions, which are dampened through an extensive reliance upon drugs in the World State, and visible signs of aging.

This freedom to experience the intimacies of oneself, regardless of how unsavory it may be, alludes to the growing reliance the current American society had upon the government which was their sole lifeline to the maintenance of their survival in the wake of so many consecutive tragedies. The characters are constantly interrogated as to whether or not their autonomy is worth it when it comes at the price of so much pain to both themselves and to others. "The greater a

man's talents, the greater his power to lead astray. It is better that one should suffer than that many should be corrupted. Consider the matter dispassionately, Mr. Foster, and you will see that no offense is so heinous as unorthodoxy of behavior." (Huxley, 162) The characters prefer to escape from their own autonomy once it is finally granted to them, frightened by the crippling overload of choice which corrals them either into returning to the society which shaped them to fear such liberty of the mind or into taking their own life, boiling the overwhelming nature of choice finally presented to them into one final binary decision; live in this world in which your own self creates for you excruciating pain, or escape it entirely.

Though he is most well known for the dystopian commentary on the degradation of privacy "1984", George Orwell's "Animal Farm" (1945) acts as the American people's rallying cry against the global outbreak of communism. Occurring right at the tail end of the generational divide, the novel focuses upon a variety of farm animals who collude to overthrow their farmer and remake their farm into a place in which all animals might be equal. This blatant allusion to the communist regime ultimately ends in tragedy as the despotic pig Napoleon climbs to power by harnessing the military might of the farm and unleashing them upon any unfortunate creature who might have beliefs contrary to his own, claiming that "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others." (Orwell, 40) With America's entrance into the second World War and the beginnings of the Cold War on the rise, this novel articulated the distinct divide between American ideologies and the rest of the world's, viewing communism as an inevitable evil as men are too prone to corruption to ever allow a system in which everyone is equal to flourish off of paper. Orwell implies throughout the plot of the book that socialism in the wrong hands acts as an inherently corruptive creation, since the divided power can make for an

easy environment for despots and tyrants to rear their heads. The novel acts largely as a critique against the Stalinist Soviet regime, which was claiming lives by the billions in tandem with World War Two. Orwell again implies that society has a natural tendency towards stratification, a message passed down to the Silent Generation from the disillusioned GI generation and articulated most eloquently by the character Mr. Pilkington. "If you have your lower animals to contend with," he said, "we have our lower classes!" (Orwell, 41) This novel acts as a warning towards a naive working class, which resonated with the Silent Generation effectively as their complicated upbringing instilled in them a sense of determination to make do with what you have rather than toy with the radical ideas emerging from the Eastern front.

With the end of World War Two comes the birth of an entirely new generation, one of the most topically popular groups whose impact is still being felt in the steady shaping of our current future. The Baby Boomers, born throughout the years of 1946 to 1964, appear as a stark contrast to their preceding Silent Generation with their formative years being filled with a sense of confidence and optimism consequent to the victory of World War Two. As opposed to the prompt introduction into the harshness of reality that the Silent Generation was intimately acquainted with through the Great Depression and the start of World War Two, this new generation swiftly introduced themselves to the world as nonconformists determined to challenge the status quo and seize opportunity by the throat, propelled along by the US's introduction of the GI bill, which increased the ease at which people could attend university or purchase a home in order to start their family. As the soldiers were now returning from the warfront and looking for employment opportunities to support themselves and their growing families, the large numbers of women who had taken the initiative to take the societally accepted male position as

the breadwinner of the family with their fathers, sons and uncles fighting overseas were now being shunted back into the home with the soldiers expecting things to simply return to the way things were before they'd left. This sense of responsibility and financial independence awakened a movement which had lost steam with the economic crash of the 1930s, starting what would be known as second wave feminism and providing a wealth of literature to inspire and commemorate the newly born women born into this uncertain time of the redefinition of gender roles. This sense of independence and equality where there had previously been injustice was additionally shared by the African Americans, returning soldiers and working women alike. These thoughts would birth the Civil Rights Movement, which would shape both the country and the documents which define it in order to create a more just, equal environment for citizens of all racial backgrounds.

