

ANALYSIS

“A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” (1927)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

Hemingway said “I guess the story that tops them all for leave-out was ‘A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.’ I left everything out of that one.... May be my favorite story.” This is one of the shortest, greatest, and most discussed of his stories. It is the most clear and succinct dramatization in literature of Existentialism, a philosophy that originated in the 19th century and became a strong intellectual current beginning in the early 20th century, especially in Europe, peaking there after World War II.

The “place” is not specified as a café because the subject of the story is a state of mind rather than a literal place. Light is polarized against darkness, as in “The Killers,” also set in a café at night and written during the same period. The polarity of light and dark makes it significant that the old man is sitting “in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light.” The shadow is a synthesis of light and dark, a state of mind identified with the old man.

The old man is deaf, yet he appears to be enjoying himself. Ironically, “‘Last week he tried to commit suicide,’ one waiter said.” How the old man recovered from despair enough to be enjoying himself is one subject of the story. The waiter says the old man was in despair about “Nothing.” This introduces the Existentialist theme of losing faith and experiencing nothingness, or *nada*, which is ironic in that “nothing” here is the meaning of Everything. The waiter who says the old man was in despair about nothing loses authority when he says he knows it was nothing because “He has plenty of money.” In retrospect the reader will be able to identify this shallow materialistic waiter as the younger of the two. Hemingway often withholds identification of speakers in dialogue, requiring the reader to pay close attention to details and to differentiate the characters.

The two waiters sit at a table and observe the old man “in the shadow of the leaves of the tree that moved slightly in the wind.” The old man is in a place outside that is part of the natural order, fluid and various in contrast to the well-lighted place inside. He has transcended the limitations of the mind. In that respect the two waiters are alike in their limited perspectives, comparable to the owner of the diner and young Nick Adams in “The Killers,” who are called “bright boys” by the hit men and by the experienced black cook. At night, bright light inside makes it difficult to see outside into the dark.

A soldier out at night past curfew passes by with a girl. Now the two waiters begin to differentiate themselves: “‘The guard will pick him up,’ one waiter said.” The other waiter, the younger one, expresses an amoral egotism: “What does it matter if he gets what he’s after?” This is his attitude throughout the story. The old man “sitting in the shadow”—by now this is an insistent motif—raps on his saucer with his glass. The younger waiter responds grudgingly, condescends to the old man and expresses reluctance to serve him. The old man does not hear him. His deafness is a blessing in that he does not have to listen to people, a variation on the old religious theme that blindness to the material world facilitates transcendence, as later dramatized by Flannery O’Connor in *Wise Blood* (1952).

The younger waiter expresses a callous inhumanity when he complains to the older waiter about having to work late: “He should have killed himself last week.” He even repeats his contempt to his customer’s face, as if the deaf old man cannot read lips or facial expressions. “The waiter poured on into the glass so that the brandy slopped over and ran down the stem into the top saucer on the pile. ‘Thank you,’ the old man said.” He responds to insults with politeness, as if blind as well as deaf, in a spirit of transcendence. The old man lost his wife. The younger waiter has a wife and should be able to sympathize.

The two waiters discuss his attempted suicide, how he tried to hang himself but got cut down by his niece, who feared for his soul. His soul is at stake. Being saved literally by someone who cared about him

led to his saving himself spiritually. The callow younger waiter says “An old man is a nasty thing.” The older waiter corrects him: “Not always. This old man is clean. He drinks without spilling. Even now, drunk. Look at him.” The story affirms the old man as a kind of exemplar. Even drunk. Ironically, the younger waiter is the nasty one, not the old man. The old man is polite and clean in a moral sense as contrasted to the younger waiter, who complains, ironically, that the old man “has no regard” for him. When the old man signals for another brandy the younger waiter “who was in a hurry” refuses to serve him, “speaking with that omission of syntax stupid people employ when talking to drunken people or foreigners. ‘No more tonight. Close now.’” Calling him stupid is a rare exception to Hemingway’s usual objectivity. The insult emphasizes the moral dimension of the story.

