HiLL PUBLISHING

Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science, 2025, 9(7), 1314-1318
https://www.hillpublisher.com/Journals/jhass/
ISSN Online: 2576-0548
ISSN Print: 2576-0556

The Positive Attitude in Post-war American Literature: A Comparison Between Hemingway and Ferlinghetti

Yi'er Xie

Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou 350000, Fujian, China.

How to cite this paper: Yi'er Xie. (2025) The Positive Attitude in Post-War American Literature: A Comparison between Hemingway and Ferlinghetti. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 9(7), 1314-1318.
DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2025.07.012

Received: May 29, 2025
Accepted: June 27, 2025
Published: July 24, 2025

***Corresponding author:** Yi'er Xie, Fujian Normal University, Fuzhou 350000, Fujian, China.

Abstract

This paper mainly focuses on the positive attitude of two American writers, Ernest Miller Hemingway and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who belong to the Lost Generation and the Beat Generation, respectively. To be specific, this paper will explore how their works—*A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* and "The World Is a Beautiful Place"—embody a tendency of resilience and positivity amid a chaotic world with existential crises. Though both are positive, there are still some differences between the two writers. A comparison between them and their inclinations will be made to find out the similarities and differences between the positive attitudes in American literature after the two world wars. Contributing factors will be explored so as to see how the chaotic and disordered societies, which normally bring about negative and rebellious ideas at that time, ultimately lead to their positive attitudes respectively. The profound implication of the word "positive," which contains more complex meanings than it literally does, will also be taken into consideration.

Keywords

Ernest Hemingway; Lawrence Ferlinghetti; Post-war American Literature; Positive Attitude

1. Introduction

Generally speaking, the twentieth century witnessed the two world wars as well as their lasting aftermath in many aspects. Both development and destruction came along with the wars, bringing about unique features to the writers as well as their writings during that period.

Around World War I, America was in its "gilded age" in the 1920s. Americans living in those days often felt blindly confident about money, about their life, and about their future. Their aim of life seemed no longer to be of actualizing the great "American Dream" but all about being rich and famous; however, they could not help but feel an underlying sense of void behind the hustle and bustle on the surface. Along with the disillusionment of beliefs and distortion of values came a pathetic fate of spiritual lost. In 1917, America entered the first World War. The sense of individual discouragement became noticeable features in the description of Americans living in that period. The Great War triggered off people's reflection on human being and therefore led to the formation of what we called the Lost Generation. Later, from the 1930s to the 1940s, the world witnessed the World War II. The impact on the moral aspect was even greater than the loss in material fields. While the economy was growing at a rapid pace, the society fell in turmoil.

As for the post-war American literature, there were several aspects to be paid attention to. The Lost Generation and the Beat Generation are generally quite similar with one another since they are both products of trauma caused by great wars. But each of them also has its unique features.

Though the 1920s were called the Jazz Age and everything seemed to be booming, it was not the case within. The Lost Generation generally felt disappointed among material comforts with the pain and bitterness brought by the war and inevitably fell into disillusionment. In the eye of the Lost Generation, the old values are hard to maintain and the civilization of the new era had gone mad. In face of the disillusionment with the war, the disrespect for the law, and the great uncertainty ahead, the Lost Generation became confused, wondering what could be the meaning of life if they were born to bear all these bitter things (Chang, 2008).

The themes that the Beat Generation involved were broader than that of their predecessors. Fewer articles would carry intense political tendency. Though the war was still cruel, there was less voice questioning if it was justifiable considering its anti-fascist nature. Writers who were active in that era began to consider more from the point of the fate and essence of human and their relationship with the highly materialized and disordered society (Wang, 2014).

Post-war American literature is an area that has been studied by many scholars; however, the uniqueness of specific individuals and the relationship between their inner world and the outside society still need to be explored. This paper will focus on two writers, Ernest Hemingway and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, who respectively falls into the period of Lost Generation and Beat Generation. Factors that contributed to their positive tendency will be looked into and comparisons will also be made to see the differences existing in their perceptions.

2. "Grace under Pressure" in Hemingway's Code Hero

Ernest Miller Hemingway is one of the world-famous American writers and is typically acknowledged as a representative writer of the Lost Generation in America. According to existing studies, Hemingway's writing career can be roughly divided into three phases.

In the first period, 1923-1929, the theme of lost and individual helplessness dominates his early writings. From 1929 to 1945, the iceberg principle was notable in his writings. In the third phase, Hemingway's Code Hero became more conspicuous in his writings. As he kept the peace at surface and digested the bitterness inside his mind, his reflection on attitude toward life became mature, and along with it grew the Hemingway's Code Hero, which refers to the typical man's image shaped by Hemingway, who embodies courage and always willing to face up to his life challenges, despite the possibly cruel consequences (Moddelmog & del Gizzo, 2013).

