The Refuge of the Spanish Café in Ernest Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”

Mukesh Williams

Abstract

Though the expanding literary canon in the United States has rejected most of Ernest Hemingway’s works, his short stories still remain relevant in an age torn by intellectual dissensions and cultural quarrels. In his short story “A Clean Well-Lighted Place” Hemingway bridges the gap between literature and life presenting to us the great brotherhood of insomniacs and skeptics lost in a world of bewildering change and chaos. The need to find a refuge in a Spanish café becomes a need for freedom and order in our world where all certitudes are breaking down from North Africa to South Asia. Hemingway’s existential nihilism may have lost its power after one hundred years but his story of social dislocation and emotional chaos finds a resonance in our world of global violence and disorder. Hemingway believes that if life is nothing, then we have to give it meaning by making authentic choices. We should always cherish the little havens of delight and comfort, like the Spanish café, that allow us to escape the physical drudgery and spiritual emptiness of life.
In the wake of new global realities, cultural homogenization, and intellectual schisms the distinctive appeal of post-war American writing and the existentialist ideology it spawned over a hundred years ago have lost their appeal. Even American literary editors have sidelined the angst of white male writers from William Faulkner to Saul Bellow. The rise of muscular feminism, political multiculturalism and Foucauldian scrutiny has given a tough fight to apologists of the old literary canon. To be politically correct most literary anthologies shy away from Hemingway’s longer fiction and instead prefer slave narratives, ethnic writings, Native American remembrances and kitchen stories. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* first published in 1979 by W. W. Norton and Company, which we have all read with relish as students, has become redundant now. It has been replaced in many American universities by the authoritative and voluminous compendium *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* in two volumes edited by Paul Lauter. *The Heath Anthology* has hundreds of pages of slave narrative, women writing and ethnic literature but just a short story “Hills Like White Elephants” (1927) and fictional extract from *A Farewell to Arms* (1927) by Hemingway.

For a writer who had won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954 and spawned a host of Hemingway clones, a short story and an extract from a novel is too modest a representation. Even the novella *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) cited by the Swedish Academy for its “powerful, style-forming” narration is omitted from *The Heath Anthology*. The reconfiguration of American authors and literary texts represents the changing and expanding canon of American literature over the last three decades. But some of Hemingway still survives even if it does through his short stories. Though his stories express his “lonely life,” hard drinking and bouts of depression they have an abiding symbolic value and appeal which transcend historical time and cultural specificity. His stories
represent the "great brotherhood" of insomniacs and skeptics of the early twentieth century who are still in great numbers today (Baker, 1980 123). Hemingway's characters still remain relevant to us in a hardened reality of global violence and chaos.

Expressing the angst of the Lost Generation immediately after World War I, American writers like Hemingway and Gertrude Stein reflected upon the mood and temper of a disillusioned society while living in Paris and other European cities. Their angst was further compounded by the economic depression, disbelief in traditional Christian values of stability and compassion and general disregard for the old. Hemingway wished to believe that even though the old world had vanished, modern life could still retain its civility and concern for others. The world depressed him so much that he began getting electric shocks for his condition at Mayo Clinic which further added to his general sense of despair (Burwell, 1999 xxiii). Carlos Baker believes that the story "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" "offered a brief look into the underside of Ernest's spiritual world, the nothingness by which he was still occasionally haunted" (Baker, 1969 238). Hemingway began to suffer from hypertension and insomnia and complained about his wife's expenses. He became paranoid that the FBI was secretly listening to his conversations. The "clean" and "well-lit" café became the last symbolic retreat for his characters, those who had lost meaning in life.

The need for a refuge is inextricably connected to light and freedom that has an indubitable ring in modern times when once again all certitudes are breaking down from South Asia to North Africa. Hemingway wrote a dozen novels a century ago but his finely chiseled short stories—written in an unobtrusive style, bringing reality and symbol together—, capture the unspoken psychological anxiety of a generation enamored by the nineteenth century existentialism of
Sören Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche. In the aftermath of the First World War writers and ordinary folks were inquiring into the meaning of life, a meaning divorced from religion and ideology. They were seeking answers to who they were and why they were here?