Though the end of a war traditionally results in an economic fallout of a nation as a direct consequence of the shift of focus from the war industry to the more mundane, peaceful alternatives, it was not so with the end of World War Two. This is likely a result of the immediate start of the Cold War following the end of the global conflict, which emphasized a continued focus on the war industry and allowed for a more gradual shift into the additional economic sectors. This Cold War brought with it a wartime mentality much in the same vein as all the others, though it fostered within the people a sense of paranoia which would soon come to be called the Red Scare, or more simply, McCarthyism as Americans in favor of communist ideals would be promptly labeled as traitors and could even lose their lives as a direct consequence of this newly public revelation. From these events, the literary successes of Bradbury's "Fahrenheit 451,"(1953) Friedan's "The Feminine Mystique," (1963) and Ellison's

“Invisible Man” (1952) would be birthed as capstones of the newly changing nations, speaking to the fierce activism of a people determined not to accept antiquated standards while being confronted by the restrictions of fear and government censorship.

Ray Bradbury’s “Fahrenheit 451” (1953) crafts a world in which free, objective thought has been too policed by the government and reinforced by the mindless compliance of society to realize that the lack of autonomy is sapping the will to live out of every functioning member of this civilization. Written on the heels of the Red Scare, which most famously resulted in the deaths of the Rosenbergs on suspicion of their passing documents to the Soviet Union, this story forces its readers to question the very real consequences of a government who censors the literature and thought of a people for the sake of their peace of mind. The novel follows the liberation of Guy Montag, a man employed as a firefighter in this world where firefighters start fires rather than put them out “as custodians of our peace of mind, the focus of our understandable and rightful dread of being inferior; official censors, judges, and executors. (Bradbury, 56). Though they are required to burn the books and homes of those who have been found to have been harboring literature, Montag’s stealing of a book from the ashes opens his mind of the restrictions of his society and results in his struggle and escape from a society doomed to fail.

By removing free and objective thought the aim of this government is to uncomplicate the world, giving everyone within a unanimous perspective to rally against so as to bolster societal happiness. “If you don’t want a house built, hide the nails and wood. If you don’t want a man unhappy politically, don’t give him two sides to a question to worry him; give him one. Better yet, give him none. (Bradbury 58) This oppression of the mind worked as a response to

the radical reactions of fear to the growing threat of communism, though through fear Bradbury insinuates that we restrict and oppress ourselves far more than any government system ever effectively can. The references to Orwell's "Animal Farm" solidify this relationship, as the novel's primary antagonist warns Montag that "we must all be alike. Not everyone born free and equal, as the constitution says, but everyone *made* equal . . . A book is a loaded gun in the house next door. Burn it. Take the shot from the weapon. Breach man's mind. (Bradbury, 55) This warning against those who would simplify the complexities of the world into an easy distinction between black and white resonated well within an age in which the growing paranoia of the other could result in the death of innocent men and women, arguing that when it comes to our own capture, we ourselves are our own best jailors.

The end of World War Two did more than inject a heady sense of patriotism into a country plenty eager to shift targets from the Axis powers to the USSR. Prior to the end of the war, the absence of male heads of the family meant that the society had little choice but to give way to that of women who rose to take the mantle of acting as the primary breadwinners of the family. This sense of female empowerment sent hordes into the workplace, with young girls recently out of high school applying to college rather than meeting a husband and settling down to start a family. Though this moment of responsibility was quick, it left a lasting impact in the psyche of the women who were then expected to simply return to the homes as though nothing had changed for them, making way for their male counterparts in both the home and the workplace. This sense of vacancy where there had once been empowerment was felt in homes throughout the nation, something of which Friedman strove to articulate through her writing of "the Feminine Mystique" (1963). In naming her novel this she attempted to give word to the

elusive beast that is fulfillment in a woman, and how it has become warped throughout the course of history by a male gaze. “The feminine mystique says that the highest value and the only commitment for women is the fulfillment of their own femininity...The mistake, says the mystique, the root of women’s troubles in the past is that women envied men, women tried to be like men, instead of accepting their own nature, which can find fulfillment only in sexual passivity, male domination, and nurturing maternal love. (Friedman, 18) The book includes excerpts of interviews conducted from housewives throughout the nation attempting to speak on the senses of frustration they cannot seem to escape with the underlying implication that it is a pointless task because the society in which they live does not allow for what they seek. Says one woman who’d left college at nineteen to start a family, “I’ve tried everything that women are supposed to do...but I’m desperate. I begin to feel that I have no personality. I’m a server of food and a putter-on of pants and a bedmaker, someone to be called on when you want something. But who am I?” (Friedman, 21) The success of Friedman’s novel acted as the flagship for what would soon become the second wave of feminism, giving many the initiative to begin the transition out of the homefront and into lives of individuality and autonomy.

