Alcohol, Sports, and Masculinity in Hemingway’s Paris

Abstract: In the aftermath of the horrors of the First World War and during the years of American Prohibition, Paris became a cheap and popular tourist destination as well as the home to a new generation of aspiring writers from artists including Pablo Picasso, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, and Ernest Hemingway. Novels written during that period and memoirs remembering it have described the exciting, boozy community there, but none have been read as widely as Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Moveable Feast* (1964). This paper aims to discuss the ways in which alcohol and sports play a part in the community of American expatriates in 1920s Paris, and the reasons for and effects of this pleasure-seeking. As well, this paper examines how alcohol and sports affect the masculine identity of Hemingway in his works, words, and actions, and what this meant in the context of the Lost Generation at large.

Gertrude Stein was an established modernist writer and a staple of the writing scene in Paris by the time the First World War ended. As her younger American compatriots began to come from New York and Flanders alike to flood the cafés of Montparnasse, Stein already had enough experience in the city to agree with the judgement of a garage shop owner belittling an incompetent worker that this new wave was a *génération perdue*, “a lost generation.”[[1]](#footnote-1) She agreed that these “young people who served in the war” are pitiful and that they “have no respect for anything,” drinking themselves to death.[[2]](#footnote-2) She was using this phrase to refer in general to both foreigner and native Parisians and their apparent disillusioned and unambitious new nature, but it has since been used most commonly to refer to the expatriate creative community in Paris. This phrase became the title for this generation since appearing in its French form in the preface to Ernest Hemingway’s 1926 breakout classic *The Sun Also Rises*, but this explanation of its alleged origins came much later, in the published collection of sketches that make up his 1964 semi-memoir of 1920s Paris *A Moveable Feast*. A probably true anecdote from the often fictional stories of *A Moveable Feast* ,[[3]](#footnote-3) this term has defined the mood of how this period is remembered. Memoirs besides Hemingway’s such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Crack-Up* (1945) and Samuel Putnam’s *Paris was our Mistress* (1947)as well as more recent movies like Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris* (2011) and Alan Rudolph’s *The Moderns* (1988) promote the fantasy of the Lost Generation. Americans like Hemingway and Fitzgerald, torn up by the horrors of the First World War, fled to Paris to socialize with their artistic peers and to drink, and Paris welcomed their search for distraction.

The creators behind this period of artistic genius who are often remembered are mostly men: James Joyce, Sherwood Anderson, Pablo Picasso, Salvadore Dali, Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Igor Stravinsky, John Dos Passos and of course Hemingway himself. Gertrude Stein and Sylvia Beach are the most notable exceptions, yet even they are most often mentioned due to their aiding the above and others in a mentor and host, and a publisher and supplier, respectively. But these women and others of the Left Bank, such as Janet Flanner, Maria Jolas, Jean Rhys, Margaret Anderson, and Harriet Weaver, massively contributed to the literary and artistic progress of the time not just through their own work but by publishing the massive stream of great literature coming out of Paris.[[4]](#footnote-4) In her letters, Flanner left exquisite characterizations of the important figures of the time, and she recorded the world of women inside of and separate from the lives of the male figures, such as the complex cultural conversation around the subversive *garçonne* haircuts and modern outfits imagined by early visionaries like Coco Chanel and worn by French Parisian women.[[5]](#footnote-5) Popular memoirs such as Malcolm Cowley’s *Exile’s Return* ignore the presence of women not named Gertrude Stein and stresses instead the interactions and contributions of his male friends.[[6]](#footnote-6) These attitudes were brought to Paris not only by Hemingway but others in his generation. Alex Small, an American journalist, wrote about preferring Europe to the ‘feminized’ culture of America, where modern American women were hurting the morality of their country with “mischief making”.[[7]](#footnote-7) In France, the First World War had put women into the workface en masse to take the places of the men at the front, and this shift in gender roles induced anxiety among many soldiers. They felt pushed outside of home and emasculated by the cultural changes for which they had been absent. French soldiers returning home felt alienated from the “feminine world of security, sensuality, and light”, and the broader appreciation of this alienation is evident in the popularity at the time of such novels as Henri Barbusse’s *Le Feu* (1916), in which French soldiers are dismayed and horrified at the happiness their wives have found at home.[[8]](#footnote-8) After the war, French women stayed out in the public world, and were able to participate in the pleasures of Paris like never before.[[9]](#footnote-9) As Americans flocked to the city after the war, American women enjoyed this modern role in the traditional world of men.[[10]](#footnote-10) With the low value of the franc against the American dollar, American women and men were able to go to Paris and indulge cheaply.