Set against the backdrop of social dislocation and emotional loss in the wake of the First World War, Hemingway's short story "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," published in 1926, captures the physical loneliness and spiritual disillusionment of old age (Hemingway, 1987 228-291). The writer expresses his indubitable existential nihilism through the old man and the old Spanish waiter, two characters who are pitted against the positive realism of the young waiter. Both the aged characters tell us in their different ways that we cannot place an order on life. The short story tells the tale of a deaf man in his eighties, who suffers from insomnia, has lost his belief in Christianity and probably has no friends or place to go to. Instead of buying a bottle of liquor and going home to drink, he sits late in a small café in Spain which is about to close. He orders glass after glass of brandy to the chagrin of one of one of the waiters who wants to close the café and go home. The story reveals a deep-seared sense of angst. Lacking the ability to shape our lives, we despair as death is about to overtake us. Hemingway's own experience in the First World War in Spain and Italy gave him the skill to place his philosophy in a spiritually uncertain world.

For the old man the Spanish café is his last refuge. Reticent and withdrawn the old man visits the café only to withdraw further into its shadows. He likes to sit late in the café "because he was deaf and now at the night it was quiet and he felt the difference (Hemingway, 1987 228)." He listens to the throbbing loneliness of the night to assuage his anxiety and forget his insomnia. Though he has lots of money he loses hope of ever spending it. He leads a lonely existence and has
recently attempted suicide. But he has been saved by his niece. The café is his last sanctuary as all his other options are closing down. He has lost hope, but only needs a clean, well-lighted place to spend his time.

Both Hemingway and his biographer Carlos Baker were fond of this short story seeing in it a “triumph in the realm of practical aesthetics.” Baker extolled the virtues of the story calling it the “remarkable union of the naturalistic and the symbolic” where “light, cleanliness and order” stand against the “dark chaos of society” (Baker, 1980 123-4). Public spaces that bring people together are great therapeutic clinics of modern society that help to reinvigorate its members offering them companionship and hope.

The Spanish Café
The Spanish café always boasted of a friendly atmosphere where lonely people could find warmth in togetherness and at the same time drink alone. But the patience and warmth of the café is tested at around 3 a.m. when the old man orders for another drink. Early in 1918 when Hemingway was a teenager he began working as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross in Italy. He was caught in the midst of the raging war in Milan and saw people killed by shrapnel wounds. He was also injured and fell in love with a nurse while recuperating, but she chose another man. Hemingway was devastated and later began to have difficulty in his relationship with women.

With a characteristic understatement Hemingway tells us how old men no longer find the promises of the Catholic tradition plausible. Though we do not come to know what the old man is thinking, we do know that he had been in some kind of existential “despair.” He suffers from loneliness but we have no clue as to the

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reason of his despair. A vast nothingness pervades his life which is spiritually devoid of salvation. In the absence of religious belief it becomes difficult for him to understand the reality of his death.

The café is undoubtedly a clean, well-lighted place, but the old man sits “in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light” (CWLP, p. 296). He sits alone, as all the tables are empty, and yet he hides in the shadows thrown by the tree on the terrace. He finds the night and silence comforting. The subtle interplay of light and shade within the café also helps to contrast the values and feelings of the young and the old characters. The old man wants to recede in the shadows and observe from a vantage point. His deafness separates him from the rest of the spoken and noisy world. He tells his story without uttering a word.

Hemingway’s Philosophical Web
Caught in the web of futility and depression, Hemingway often rationalizes the spiritual suffering through his writings, often representing those sentiments through his characters. Hemingway tells us that as we get old we realize the meaninglessness of life and this feeling gets intense as we lose control of our own existence. In the absence of religion or a viable philosophy we fail to be optimistic in the face of death. The many demands placed on individual responsibility to make authentic choices further undermines own hope.

Existentialism attempted to examine some of these questions raised in the story while emphasizing values connected to liberation, responsibility and solitude. Existentialism stated that man must find a reason for his existence, make responsible choices and escape the idea of a preordained destiny. It denied a higher power or God. Man must locate his own truth and live in it, a quest that most of Hemingway’s s short stories underscore.
Even the story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place, follows this theme. It elaborates the existential paradigm and the idea of nihilism and despair lurking in its shadows. The old man, the old waiter and the young waiter represent the three stages of an existential framework where nada or nothingness has an indubitable presence. Nada implies that life loses its meaning when we lose the purpose to live. In the story, a hollow emptiness prevails in the silence between dialogues. If you believe in nothing, life has nothing to offer. The old waiter conducts an interior monologue explaining the predicament of his times,

It is the light of course but it is necessary that the place be clean and peasant. 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. What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanliness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it was all nada y peus nada y nada y peus nada. (Hemingway, 1987, 291)

The dread of nothingness is intense but it can be mitigated for a brief moment by a “clean” and “pleasant” place without music.

