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Contemporary American Literature: The Long Form

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*Before Sunrise* As a Product of the 1990s

The 1990s were a pivotal time for the world. The Berlin Wall had just fallen. The Cold War between the United States and Soviet Union, which had smoldered for almost seventy years, had finally drawn to a close with the fall of the latter. With the use of the Internet spreading like wildfire outside of the military and academia for the first time, the world was binding and becoming more connected, and, perhaps most importantly, Generation X was poised to make their first genuine efforts at running the world. With the massive shifts in politics, communication, and globalization that would lead to what we know as the contemporary world, it was an easy time for a person to get lost in the machinations of entities larger than himself. In this respect, I do not believe that a film like *Before Sunrise* could have been made in any other time, certainly not in any time before. *Before Sunrise* is distinctly a product of its time period in the way it deals with young adult angst and confusion.

One of the primary themes we see surfacing around *Before Sunrise* is the idea of the characters being confused. Not only are many of their conversations inconclusive, but the very premise of the film centers around confusion. Neither Jesse nor Céline really knows why they're walking around talking. Ostensibly, it is a way for Jesse to kill time, but why this specific way? Surely, there are better ways to kill time in Vienna than walking around talking to a stranger. The next possible answer would be because they enjoyed spending time together. This is true, but spending twelve hours walking around Vienna at night hardly seems like the logical next step when an exchange of contact information is readily available. Then why? I would make the argument that it is simply because they do not know what else to do.

To understand this idea, it is necessary to understand a bit about generations, specifically

Generation X. One of the defining characteristics of Generation X (the generation to which these characters belong, being born presumably in the early seventies) is a lack of direction and motivation. Why? The generation preceding Generation X was the Baby Boomers, whose culture and counter culture were largely defined by united movements of protest and political radicalism. The Baby Boomers can be said to have been flexing their muscles against the constraints of their World War II-era, military parents while retaining some of their characteristics specifically, unity. The Baby Boomers were united for causes, but individualistic in spirit. The results were that when they raised Generation X children, they raised them on a culture of pure individualism, leading Generation X to become a fragmented generation. The machinations of international politics were too large for the individual to interfere with. As such, compared to the Baby Boomers, Generation X is characterized by a feeling of loss and powerlessness, angst, laziness, and confusion in the face of life. We see this very specifically Generation X brand of impotent rage surface through Céline's diatribe about how there are wars going on only a few hundred kilometers from where they're walking, but they can't do anything about it.

Jesse and Céline both have different approaches to dealing with their Generation X angst. Jesse tends to be more affable, letting it seem to roll off his back. He isn't affected by the politics of the time, we see him repeatedly care little and less for the destitute. He is simply not interested. At least, that is how it seems on the surface. In reality, we see that Jesse actually feels just as lost as any other member of his generation. The reason he is wandering Europe to begin with is because his girlfriend left him, and with her went his sense of purpose. As such, he continues wandering Europe because he doesn't have anything else to go back to. Céline is a bit different. Her angst, as previously mentioned, is a bit more traditional. A feeling of loneliness and powerlessness to change anything and a search for meaning in her existence which leads to her fear of death, which is first brought up in the first ten minutes of the film and is continually referenced throughout the run time. Both of these individuals lack purpose. They lack motivation, and they lack any definite sense of what ought to be done owing to their generational angst. So what do they do? They simply walk together and grasp for meaning in one

another.

Richard Linklater is a product of Generation X himself, and as a screenwriter and director, I believe that he attempts to capture lonely lack of direction inherent in that generation through the way he writes and frames the characters in *Before Sunrise*. Both of them being young adults, their experiences can both be described as quintessential to the generation of which they are products. It is for these reasons that I believe *Before Sunrise* is ultimately a product of Generation X and the 1990s before anything else. The film deals with the inherent angst and confusion of being a young adult in the 1990s and a product of Generation X. The characters are a product of the director, and the director is a product of his time. As such, the director's angst is reflected in the characters.