The concept of "grace under pressure" was actually a typical feature both of Hemingway's Code Hero and of Hemingway himself. The Code Hero in his writings are tough guys with infinite potential, as can be seen in the typical example of The Old Man and The Sea (Zhong, 2024). Understandbly, the Hemingway's Code Hero is a perfect feature setting Hemingway aside from his contemporaries through his positive tendency, which was quite valuable in his days. His stories typically remind us about the spirit, dignity and perseverance as a human, which compels us to be tougher than before (Farooqui, 2021).

Take Hemingway's short story A Clean and Well-Lighted Place as an example. Three characters are mainly involved. A younger waiter stands for those who lost their faith and ambition, focusing on his material life. An old man stands for those who can sense the feeling of lost but finds no way to deal with it. To some extent, another character, the elder waiter, can be seen as having the primary feature of a Hemingway's Code Hero. He can sense the desire for material contentment of the younger waiter. He can also feel the same way with the old man when it comes to the sense of loss. But unlike the old man, the elder waiter is aware of the fact that he should find a neat and clean place, which is the café, to find spiritual comfort and inner order for himself. He has both the consciousness and willingness to get rid of "nada (nothingness)". From that perspective, he can be seen as having the primary feature of Hemingway's Hero, presenting Hemingway's tendency of being positive and strong in face of an uncertain life.

In this short story, it is easy to find the concept of existentialism and the idea of nada(nothingness), which concerns with the topic of existential crisis. Existential crisis is a state of mind when an individual questions the meaning of life and the very existence of himself. Such psychological crisis can commonly be seen in the Lost Generation; however, the existential crisis does not necessarily lead to a negative consequence. It is an objective dilemma which many individuals are likely to be caught in when entering into a new era or adapting to a different kind of life, while everyone's life still depends on their respective choices.

3. Ferlinghetti as "A Tonic for a World"

As a distinguished American poet and founder of City Lights Booksellers and Publishers, Lawrence Ferlinghetti was famous for his collections of poetry. Compared with Hemingway, Ferlinghetti seemed to be more mysterious. In studies involving him, more emphases were laid upon his Beat Generation contemporaries; however, Ferlinghetti was quite instrumental in his days. Without his City Lights Bookshop, the Beat Generation writers would fail to voice their perceptions of society and ideas about life.

Compared with Hemingway, Ferlinghetti had less desire for adventure. War seemed to have less direct impact on Lawrence Ferlinghetti, which may for the relatively justifiable anti-fascism in World War II, but after all, since he was part of the post-war society, there were still traces of anti-war sentiment in his poems. After his studies abroad, Ferlinghetti was active in the field of political and social life back in San Francisco. This place, for one time being the financial center and a top choice for immigrants, once served as the center of movements like the Beat movement and the struggle for Civil Rights (Xiang, 2010). Such living atmosphere offered Ferlinghetti the possibility of taking on his social responsibility and getting responses from the local populace. Ferlinghetti was playing such an integral role in advancing the poetry there.

His ideas could be seen in his practice of opening up the City Lights Bookshop, which was opened in 1953 by Ferlinghetti and his friend. The bookshop soon became a forum for the Beat writers, poets, and painters who failed to find a channel to convey their ideas and present their work, serving as a gathering place. It was through City Lights that Allen Ginsberg published his Howl and Other Poems, which later became outstanding among the Beat Generation work.

Since the books published by City Lights contained ideas that were not accepted by the mainstream, Ferlinghetti was once arrested on charges of printing and selling indecent material; however, he got support by many great writers. Finally, he won the case and therefore energized the San Francisco renaissance and the movement mounted by the Beat Generation through this victory (Zheng, 2017). Thereafter, Ferlinghetti went further on the road of running his City Light bookstore and in the meantime being a poet, bringing influence to the general public. Undoubtedly, Ferlinghetti and his City Lights Bookshop served as an instrumental and irreplaceable role in his days, offering people the spiritual strength to face up to the disordered society after the World War II.

Despite his close connection with the Beat Generation writers, Ferlinghetti's ideas shown in his poems were quite different from theirs. Unlike typical Beat Generation ideas which were full of alienation from the society by advocating personal release, Ferlinghetti focused on the trivial aspects in everyday life, tended to his home and bookstore, spoke to and received favorable responses from the general public.

Through Ferlinghetti's poems, it seemed that he can easily speak out the essence and truth of quite common experience. Ferlinghetti used juxtaposition to put forward both good and evil things which were quite common in his days, but forming contrast in the readers' minds. Beautiful as the world might be, evil things like death and starvation still exist. These repeated twists and turns lead the readers to reconsider the seemingly common concepts in their everyday life, gaining a reflection of this world from a different perspective. The content was neither so simple as to be meaningless nor to be obscure and difficult to understand. It was in this way that Ferlinghetti stuck to his idea that art has the spiritual power that could influence the world and should be an accessible experience of each and every man. In this way, literature can be equipped with the intangible power to change the existing society, from the starting point of affecting every individual in it.