Alongside the crest of second wave feminism grew the start of what would soon be the Civil Rights Movement, protesting and drawing attention to the nature of racial inequality in America for African American men and women. Though by law the two races were considered to be equal, segregation’s impact upon the nation ensured that any and all change hard won throughout history would be slowly dismantled as separating both races inherently implied an imbalance in a country meant to function as the land of the free. This fight between black pride and white supremacy would give rise to a wealth of literature articulating the black experience of

an African American citizen, most notably being Ralph Ellison's "Invisible Man." (1952) Telling the story of an unnamed narrator sheltering in the safety of the underground, the novel follows the recollection of the nameless protagonist's life as a man whose life events acts as allusions towards the many strategies African Americans have lobbied for equality throughout freedom, and the ways in which they have been thwarted by hate and institutionalized racism alike.

As a college-educated man and a well known speaker for African American rights at different points in his life, the narrator takes a great deal of hard won pride in his heritage, proclaiming that "I am not ashamed of my grandparents for having been slaves. I am only ashamed of myself for having at one time been ashamed." (Ellison, 13) The narrator's initial college experience references the Booker T Washington approach to slowly ingratiate oneself into white society while slowly assimilated your own behavior to mimic their own. This proves to be a pointless task however as the narrator's few successes come at the price of battling over equally qualified black men seemingly for the amusement of his white audience, and the letters of recommendation his college degree garners in truth contains disparagement of his character which ensures his failure to any job he attempts to apply for. In time he finds his way to the Brotherhood, a group of people supposedly devoted to the task of achieving social justice for those oppressed in society. However the more time the narrator spends within the Brotherhood, the more he realizes that each member has widely differing views on the correct way in which their race should be represented, substituting one stereotype for another until all are considered either inconsequential or threats for not agreeing with their own viewpoints. The narrator attempts to unify the Brotherhood in favor of a common enemy, calling for his listeners to "make a miracle... take back our pillaged eyes! Let's reclaim our sight; let's combine and spread our

vision. Peep around the corner, there's a storm coming. Look down the avenue, there's only one enemy. Can't you see his face?" (Ellison, 267) This ultimately ends in tragedy however, with the narrator being thrown from his place of leadership and beginning the chain of events which allows for the destructive riot at the end of the story. Through this story Ellison beseeches the members of the Civil Rights Movement not to let trivial differences in worldviews alter the fact that they must stand united against their enemy if they are to meet with any success, ending the story hopefully with the narrator declaring himself ready to emerge into the world again.

With the Civil Rights Movement reaching a fever pitch as anti-war tensions grew on the rise, the Thirteeners would come to maturity amongst the falling of the Berlin Wall and in the aftermath of the assassination of Martin Luther King Junior. This age of activists denied even their own initial generational label, rechristening themselves Generation X rather than the previously accepted Strauss and Howe definition. Children growing up in this time period were additionally considered to be more independent than their predecessors, with it becoming more and more socially acceptable for their mothers to have a career as a working woman, and the advent of the television meant that it could become easier than ever for free and independent thought to flourish. Much of this is attributed to the general disregard for the Vietnam War, as images and videos containing graphic depictions of battle could be viewed from the comfort of one's home, ensuring that viewers would have to come to terms with the consequences of American imperialism. In addition to the growing sense of autonomy women possessed, the supreme court ruling of Roe vs Wade paved the path for women to finally be able to take control of their own bodies, further dispelling the notion that the sole option made available to women is the growth and nurture of a nuclear family. It makes sense then that Kurt Vonnegut's

“Slaughterhouse Five,” (1969) Donna Tartt’s “The Secret History,” (1992) and Tony Kushner’s “Angels in America” (1991) would be met with such a resounding chorus of approval, as their literary works represented the degradation of previous ideals and standards in favor of their being grounded in the reality of the increasingly independent and rebellious generation.