In *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* (1936), Hemingway remembers his view of his impoverished peers who came to Paris: “Around that Place there were two kinds: the drunkards and the *sportifs*. The drunkards killed their poverty that way; the *sportifs* took it out in exercise.”[[11]](#footnote-11) While *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* is a fictional story, as with most works of Hemingway, the parallels to the author’s real life are only barely hidden. Hemingway, while certainly a drinker himself, was quick to pass judgement on the overindulgence of his peers. In *A Moveable Feast*, F. Scott Fitzgerald is crippled by alcohol addiction spurred on by the bad influence, in Hemingway’s eyes, of his wife, Zelda, who “was very jealous of Scott’s work” and who was not above “interfering” with his work in order to not drink alone.[[12]](#footnote-12) And in *The Sun Also Rises*, the first chapters introduce the late-night drinking of Hemingway’s generation as their main social activity: upon the drunken entrance of Jake Barnes’ friend at half-past four in the morning, waking him from his sleep, he immediately and wordlessly begins to prepare two glasses for brandy and soda.[[13]](#footnote-13) This presence of alcohol in the real and literary Paris of Hemingway was accompanied by the presence of sport as well, and while in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* the “drunkards” are distinct from the “*sportifs*,” in Hemingway, they were one and the same. Aside from simply being instruments of distraction for Hemingway and other Lost Generation writers, alcohol and sports defined the lessons of the 1920s and together formed a single element that was a useful social tool in reality and a useful metaphor in his work and the work of others.

Hemingway’s writing of alcohol and sports helped to inspire the interest of other writers and tourists, and to a lesser extent, these qualities even inspired visits to Paris to seek this kind of life. This period was when alcohol and sports began their specifically masculine quality in Hemingway’s written work as well as in his ego and outlook. In the 2014 edition of *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway’s grandson Sean Hemingway mentions the immediate success of the novel and how people have come up to him speaking of a desire “to see the Paris of Jake Barnes and Brett Ashley and watch the bullfights at Pamplona.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Despite a probable exaggeration from familial pride, the impact of *The Sun Also Rises* on American tourism is undeniable, and the novel’s emphasis on the drinking, travel, and sport culture of Paris in these *Années Folles* is suitable for such a hedonistic period.

Accessibility by rail, sea and air as well as the “extensive opportunities for social and professional networking” through the cheap cost of living in Paris had made the city very attractive for Americans abroad.[[15]](#footnote-15) Paris was a center for publishers and journals; that had been one of the reasons Hemingway had been encouraged to travel to Paris by fellow writer Sherwood Anderson in the first place.[[16]](#footnote-16) Hemingway’s 1926 *The Sun Also Rises* was well received by enough of the literary community that he had become a literary celebrity and many readers became enamoured with the European life quite soon after its publication.[[17]](#footnote-17) Obviously, the entirety of the increase in tourism however cannot be traced singularly to its 1926 publication: while around fifteen thousand Americans annually visited Paris in the years before August 1914, by 1925 the city was becoming overrun with four hundred thousand tourists annually.[[18]](#footnote-18) By 1927, travel books by Robert Forrest Wilson and Bruce Reynolds aimed at American tourists had begun to get published, emphasizing not the Louvre or the Eiffel Tower but the fact that “Prohibition is three thousand miles away.”[[19]](#footnote-19) And the number of American permanent residents in Paris soared from 8,000 in 1920 to an estimated 40,000 by the second half of the decade.[[20]](#footnote-20) However, the scathing criticism from home vilified expatriates as “escapists who selfishly renounced civic responsibilities,” a judgement of “Paris dalliances” Fitzgerald later echoed with regret in “Babylon Revisited” (1931).[[21]](#footnote-21) Fitzgerald’s protagonist sees his life fall apart because of his hedonistic choices in Paris in a tragic arc that ironically mirrors Hemingway’s opinion that drinking in the Paris period brought the beginning of the end of Fitzgerald’s promising career. Outside of his peers, Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises* also inspired a wave of young travelers to embrace the scandalous life depicted. Malcolm Cowley, a contemporary American writer and a noted recorder of the Lost Generation, described this wave as “a craze- young men tried to get as imperturbably drunk as the hero, young women of good families took a succession of lovers in the same heartbroken fashion.”[[22]](#footnote-22)