The old man responds to being thrown out of the café by leaving the younger waiter a tip—a small one. He has plenty of money. The tip is a gesture both moral and transcendent. “The waiter watched him go down the street, a very old man walking unsteadily but with dignity.” The older waiter objects to closing early: “‘Why didn’t you let him stay and drink?’ the unhurried waiter asked... It’s not half-past two.” After all, waiters are paid to wait. The younger waiter is in a hurry to go home to bed with his wife: “You talk like an old man yourself.” The older waiter jokes back by suggesting that the younger waiter’s wife might be as unfaithful to him as he is to his obligations as a waiter: “You have no fear of going home before your usual hour?” The brash young waiter is confident: “I am all confidence.” The older waiter acknowledges, “You have youth, confidence, and a job.” Among the various contrasts between them, at this point the young waiter is like Young America in contrast to Old Europe.

The older waiter identifies with the old man and “With all those who do not want to go to bed. With all those who need a light for the night.” Generously, he is “reluctant to close up because there may be some one who needs the café.” The younger waiter replies that “there are bodegas open all night long.” A bodega, a nightclub, is a dark and dimly lit place with loud music, often not very clean. The older waiter explains, “You do not understand. This is a clean and pleasant café. It is well lighted. The light is very good and also, now, there are shadows of the leaves.” This extends the consciousness of the older waiter outside into Nature and the shadow where the old man sat. The shadows have the same relation to the leaves as art does to Nature. Art is a human synthesis of light, cleanness and order. Though he is no artist, the humble older waiter has achieved these values by working in a clean well-lighted café. Now the younger waiter has forced him out too early into the darkness along with the old man.

The younger waiter is not listening and is quick to leave. The older waiter says to himself, “It is the light of course but it is necessary that the place be clean and pleasant. You do not want music. Certainly you do not want music. Nor can you stand before a bar with dignity although that is all that is provided for these hours.” Music is an escape from thinking and facing *nada*. The older waiter is experiencing a crisis common to many in the secular modern world: “It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too.” These are the basic premises of Existentialism. Loss of faith in Christianity is expressed by the parody of the Lord’s Prayer, replacing God with *nada*.

The parody has led many critics to call the story despairing or “nihilistic.” On the contrary, before the parody the older waiter says, “...light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order.” These are universal human values, expressed in archetypal imagery. Light equates to knowledge, enlightenment and truth; cleanness is moral as well as physical; and order takes many forms including art, religion, Nature, and Existentialism. Some critics have equated Hemingway with the older waiter, even though the waiter has “never had confidence.” The story is a psychological portrait dramatizing a state of mind that was only occasional with the author. Hemingway is never nihilistic. Nature is redemptive and is always there, accessible to all, as in “Big Two-Hearted River,” Hemingway’s rebuttal to the downbeat T. S. Eliot in “The Waste Land” (1922). Get out of the Unreal City, Tom. Go fishing for God sake. The sun also rises. Exasperated by accusations of nihilism and despair, Hemingway once said, exaggerating, “Christ, I never had an unhappy day I can remember!” Actually he did have occasional depressions serious enough to be suicidal, but he overcame them like the deaf old man—up until the last one.

On his way home the older waiter takes refuge from the darkness in a bar. The light in the bar is very bright and pleasant but the bar is unpolished. The bar is unclean. When the barman asks “What’s yours?” the older waiter jokes, “Nada.” He orders coffee rather than alcohol, an indication that he wants to confront

nada in a clean well-lighted mind. “He disliked bars and bodegas.” He goes home “without thinking further.” In fact, however, his thinking is unstoppable now and will interfere with his sleep all night. He tries to stop himself from thinking with a fiction, creating order, whistling in the dark so to speak: “After all, he said to himself, it is probably only insomnia. Many must have it.” Many do, in the secular modern world. Facing *nada*, as the older waiter has, is a hopeful sign of courage and psychological growth, like facing the bull. In slavic languages *nada* means hope. Rather than being in despair, the older waiter may be on his way to transcendence like the exemplary deaf old man.

In the absence of proof as to the existence of God, Existentialism is based as much on faith as Christianity, without the morality or the salvation. Lack of morality is the objection that Benjamin Franklin made to Deism. The inadequacy of Existentialism is proved when the waiter resorts to kidding himself that he only has insomnia. It is ironic that he sees Christianity as a fiction he cannot believe in, while believing in his own fiction without really believing in it. Ironically also, Christ is the light.

Michael Hollister (2012)