Though Hemingway’s character put up a brave and heroic front there is a moral chaos in the depths of their psyche which surfaces through the dialogue and imagery. It is possible to detect a sense of futility and the inevitability of death. Though the scenes are romantically exotic, they nonetheless possess a quaint post-war anguish and regret. Hemingway traveled a lot and took unprecedented risks in his life as a man and a writer but he was constantly troubled by the human condition and the nihilism it gave rise to. He often denied the epithet the
“lost generation” as an oversimplified statement that his protagonists share. But it cannot be denied that his characters are equally purposeless, unhappy, lost and depressed as those who belonged to the lost generation. There were a host of existential philosophers in postwar Europe such as Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus and Fyodor Dostoyevsky who explained in detail about the human condition, the existential dread and human responsibility. European writers including Hemingway could not escape the existential nihilism.

Most of Hemingway’s short stories embody this theme of depression and meaninglessness, stories such as “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” “The Capital of the World,” “The Snows of Kilimanjaro,” “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” and “The Killers.” In “The Capital of the World” Paco, the Spanish waiter chases his dream to become a matador, but dies unfulfilled. Hemingway praises Paco for having lived up to his aspirations though he never succeeded in realizing his dream. Harry, in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” is a failed writer, lover and man, realizes that he should have done better with his life. In “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” the protagonist is emasculated by his wife but redeems his manhood by hunting buffaloes. In the end he gets killed. In “The Killers” Nick Adams warns Ole Andreson that hired assassins are going to kill him but Ole dismisses the warning and moves around with a sense of fatalistic heroism. In “Old Man and the Bridge” a 76-year man sits by the bridge waiting to be killed by the advancing Fascist troops instead of running away and protecting his life. The supposed nihilism of these characters is not perceived by Hemingway as nihilism but an act of courage that gives meaning to their lives in a violent and unforgiving world.

Inconsistency in the Dialogues

Hemingway’s short story “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” was republished in
Scribner's Magazine in 1933, and since then has been in the eye of a storm. In 1956 Judson Jerome, an Antioch College scholar, discovered an apparent inconsistency in the dialogues of the two waiters. The inconsistency in the dialogue occurs when the two waiters are talking about the attempted suicide of the old man. The old man hangs himself but is rescued by his niece. The old waiter inquires: "Who cut him down? The young waiter replies, "His niece." Later in the story the young waiter says, "I know. You said she cut him down." Either the text assumes that the young waiter’s information about the attempted suicide has passed unconsciously to the old waiter or else there is an inconsistency in the dialogue. But in effect this inconsistency does not take away the moral vision of the story or destroy its tight structure.

Otto Reinhart’s theory
In 1959 Otto Reinhart argued against the idea that Hemingway used metronomic dialogue where each indented sentence suggested a new speaker. He suggested that Hemingway intended that each character spoke consecutive lines. But this theory was challenged by Joseph Gabriel who felt that the Hemingway intended both the metronomic dialogue and the subsequent confusion (Gabriel, 1961 539-46). Some scholars like John Hagopian and Martin Dolch rejected both the earlier theories and felt that this was a typographical error that needed a revision of the story (Hagopian and Dolch, 1962 108). Scribner’s republished the story in 1965 rectifying the apparent anomaly and adding further fuel to an ongoing literary controversy. The whirligig of opinions has once again veered in favor of Reinhart forcing many scholars to suggest for the republication of the story as it was written by Hemingway. From a strictly literary point of view we must read what Hemingway wrote not what Scribner’s changed.
Short Story Techniques

We have here an omniscient third person narrator who occupies a privileged place like most writers in post-First World War period. The privilege to see in the minds of the three characters—an old Spanish waiter, young Spanish waiter and an old man—is a privilege denied to us in daily life. We come to see what is taking place in the mind of the old waiter, how he identifies himself with the old man as Hemingway represents the angst of the age and the sadness of growing old. It is the quintessential insomnia of the beat generation, the sense of growing old and a romantic attachment to images of death and inertia. The modernist label sits somewhat uncomfortably on Hemingway. Though he did represent some of the modernist themes such as alienation, angst, disillusionment, he was often writing conventional stories in ordinary settings, something that his contemporaries like Gertrude Stein or Ezra Pound were not doing.