Alcohol plays a very large part in the whole of Hemingway’s work, yet drinking in 1920s Paris was particularly important and unique on a generational level. Looking at one list of renowned twentieth century American writers, about one third were known for their drinking, yet the cohort of American writers born between 1888 and 1900, who then came into their twenties from 1909 to 1921, were half of the heavy drinkers on this list.[[23]](#footnote-23) These college-educated writers came of age at a time when the American temperance movement was primarily conservative and traditional Southern Protestant. These progressive, radical students might have connected heavy drinking with political dissent. Certainly in the painting community there was a heavy connection to alcohol: in 1946, Anne Roe studied 20 “eminent painters,” finding that none were teetotalers and many, especially the avant-garde, drank heavily.[[24]](#footnote-24) At that time, France had the highest recorded alcohol consumption per capita in the world, and so these drinking writers were warmly welcomed into a strong drinking culture.[[25]](#footnote-25) They met constantly in cafés for casual daytime drinking and continued to bars and nightclubs such as the Dingo American Bar, where Hemingway and Fitzgerald first met.[[26]](#footnote-26) Drinking was a very important way to be social and stay connected in this world, and the prevalence of alcohol in *A Moveable Feast* and *The Sun also Rises* is obvious: in the former, there are over thirty different types of alcohol mentioned from wines to aperitifs, as Hemingway never forgets to set a scene without a mention of the drink in hand.[[27]](#footnote-27) In *The Sun Also Rises*, the meandering characters are seemingly always in pursuit of drink and a good time is set by the ability to get a drink. Settling into a bar, answering the observation, “This is a good place,” Jake Barnes concurs,“There’s a lot of liquor.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

The metaphorical use of alcohol helped define the period as one of its own, and in turn created the myth of the *Années Folles* of the Lost Generation. Alcohol is remembered in so many memoirs because of its versatility: “like Chanel’s famous little black dress, it goes with everything.”[[29]](#footnote-29). It can be celebration and joy like the readers of *The Sun Also Rises* would like to believe, or it can be a sad necessity as it is for the Fitzgeralds. Hemingway particularly uses drunkenness to signify the wasted talent of F. Scott Fitzgerald who, at the time of Hemingway’s writing in the late 1950s, had been dead for over a decade. Hemingway’s preoccupation is not with the prevalence of alcohol across every layer of life for him, his peers, and his characters, but rather his preoccupation was with whether his troubled friend was drunk.[[30]](#footnote-30) Hemingway would judge those he saw as drunks for the rest of his life as harshly as he would attack any that accused him of the same illness, a habit that became a clear sign of deep denial as he drank more and more in his later life. Morley Callaghan, an aspiring young writer and fellow amateur boxer whom Hemingway drew to Paris, had felt a particularly strong impression of the masculine-edged competitiveness that had been growing in Hemingway since they had met in Toronto years earlier:

Though I kept my half-filled glass in my hand, and Ernest could see it was still half-filled, each time he ordered he would say, “Are you sure you won’t have one?” The waiter leaves the saucer that comes with each drink on the table, so he can count them up for you when you are leaving and show you what you owe him. Soon Ernest had a pile of seven saucers to my three. When he had left us, I turned to Loretto. “Well, how do you like him?”

“Very much. You can’t help liking him. Tell me, has he changed at all?”

“No, he hasn’t changed at all - except for one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“Didn’t you notice about the beer and how he made it plain I couldn’t keep up with him? Now he just has to be the champ.”[[31]](#footnote-31)

Hemingway’s pride and identity relied on his ability to if not be dominant over other men, then at least appear to other men to be dominant over other men. This pride also ran into his discipline towards his writing. His obsession with finding good places to write was driven by a desire to find a place in which he could find “good and severe discipline” to work.[[32]](#footnote-32) Hemingway and other writers were aware of the risk to productivity these activities could become, and they would gossip about each other’s inability to keep sober; Harold Stearns and Robert McAlmon were identified as warnings for their over-indulgence of Parisian bars and cafés.[[33]](#footnote-33) Hemingway however found a balance like nobody else. He claimed that it was because he engaged in such testing physical conditioning that his metabolism allowed him to drink so much, and would recommend that when done in parallel, activity and drinking could be taken to any extreme.[[34]](#footnote-34)

