Themes of the Lost Generation

The term *Lost Generation* was coined (first used) by an American writer living in France, Gertrude Stein, to refer to a group of American literary notables who lived in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s. Significant members included Ernest Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Gertrude Stein herself. Hemingway likely popularized the term, quoting Stein (“You are all a lost generation”) as an epigraph (summary) to his novel, *The Sun Also Rises*. Stein herself attributed the expression to a French mechanic lamenting what the war had done to the country's youth.

Usually, the term is used for the generation of young people coming of age in the United States during and shortly after World War I. For this reason, the generation is sometimes known as the *World War I Generation* or the *Roaring 20s Generation*. In Europe, they are most often known as the *Generation of 1914*, named after the year World War I began. In France, the country in which many expatriates settled, they are called the *Génération au Feu*, the Generation of Fire. Broadly, the term is often used to refer to the younger literary modernists.

William Strauss and Neil Howe in their book *Generations* list this generation's birth years as 1883 to 1900. Their typical grandparents were the Gilded Generation; their parents were the Progressive Generation and Missionary Generation. Their children were the G.I. Generation and Silent Generation; their typical grandchildren were Baby Boomers. This generation is not yet fully ancestral (some are still alive); with the current youngest members being age 106 in 2006, the "Lost Generation" can be expected to last another 10 years or so.

The "Lost Generation" were said to be disillusioned by the large number of casualties of the First World War, cynical, disdainful of the Victorian notions of morality and manners of their elders. This over-generalization is true for some individuals of the generation and not true of others. It was somewhat common among members of this group to complain that American artistic culture lacked the breadth of European work—leading many members to spend large amounts of time in Europe—and/or that all topics worth treating in a literary work had already been covered. Nevertheless, this same period saw an explosion in American literature and in art, which is now often considered to include some of the greatest literary classics produced by American writers. This generation also produced the first flowering of jazz music, arguably the first distinctly American art form. Jazz is know for its inconsistent format, use of improvisation, and the tendency of many musicians to be totally self taught and experimental.

Many “Lost Generation” thinkers looked for a new world view or philosophy to replace the one that had failed them so miserably going into the Great War. One of these was Existentialism, a philosophical movement that views human existence as having a set of underlying themes and traits, such as anxiety, dread, freedom, awareness of death, and consciousness of existing (i.e. you think a lot about why we are here). They thought that existence cannot be reduced to or be explained by a natural-scientific approach. Existentialism tends to view human beings as subjects in an indifferent, objective, often vague or unclear and even "absurd" universe in which meaning is not provided by a 'natural order, but rather is created by human beings' actions and interpretations.

One expression of this was in the arts, in which surrealism began as a movement. In paintings, surrealist pieces often include distortions of reality and images that most people would associate more with dream states than the conscious mind. Painters like the Spanish Pablo Picasso and Salvador Dali represent this movement. One way of thinking about surrealists is to recognize that their arts show a perception of reality that is “distorted” yet reflects the existentialist idea that reality is only what you make of it. At various times individual surrealists aligned themselves with communism and anarchism to advance radical political and social change, arguing that only transformed institutions of work, the family, and education could make a difference.
Another part of the “Lost Generation’s” search was for a new political model, since many of them saw part of their parents’ failure to be political. This, plus the desperation born of the worldwide economic depressions that followed the war, led to experiments in fascism, communism, socialism (totalitarian government forms) led by strong individualists who formed the reality of their nations’ politics into their own visions (reflecting existential thinking).

Lost Generation Questions
Please answer on a separate sheet in complete sentences.

1. Who were the Lost Generation writers?
2. Why were they “lost”? How does it relate to their experiences with WW I?
3. Where did most of them work?
4. What philosophy did many of them adopt and how did it work?
5. What is surrealism?
6. What political movement did the Lost Generation align themselves with, and why?

Figure 1: Salvador Dali’s Persistence of Memory (1931) shows the dream-like qualities that surreal art is known for.

Figure 2: Picasso’s Three Dancers (1925) shows the influence of African art forms and Picasso’s willingness to experiment with forms outside the “norm”.