The story does have its modernist mark. There is an interior monologue of the old waiter that verges on Joycean stream of consciousness. It captures a slice of life, the nastiness of old age and youth. It expresses a feeling of nada. There is no denouement, no resolution. The tone has a deadpan monotony which today might strike as somewhat comical but there is directness about it. Hemingway just provides dialogues and refuses to intervene in the flow or pass an overt judgment. He does not interpret actions but allow them to speak for themselves. His style is tight and controlled with no extra work, a direct reportage much admired since the 1920s.

The Spanish café is never clearly described but we can imagine its atmosphere and the time of the night. Though inside the café everything is clean and well lit outside is chaos and darkness. The chaos in the world, the nada of life, creates an insomnia that no one can escape. Sex, money and indulgence will all end in the
cognizance of death and leave you sad and morose desiring escape. The story lacks a plot as it is just a sequence of events and ruminations. Hemingway requires the reader to fill in the gaps. We often wonder if we have truly grasped the motives of all the characters but the author offers no help. Hemingway works against the tradition of the short story presenting to us the nothingness of our existence—"nada y pues nada ye pues nada" or nothing and nothing and nothing. The three characters make us think about the existential question in our lives from three different perspectives.

**Imagery and Style**
Right in the beginning Hemingway goes to the heart of the matter. He captures with unerring clarity both the physical image of a deaf old man getting drunk in a café late night.

It was very late and everyone had left the cafe except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light. In the day time the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference. The two waiters inside the cafe knew that the old man was a little drunk, and while he was a good client they knew that if he became too drunk he would leave without paying, so they kept watch on him (CWLP, 288).

Obviously the two waiters are watching him with some concern wondering if he would be in a position to pay if he really became intoxicated.

It is not the bar or the bodegas but a clean café that provides solace and an escape away from the sick hurry and divided aims of life. The bodegas are small
grocery stores with a wine shop. They do not create the right atmosphere to relax and get drunk. A bar is cluttered with glasses, bottles, woodwork, etched glass and lights. There is poetic calm, an aesthetic beauty in getting drunk in a café. This is the heart of the argument between the old and the young waiter at the café.

'We are of two different kinds,' the older waiter said. He was now dressed to go home. 'It is not only a question of youth and confidence although those things are very beautiful. Each night I am reluctant to close up because there may be someone who needs the cafe.'

'Hombre, there are bodegas open all night long.'

'You do not understand. This is a clean and pleasant cafe. It is well lighted. The light is very good and also, now, there are shadows of the leaves' (CWLP 290)

It is the agreeable nature of the café, the balanced light playing against the leafy shadows that pulls people out of their loneliness and makes drinking enjoyable.

**The Two Spanish Waiters**

It is the simplicity of the story that catches us straight in the face. Two waiters are serving liquor late night to an old man of about eighty in a café. The old man is rather lonely, has no friends, no one to go back to. He has attempted suicide only "last week" and has been rescued by his niece. As the dialogue between the two nameless waiters, one old and the other young, unfolds, their characters develop. The older waiter is more composed, less hurried and empathizes with the old man in the story. The old waiter reflects upon life, understands human predicament, sympathizes with problems of old age and is no hurry to go anywhere. The young waiter, on the other hand, is not concerned about human
suffering and is impatient to leave the café: "He's lonely. I'm not lonely. I have a
wife waiting in bed for me." The young waiter underscores the whole notion of a
nuclear family, sex and companionship, the ephemeral aspect of marital bliss that
the old man lacks.

The old waiter does not mind staying late at the café. Seemingly he has some
knowledge about the old man and his attempted suicide. The old waiter
sympathizes with the old man and gently rebukes the young waiter for sending
the old man out of the café before closing time. The young waiter finds the old
man "a nasty thing" the old waiter finds him "clean," one who drinks without
"spilling" (CWLP 289). The old waiter identifies himself with the old man as he
too does not want to go to bed—

With all those who do not want to go to bed. With all those who need a
light for the night (CWLP 290).

The old waiter like the old man reflects upon the resistance to death and its
ineluctable reality. The young waiter does not care about the old man, feels
impatient and wants to return to his wife before three. Since the young waiter is
waiting for the old man to finish and leave, he does not pay attention to the
statements of the old waiter.

The old waiter has a warmer, sympathetic character, a person Hemingway would
respect. He shows reserve and sharp observation—something that Hemingway's
typical hero invariably possesses. Obviously the characters in the story are living
in troubled times. A soldier passes by with a girl. The old waiter is trying to
make sense of the world they are living in. He is, perhaps, suggesting to the
young waiter that it is more decent and honest to sit and drink a few pegs of
brandy in a clean café and try to make sense of the world, than to pretend to lead a good Christian life and be dishonest. The image of the well-lighted place which symbolizes life contrasts quite well with darkness representing death. The old waiter suggests that it is good to sit in a well-lighted café than a loud bar. The clean café seems to be some kind of a refuge from the distemper of the times. The young waiter does not understand this, as he is too preoccupied with his own affairs.