Certainly the extreme self-confidence that was growing in Paris was a result of a growing masculine identity, framed by natural personality and traditionally masculine activities and emphasized by his writing. But even after decades of drinking, Hemingway still remembered his immediate denial of Stein’s accusation that he drank too much, and included it in *A Moveable Feast* without self-reflection.[[35]](#footnote-35)As he relied on alcohol not only to prove his masculinity but also simply because of his addiction to it, he would continue to drink after Paris, and as he drank more, his characters drank more. His obliviousness to his own problem began to reflect in his writing, and by 1950, several of his characters reveal the large amounts of alcohol he was drinking daily. In *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950),Colonel Cantwell, Hemingway’s most poorly-hid depiction of himself in one of his works, has a cartoonishly out-of-touch alcohol tolerance; this aged, terminally ill protagonist with a cardiac condition casually downs between 24 and 28 ounces of alcohol in gin cocktails and three bottles of wine before making love twice in a gondola and waking up the next morning without any hint of a hangover.[[36]](#footnote-36) While his time in Paris is not affected by the worst of his alcoholism, this period certainly shows the beginnings of this strong, egotistical connection between drinking and virility.

Focused on a pleasure-driven pilgrimage to watch bullfights, *The Sun Also Rises* has a legacy as a “sporty” novel.[[37]](#footnote-37) The novel’s American expatriates end up watching bulls in Pamplona but boxing, tennis, football, bicycle racing and fishing feature heavily in the novel, and references of masculinity are constantly tied in. In a quiet fishing episode, Jake Barnes is embarrassed by the smaller size of his fish compared to his companion’s in a phallic analogy that reinforces the theme of masculine participation and observation that runs throughout the bullfight scenes.[[38]](#footnote-38) As described in *A Moveable Feast*,Hemingway was a passionate boxer who claims to have taught Ezra Pound at least the “basic moves,” and he was asked by the Toronto Star to look after Larry Gains, a Canadian heavyweight whose boxing match he describes in detail.[[39]](#footnote-39) Jake Barnes’ fancy for tennis reflects Hemingway’s, who shared the court with several writers, including Ezra Pound.[[40]](#footnote-40) Historian Thomas Bauer asserts: “The practice of certain sports, such as tennis or boxing, likewise enabled [Hemingway] to build friendships with American artists living in Paris who, in turn, helped him move forward and boost his self-confidence.”[[41]](#footnote-41) Besides participating, Hemingway became so involved with the horse racing and betting community, and especially with winning, that he wrote later of “getting too mixed up with them” in that it got in the way of his work.[[42]](#footnote-42)

Hemingway’s love of sport and sport spectating was a major motivator for his extensive travel out from Paris on short escapades, such as a skiing trip to Austria that ended in his first divorce.[[43]](#footnote-43) A Pamplona trip in *The Sun Also Rises* was based on Hemingway's trip to Spain in 1925, and it was over a shared love of Spain that he bonded with another American writer, John Dos Passos, a bond that would bring both back to cover the Spanish Civil War in 1937.[[44]](#footnote-44) Many Lost Generation writers embraced Paris’s location as a central home base from which to explore the rest of Europe, and the characterization of Paris in *The Sun Also Rises* as a home base for shorter vacations across the continent drew many to follow this example from Paris to the bullfights in Spain. Bullfighting is central to the novel, and the popularity of the novel has insured that, as one source claims, “Hemingway has done more than anyone to foster worldwide understanding and appreciation of the bullfight.”[[45]](#footnote-45)

His renown in the boxing community of Paris was inflated both passively by myths and rumours of extraordinary (and false) boxing matches against professional opponents, such as knocking out the middleweight champion of France, and actively by his enthusiasm in offering coaching to anyone slightly interested.[[46]](#footnote-46) Morley Callaghan claims in his memoir that his ego in boxing was particularly tender, claiming that when the junior writer was able to knock Hemingway to the floor in front of Fitzgerald, a small victory in a friendly afternoon practice, Hemingway exploded in anger and stormed off.[[47]](#footnote-47) Winning at drinking and at boxing was important to Hemingway’s sense of his own masculinity.