4. Differences between the Positive Attitudes of Hemingway and Ferlinghetti

The tendency of Hemingway and Ferlinghetti to remain positive in face of the grim reality is what sets them apart from their Lost or Beat contemporaries; however, their similar positive tendencies also showed slight differences. For Hemingway, his positive tendency tends to leave its impact on the individual's own life. He fully affirmed the important role of ideals and beliefs in the period of people's decadence and depression (Wang, 2025). The strength serves as the "clean and well-lighted place" in people's inner world, providing the courage and dignity to remain the order of mind in a world torn by wars. As for Ferlinghetti, his positive tendency seems to be for the general public, and to the society at large. His positive tendency goes further than Hemingway's, not limiting itself to having an impact solely on the individual, but trying to influence society as a whole. City Lights Bookshop can attest to this very well. Poetry is not all about the pleasant things, but about everything, whether rosy or loathsome, that can touch the minds and souls of different types of readers.

These two similar but at the same time differently-oriented positive tendencies form a contrast through which we can get a glimpse of the American writers living respectively around the two world wars. Around the World War I, Americans were more uncertain about their future. The conflict existed mostly in the issue of self-perception among the Americans. The Hemingway's Code Hero served as an enlightenment for individuals to find their meaning of life. While around the World War II, part of the emphasis was shifted to the issue of human nature, to the future of human-being. Ferlinghetti's poems served as a real ray of light into a chaotic city, bringing about the calling from literary world for the society at large.

From the discussion, it is not difficult to notice a hidden sense of contrast through all the cases discussed. The development and destruction coming along with the world wars, Ernest Hemingway's depressive suicide and the heroic feature of his characters, and the juxtaposition of good and evil things in Lawrence Ferlinghetti's poem "The World Is a Beautiful Place" are all clues signifying some seemingly paradoxical contrast, which actually leads to the transformability of the interpretation of "positive attitude".

It's typically considered that a positive attitude shall be shown through an optimistic discourse or the great expectation of a rosy future; however, one has to admit that no one can be truly positive without knowing what exactly "negative" means. Acknowledging the existence of negative things often comes before one shows his fortitude.

For both Hemingway and Ferlinghetti, their positive attitude came from their willingness to be aware of the authentic account of their society, from their wish to overcome the depressive feeling even if it would be quite hard, and also from their aspiration to write it down for more people to feel it. Describing the negative things is for the purpose of knowing them better and therefore beat them with the fortitude and goodness in human nature. That's what makes them truly "positive".

5. Conclusion

To conclude, both Ernest Hemingway and Lawrence Ferlinghetti played quite unique roles in their own days. They went far beyond the label that normally bound them and perfectly presented their positive tendency in face of their chaotic and disordered society.

Ernest Hemingway was a tough man showing considerable fortitude even after witnessing the pains and tears in the battlefield in person. He expressed through his Code Hero the courage needed to support oneself get over the crisis, especially the spiritual one, which should be the doubt about the meaning about one's life. As for Lawrence Ferlinghetti, a great poet, artist, and publisher in his time, he took active part in social activities, making huge contributing to many social movements. His understanding of the redeeming function of poetry shows his wish to make a difference through art and the goodness in human nature.

Both Hemingway and Ferlinghetti maintained the tendency to be positive while observing the dark side of the era in which they lived. The difference between the positive attitudes of these two writers can be summed up as Hemingway leaves impact more on individual lives, while Ferlinghetti brings about impact more on the society at large.

The underlying meaning of "positive" goes far beyond the literal one. To be positive does not simply means to be optimistic about life. It needs an objective understanding about both the positive and the negative side. To see the negative things was not for the purpose of being a rebellious insurgent, but in the expectation that one can gain the awareness and energy to take a turn for the better through the calling of literature and of the goodness in human nature. Although positive attitudes do not directly provide a solution to the problem, it at least makes it possible, and may also stimulate one's potential to be tough and invincible.

References

Chang, Y. (2008). A survey of American literature (3rd ed.). Nankai University Press.

Farooqui, R. (2021). An analysis of Santiago's character in Hemingway's The old man and the sea: A saga of indomitable human spirit. *International Journal of Linguistics*, *Literature and Translation*, *4*(5), 184-188. https://doi.org/10.32996/ijllt.2021.4.5.20

Moddelmog, D. A., & del Gizzo, S. (2013). Ernest Hemingway in context. Cambridge University Press.

Wang, X. (2025). The French writing of 'the lost generation'—Hemingway and Fitzgerald as an example. *Journal of Mudanjiang University*, *34*(1), 71-78. https://doi.org/10.15907/j.cnki.23-1450.2025.01.009

Wang, Y. (2014). A study of evolution of American war novels [PhD thesis, Jilin University].

Xiang, L. (2010). Post-war American intellectuals and public space: A case study of Lawrence Ferlinghetti. *Comparative Literature: East & West*, *12*(1), 79-88. https://doi.org/10.1080/25723618.2010.12015381

Zheng, Y. (2017). Poetic idea and practice of Lawrence Ferlinghetti. *Foreign Languages and Cultures*, *2*, 1-8. https://doi.org/10.19967/j.cnki.flc.2017.02.001

Zhong, Y. (2024). Elegance under the waves: Life outlook implied in *The old man and the sea*. *Education Journal*, *7*(2), 144-149. https://doi.org/10.31058/J.EDU.2023.72017