The Nada of Life
After the young waiter leaves the old waiter wanders into a bar and orders a glass of wine. He feels dissatisfied with the atmosphere of the bar, its unpolished counter and remembers the clean ambience of his café. He feels that when he will go back home he will not be able to sleep; his insomnia will return. He reflects upon the spiritual content of his life and draws general conclusions about the spiritual tenor of the 1930s. The old waiter conducts a monologue where he replaces many words in the Lord’s Prayer with the Spanish word nada meaning nothing.

Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name, thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada and nada us our nada as we nada our nadas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada [then nothing]. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee.

This is a parody of the entire Christian notion of prayer, afterlife, evil, brotherhood and forgiveness. The Pater Noster is not just a prayer but a discourse on how to pray. But most people like the old waiter find the disappearance of all certitudes only to be replaced by a lack of purpose, a nothingness. The old waiter smiles at this interpolation. He then stands before the bar which needs some
cleaning. The barman misunderstands his intention and thinks that the old waiter wants a drink:

‘What’s yours?’ asked the barman.

‘Nada.’

‘Otro loco mas [another crazy person],’ said the barman and turned away (CWLP 291).

The waiter ruefully orders some coffee. As Sartre pointed out first man exists, then defines himself. In other words existence precedes essence. Hemingway too presents a “godless universe” in a state of “meaningless flux” (Civello, 1994 72).

The old man, though unsteady on his feet, walks with “dignity” and does not lose control (p. 298). The old waiter wants the old man to stay and continue to drink. But the younger one shoos him away. The older waiter epitomizes the anxiety of the Lost Generation especially when night falls. He likes to stay late at the café and be one with all those who “do not want to go to bed” and all those who “need a light for the night” (pp. 298-99). The electric light stands for a man-made order that keeps the “impinging void” at bay (Civello, 1994 105). The old waiter converses with himself saying that not only a light is necessary but also the light must be “clean and pleasant.” This seems to him the best way to fight the nothingness of the world. “It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too” tells the old waiter to himself. Religion is meaningless, as it gives no solace. Parodying the Lord’s Prayer with the Spanish word nada which means nothing, he tells us that religion means nothing anymore. A well-lighted café is more meaningful than religion or pretentious social values in an age where most people suffer from insomnia.
Age and Nastiness

The young waiter states that an old man is a nasty along the lines of W.B. Yeats’s “Sailing to Byzantium” written in 1928, two years after Hemingway’s short story,

An aged man is but a paltry thing,
A tattered coat upon a stick, unless
Soul clap its hand and sing, and louder sing
For every tatter in its mortal dress

But man can give meaning to his life by his own actions. Though in Yeats there is an overt spiritual quest, it is muted in Hemingway giving rise to despair.

Dignity, Light, Cleanliness and Order

Hemingway uses ideas connected with the concepts of dignity, light, cleanliness and order in his story to represent the values of an entire world in transition and the significance of human life in the absence of religious belief. The word dignity also refers to the “composed and serious manner” of the style of Hemingway and the old man. The man walks with dignity even when drunk and this deserves “honor and respect.” The use of the image of a “well-lighted place” suggests how the café brings “relief to the mind. The light stimulates the senses of the man even though he is blind. Within the context of the war to find an unhurried place “free from dirt and impurities” is to find a safe haven. Plagued by the chaos generated by the war the Lost Generation hankered for order, “a condition where every part or unit is in its right place or normal efficient state.”

Conclusion

There is a lot of Hemingway that we see in the story—in the attitude of the old waiter, the old man and the controlled prose of the mature writer. As James Joyce
had once remarked Hemingway's prose was always an attempt to bridge the gap between literature and life. Hemingway has effectively used the twin techniques of the dialogue and interior monologue to convey to us a large part of life within a rather short story. Hemingway's somewhat nihilistic temper finds expression in the unstated philosophy that we live in a world without solace and that there is no escape from the misery and boredom of life except those small havens that man creates. The notion of a godless universe in which man must beguile himself through artifices of distraction interpenetrates Hemingway's writings. Such a worldview attempts to glorify individual who live with grace and courage against heavy odds like the old man.

Works Cited