Though “Slaughterhouse Five” (1969) details the experiences of an American soldier drafted into World War Two, and is written by an author not of the generation, the anti-war message aged well enough to catch a wealth of popularity with the young people of a generation pushed into fighting a war they are quickly realizing they don’t believe in. Tales such as these helped to define the Generation X experience into a defiant one worthy of its Boomer predecessors. The story follows the life of Billy Pilgrim, an otherwise unremarkable boy studying optometry who finds himself on the battlefield almost by accident. This depiction of a main character so clearly unsuited for war acts resonated strongly with the crowds of newly matured Generation Xs who felt equally incompatible with the skill set required for battle, and resented the country and the government which required them to do so. References of brutally lost innocence are peppered throughout the book by humans and animals alike. “The dog, who had sounded so ferocious in the winter distances, was a female German shepherd. She was shivering. Her tail was between her legs. She had been borrowed that morning from a farmer. She had never been to war before. She had no idea what game was being played. Her name was Princess.” (Vonnegut, 27) Despite his training, Billy is captured almost immediately and taken across enemy lines to a prisoner of war camp, where he is deposited in Dresden, an otherwise beautiful city seemingly untouched by war. The title scene originates from the slaughterhouse Billy and a few other soldiers shelter in throughout the carpet bombing of Dresden by Allied

forces, creating a blaze so intense that the lack of oxygen suffocates all those for whom the flames miss. Emerging later to the ruins of a city which had been so impervious to damage only a short time earlier, the blind destruction of war is made eminently clear, with the characters mourning the loss of Dresden despite the enemies it had harbored.

Mirroring this calculated destruction is the peculiar degree of foresight Billy seems to possess, being capable at certain points throughout the story to see the entirety of his lifetime stretched out in one moment. This is in part played off as a reference to the literary trope in which a character's life flashes before their eyes, acknowledging the fact that by existing as a citizen and a soldier, Billy's life is constantly at the whim of fate's unpredictability, as the edict of a government official can send him into an environment in which the slightest misstep can result in his own death. His farsightedness is also a reference to how many of the terrible events which occur throughout his lifetime are not only foreseeable but avoidable, as shown through the way in which he foresees the manner of his own death and decided to simply record the event rather than take any steps to prevent it from coming to pass. This bullheaded stubbornness in the face of analytical judgement draws parallels to the very real consequences of America's interference throughout the world in terms of the aftereffects of both the Vietnam war and the global impact of American imperialism. It is this understanding which fascinates the aliens later introduced into the story, describing humans as "the great explainers, explaining why this event is structured as it is, telling how other events may be achieved or avoided." (Vonnegut, 41) In creating this commentary, Vonnegut urges his readers to question whether they have given adequate thought to the decisions they and their government are currently supporting, whether it is done out of a sense of genuine belief or simply benign inattention to one's surroundings.

Though published at the end of the Generation X timeline, Donna Tartt's "The Secret History" (1992) arrives at a time in which the young generation had grown into maturity, now testing the waters of the world they had been introduced to. Their formative years had witnessed a great number of world-altering changes, with everything from the fall of the Berlin Wall to the end of the Vietnam war to the Supreme Court ruling of Roe v Wade, giving American women unprecedented liberties over their own bodies. Amongst this world more and more children were moving past high school to enroll in colleges in pursuit of a degree, making higher education the norm rather than the exception. From this closer examination of the world and the increasing degree of globalization, the future seemed increasingly to be unstable ground to build one's life upon, leading to an increased degree of anxieties within the newly matured generation. Out of this uncertainty the world of "The Secret History" is born, following the recollections of the seemingly mundane Richard Papen who recounts his experiences at the elite college which introduces him to the destructive society of the rest of the world.

Upon attending school, Richard quickly falls into a group of wealthy students joined together by their love of classic Greece, aspects of which are swiftly integrated into their increasingly isolated lives. "Does such a thing as 'the fatal flaw,' that showy dark crack running down the middle of a life, exist outside literature? I used to think it didn't. Now I think it does. And I think that mine is this: a morbid longing for the picturesque at all costs." (Tartt, 121) In the group's desire to recreate the times of which they considered to be the highlight of humanity, the accidental murder of another leads to the eventual cracking apart of the previously tight-knit group, which shatters under the weight of their guilt. The fact that their undoing comes at the price of reliving the gloried days, which had been romanticized to the point in which the negative

repercussions of the time had been wiped from memory is symbolic of Generation X's leaning into the past in favor of the future's uncertainty. In doing so they release the autonomous control that has been the source of the future's intimidating potential, which Tartt warns is just as dangerous as the alternative. "It's a very Greek idea, and a very profound one. Beauty is terror. Whatever we call beautiful, we quiver before it. And what could be more terrifying and beautiful, to souls like the Greeks or our own, than to lose control completely?" (Tartt, 97) The success of Tartt's novel expresses a generation's fear at being caught between the old traps of the past and the unknown entity that is the future, born of a world which seems capable of changing in a matter of moments.