Hemingway’s fascination with gender reveals itself as his most influential and appreciated works from his time in Paris, *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) consider the effects of the war on gender roles of his generation. His time in Paris, remembered in Lost Generation memoirs, including his posthumous memoir of the time *A Moveable Feast* (1964), as well as reflected in his own and others’ work, was spent defining his own masculinity. To this end, the culture of drinking, travel, and alcohol that defined the experience of 1920s Paris for himself and his peers worked as attempts to reinforce his masculine image of himself. His actions as part of the wider Lost Generation writers in France reinforce gendered assumptions in travel, drinking, and sports at that time.

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1. Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*: *The Restored Edition*, (New York: Scribner, 2009), 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Hemingway originally planned on prefacing the book with “This book is fiction.” In various working forms, this can be seen in “Fragments” in the Restored Edition, 229-232. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Shari Benstock, “From the Left Bank to the Upper East Side: Janet Flanner’s Letters from Paris,” *Women of the Left Bank* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986), 111. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid, 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Alex Small, *Paris Tribune*, July 10, 1930. From Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*, 29-30. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mary Louise Roberts, *Civilization Without Sexes: Reconstructing Gender in Post War France, 1917-1927* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 27-29. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Brooke L Blower, *Becoming Americans in Paris: Transatlantic Politics and Culture Between the World Wars* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 137. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid, 33. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Ernest Hemingway, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro* *and Other Stories* (New York: Scribner, 1995), 20. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, 154, 158. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Ernest Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*, (New York: Scribner, 2014), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, xi. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Blower, *Becoming Americans in Paris,* 225. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Samuel Putnam, *Paris Was Our Mistress*, (New York: Viking Press, 1947), 127-128. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Mary McAuliffe, *When Paris Sizzled: The 1920s Paris of Hemingway, Chanel, Cocteau, Cole Porter, Josephine Baker, and Their Friends*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016), 21. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Allyson Nadia Field, "Expatriate Lifestyle as Tourist Destination: The Sun Also Rises and Experiential Travelogues of the Twenties," *The Hemingway Review* 25, no. 2 (2006): 29. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Blower, *Becoming Americans in Paris*, 6. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Ibid., 213, 214. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Malcolm Cowley, *Exile’s Return* 2nd edn., (1934; rept. New York: Viking Press, 1951), 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Robin Room, “A “Reverence for Strong Drink”: The Lost Generation and the Elevation of Alcohol in American Culture,” *Journal of Studies on Alcohol* 45, vol. 6 (1984): 540-541. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid, 542. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, 126. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Susan F. Beegel, "Hemingway's Gastronomique: A Guide to Food and Drink in "A Moveable Feast" (with Glossary)," *Hemingway Review* 4, no. 1 (Fall, 1984): 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Hemingway, *The Sun Also Rises*, 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Marc Dolan, "The (Hi)story of Their Lives: Mythic Autobiography and "The Lost Generation"." *Journal of American Studies* 27, no. 1 (1993): 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Dolan, “The Good Writer’s Tale: The Fictional Method of Hemingway’s “Scott Fitzgerald,” *The Hemingway Review* 12, no. 2 (1993): 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Morley Callaghan, *That Summer in Paris*, (Holstein, ON: Exile Editions, 2013/14), 115. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, 22. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Room, “A Reverence for Strong Drink,” 543. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Tom Dardis, *The Thirsty Muse: Alcohol and the American Writer*, (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989), 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Dardis, *The Thirsty Muse*, 189. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. David Vanderwerken, "Another Fix on Hemingway, Sport and the Twenties," *Aethlon* 6, no. 2 (Spring 1989), 5. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. Thomas Strychacz, *Hemingway’s Theaters of Masculinity*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 78-79. [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, p. 88, 193-198. [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, 102. [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Thomas Bauer, “Paris in the 1920s: Hemingway’s city of sport.” *Sport in History* 3, no. 39 (2019): 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. Ibid., 260; Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, 51. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast*, 122-123. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. Brooke L. Blower, *Becoming Americans in Paris: Transatlantic Politics and Culture Between the World Wars*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 216. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. Edward Lewine, *Death and the Sun: A Matador’s Season in the Heart of Spain*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2005), 162. [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. Callaghan, *That Summer in Paris*, 250. [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. Ibid., 255. [↑](#footnote-ref-47)