Though the end of the Cold War had many Americans rejoicing in their newfound peace of mind in the state of the world, the AIDS crisis had just as many citizens frightened to know whether they and their loved ones would survive into the next week. With the nature of Gay pride still a taboo subject, Kushner's "Angels in America" (1991) gave voice to the queer experience for those closeted and out, exploring the nature of sexuality as well as what it means to find religion and culture in a land that worships money and power. Rather than follow a single character, the plot is centered around the plights of two couples, one gay and one straight. Of the first two, Louis and Prior come to the discovery that Prior has contracted AIDS and must deal with the emotional fallout that results. Joe and Harper, their heterosexual counterparts, are a Mormon couple whose marriage has been fractured to pieces by Harper's valium addiction and Joe's repressed homosexuality. Roy Cohn, Joe's mentor acts as a bridge between the two couples as he has also contracted AIDS but refuses to acknowledge the fact, insisting that it be listed as liver cancer so he might continue his days in closeted peace.

By examining the power dynamics in America, Kushner claims through Cohn that labels are not so much representative of one's identity as it is an indicator of one's power.

“Homosexuals are not men who sleep with other men. Homosexuals are men who in fifteen years of trying cannot get a pissant antidiscrimination bill through the City Council.

Homosexuals are men who know nobody and who nobody knows. Who have zero clout. Does

this sound like me...?” (Kushner, 46) These scenes in particular resonated strongly with

Millennials, as countless numbers were dying of a plague which was given no attention towards

as they were considered to be unsavory members of the society. Finding the strength to continue

living despite this daily reminder of a national disregard for one's own existence is spoken later

by the doomed Prior, who manages to trick his way into Heaven and bargain for a portion of his

life back, insisting that the angels he finds “bless me anyway. I want more life. I can't help

myself. I do. I've lived through such terrible times, and there are people who've lived through

much worse, but...you see them living anyways.” (Kushner, 278) The play's moving epilogue

with ambiguously optimistic implications for the characters who exited the story of their own

accords gave hope to those in the audience who saw themselves in the characters, making it a

story that helped to define an often unspoken part of the Millennial experience.

Rounding out the millennium comes the appropriately named Millennials, a name most

frequently heard in modern day media as the reigns of the world are shifted from that of the

Boomers and Generation X to those new members of the workforce. Spanning the years of 1980

to 2000, this age range grew to maturity with the advent of the internet, the end of the Cold War

and an increasing sense of distrust in the government as a result of leaked meddlings with the

Middle East. Though this has of late been referred to as the most narcissistic of the generations,

this is likely merely a result of the hiked increase of connectivity the internet has allowed for, altering the world like never before by opening the floodgates of information while allowing for the craft of internet personalities. As if to bolster that sense of interconnectivity, this generation also bore witness to the fall of the Berlin wall, largely marking the end of the Cold War and allowing the chance for two previously divided parts of the world to reunite. The challenges which come from attaining a sense of identity throughout so much clutter and noise act as part of the defining moment of the Millennial experience, with the internet and the television increasing the ease at which opinions and thought can be swiftly relayed to its listeners. From this environment the works of Delillo's "White Noise," (1985) Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" (1985) and Ishiguro's "Never Let Me Go" (2005) achieved fame and renown for their creation of works which spoke to the Millennial experience.

The enormity that is the internet brought with it a wealth of knowledge that pushed modernists into the postmodern period, allowing for many to reflect upon the nature of identity and the self in response to the sheer sense of overwhelmingness of the world. Despite its earlier publishing date, Delillo's "White Noise" (1985) reached the apex of its fame with maturing Millennials who resonate strongly with his attempts to give word to that almost futile sensation of maintaining oneself in the face of chaos and finality of death. The story follows that of Jack Gladney, a college professor chairing the department of Hitler studies, a position of which he made for himself. Both he and his wife are morbidly fascinated with the concept of death, something which borders on obsession for both and manifests in their behavior. For Jack, his fascination with Hitler stems from his fear of death as Hitler to him is a man who has transcended the grave, establishing himself as an immortal living throughout the memory of

history larger than he ever had been in life. The same is said of Elvis, for whom a colleague of Jack's wants to devote a department of study.

As the story continues, one of Jack's sons discovers that his hair is thinning despite his being only fourteen years old. This is the first of many moments in which youth is dramatically confronted with that of age, and the fact that comes in the form of Jack's son Heinrich is not intended to be a trivial detail. Heinrich is described to be fiercely intellectual, fascinated with the world and constantly challenging it rather than allow himself to be frightened by it the way his parents are. As a result of this confrontation of adulthood the trappings of youth are subsequently stripped, making him a character for whom Millennials can easily relate to as the invention of the internet brought with it much of the world that parents would have traditionally attempted to hold back. The alternative early truth makes clear that "man's guilt in history and in the tides of his own blood has been complicated by technology, the daily seeping falsehearted death."

(Delillo, 16) Though the characters continue to struggle in vain against the fear of death, their eventual resolution culminates in the simple witness of a sunset, which have reportedly grown in beauty since an airborne toxic event has occurred bringing with it a fear of finality. For a people living in the aftermath of the world wide web, characters taking joy in the simplicity of fleeting, inconsequential events would resonate strongly with the audience, who can share in the sunset "rich in romantic imagery. Why try to describe it? It's enough to say that everything in our field of vision seemed to exist in order to gather the light of this event." Delillo, 99) Though the characters do not attain a miracle cure for their crippling fear of death, their acceptance in it as an inevitable part of life acts as Delillo's parting message to his readers to be grateful for the fear, as it gives perspective and meaning to even the most trivial, repetitive moments of life.

Arriving just in time to help impart upon her readers the importance of one's sense of self, Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" (1985) is a remarkable masterpiece of resistance by means of existing in an oppressive society determined to strip from you everything save the parts of you it finds most useful. Brought to greater attention with the resounding success of its adapted television series, the novel's success parallels Delillo's "White Noise" in that it found a new audience in Millennials despite its earlier publishing date. The story is centered around Offred, a renamed woman in the Republic of Gilead where women have been stripped of their rights and relegated solely to the service of men, either in the nurturing of a family, the birth of children or as the providers of pleasure. The Republic of Gilead is said to have risen from the ashes of the United States of America, the fall of which the new administration had had a hand in. Their ascent to power was lulled into existence by insisting to the listeners that women in actuality had fewer rights in the hedonistic culture of the US, and that by instilling order and a gendered hierarchy, women can regain their respect and dignity in the service of the natural order.

Offred's memories of the gradual loss of personal liberties resonated strongly with the Millennial generation, which newly wielded many hard-won liberties for previously oppressed minorities but still had to fight tooth and nail to ensure that the structures of the old administration would not dismantle everything which had been worked for. "Is that how we lived, then? But we lived as usual. Everyone does, most of the time. Whatever is going on is as usual. Even this is as usual, now. We lived, as usual, by ignoring. Ignoring isn't the same as ignorance, you have to work at it. Nothing changes instantly: in a gradually heating bathtub you'd be boiled to death before you knew it." (Atwood, 48) Though she does not make intense

and dramatic stands against the totalitarian regime, Offred's unfailing observations of the world around her along with her determination to hold tight to her sense of self eventually leads to enough breaches in the imposed daily routines that she is freed from her life as a handmaid—whether through death or through liberation, the ending is left ambiguous. This testimony of silent resistance reminds the reader of how crucial one's sense of self can become in a fight against oppression, implying that as long as you have your identity intact, you cannot truly be broken. "My name isn't Offred, I have another name, which nobody uses now because it's forbidden. I tell myself it doesn't matter, your name is like your telephone number, useful only to others; but what I tell myself is wrong, it does matter. I keep the knowledge of this name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to dig up, one day." (Atwood, 69) For the many American citizens living throughout an era in which incessant infringements upon one's personal liberties can lead to the degradation of one's identity, the quiet power of Atwood's novel acts as a ray of hope for those unsure as to whether or not the future is something they even want to bear witness to.

Focusing more upon the consequences of an increasingly global world and the cost of interconnectivity, Kazuo Ishiguro's "Never Let Me Go" (2005) made impressive waves with its Millennial audience. Its blend of science fiction with a coming of age story was perfectly suited to its audience still working out the nuances of adulthood for themselves as they make their way through life in the Digital Age while questioning the true function of art and knowledge in society. Told in a series of recollections as the narrator, Kathy H, remembers her past in fits and bursts across her own timeline, the novel eventually reveals that Kathy, along with her friends, are clones created by the government for the purpose of organ harvesting. Their lives are

significantly stunted as a result of their machine-like natures, with the oldest clones living at best to their mid forties before having been subdued by the series of “donations” they are required to undergo— a euphemism for the surgeries which remove their organs from their bodies. Though Kathy spends the end of her life attempting to find a way around her inevitable donations, the novel is focused far less upon her status as a clone and more fixated upon life, and the nature of identity one can cultivate in such a situation. Kathy and her peers are often found to be preoccupied with their “possibles,” the sources of the genetic material they were created from, and search for them in the short free time they have allotted to attempt to determine more of their identity through the observance of others. At one point in the story Kathy herself hides away so that she might scour magazines and the models depicted in the hopes that she’d find her own face amongst the glossy pages. “That’s why I was thinking, well, it has to come from somewhere. It must be to do with the way I am...So I thought if I can find her picture, in one of those magazines, it’d at least explain it...why I am the way I am.” (Ishiguro, 181) This determination to find oneself through the discovery of another, and define one’s identity through that person’s eyes resonated strongly with the Millennial generation, who had matured with the world at their fingertips and as a result were constantly comparing themselves to others through the new channels of interconnectivity allotted by television and the internet. The resolution of the problem is that no clone ever manages to find their possible, forcing Kathy and her friends to contend merely with themselves by their own definitions, which effectively parallels the purposeless task for the Millennial audience as well.

Entering the 21 century brings us into the new and still-developing Generation Z, of which I myself am a part of. Though much of Generation Z’s future is still uncertain, there have

been countless historical events which will doubtlessly impact the adults we will become and will likely manifest itself in the literature we apply ourselves to. Great numbers of teenagers to young adults have turned out to Climate Change strikes and marches, with seventeen year old Greta Thunberg acting as a representative for her generation despite the constraints of her youth. This focus on the questionable state of the environment has likely manifested itself in sharp increase of dystopian literature which has grown in popularity of late— Suzanne Collins's “The Hunger Games” being one example, and James Dashner’s “The Maze Runner” as another, each New York Times Best Sellers. In each story the world as we know it has been razed to the ground, with gritty high stakes stories centered around teenage and young adult main characters for whom the fate of the world has been entrusted to. The parallels this has to the current world state seems indicative of the anxieties Generation Z feel over the impending future, as the question of whether enough can be done in time looms at the forefront of minds. Given the evidence presented in this paper, it seems clear that the key to stories which resonate strongly with the public is that a grain of the current anxieties must be instilled into the subsequent tale.

Though all that can be done as of now is to analyze and anticipate, a closer examination of the current world events which presented itself as a clear and present definition to their peer personality. 2015 marked the Supreme Court decision to strike down all state laws barring gay marriage, prompting the sudden ability for many to define their lives with newfound agency previously thought impossible. This event brings back into question of how the identity of queer citizens of America fit into the typically far more conservative society which has indoctrinated so many into a vicious cycle of repressed identities. As this strongly parallels much of the topics discussed in Tony Kushner’s “Angels in America,” there is then a generational precedent that

has been set regarding the popularity of stories preoccupied with the such personal crises which might now see a renewal of popularity.

The increase in gun violence presenting itself overwhelmingly in schools pitted adolescent Generation Z's against their unmoving and unresponsive administrations, prompting 2018's March for Our Lives, championed primarily by survivors of the Parkland High School shooting. The analysis of the Baby Boomer's unyielding political activism mirrors that of the current climate, indicating the possibility that novels similar to "Fahrenheit 451" with oppressive, totalitarian governments who sacrifice a few for the control of a whole may experience an upkick in popularity. Though ultimately these predictions may come to nothing, history's peculiar tendency to repeat itself indicates that a careful analysis of a country's past decade of peer personalities and the literature that subsequently rises to popularity can prove profitable to publishing houses and editors who must gamble upon the relatability of the stories they champion. If nothing else it reveals art's purpose as a means of articulating the complexities of human life, and lends itself as a helping hand to those unable to reconcile the people we now are with the people we have been.

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