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AN ANALYSIS OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S "A CLEAN, WELL-LIGHTED PLACE"

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Abstrak

*Karya sastra yang baik adalah karya yang menyentuh kehidupan manusia, yang mengemukakan masalah-masalah yang dihadapi manusia dalam kehidupannya dan membuat si pembaca berpikir dan menganalisa kehidupannya sendiri untuk berubah menjadi lebih baik. Cerita pendek *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* yang ditulis oleh Ernest Hemingway adalah contohnya. Melalui karya ini, Hemingway mengemukakan masalah yang sangat esensial dalam hidup manusia, yakni masalah eksistensi yang memang satu hal yang sangat kompleks. Melalui karya ini pula pembaca dapat melihat bagaimana Hemingway memandang masalah ini dan bagaimana itu mempengaruhi kehidupannya pribadi. Diharapkan pembaca dapat pula memperoleh pelajaran dari karya ini, yang meskipun pendek dan sederhana tetapi memberi makna yang sangat dalam bagi mereka yang membacanya.*

Introduction

A short story, though brief in form, intensely discloses the insights of human existence. It mirrors human experiences and feelings as well as the personal life of its author. By evaluating a short story, one can observe how creative a writer is from how much he tells in the brevity of his narration. Hemingway's *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* is an example of this. In this very simple and brief narration of an old man and two waiters in a Spanish cafe, Hemingway unfolds the problems in human life, for example loneliness, helplessness, fear of dying and death, which will eventually challenge every human being in his life history.

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Due to the story's briefness, a reader must look into the short story deeply in order to reach a profound understanding of what its writer wishes to convey. This can be done by examining the author's life, the point of view that lies behind it and also the short story itself.

Therefore, in analyzing **A Clean, Well-Lighted Place**, the writer of this paper will discuss Hemingway's life, way of thinking and style of writing in relation to this story. She will also examine the story itself to find its relevance to human existence.

It is the writer's hope that the readers of this paper will come to a realization that man, in his lifetime, face many problems due to the complexity of his existence and there are choices to make one's being worth living. Understanding the sorrows of living, hopefully, will also result in a feeling of sensitivity toward other people who are in despair.

Hemingway and Existentialism

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) was a writer famous for his "plain, forceful prose style characterized by simple sentences and few adjectives or adverbs" (World Book, p. 148) and "(t)he nouns and verbs are concrete, frequently repeated, and the cadence is at times monotonous" (Americana, p. 83). However, this "simplicity is actually forged out of complexity, under great pressure." (The Encyclopedia Americana Vol. 14, p.83) -- a quality which can be clearly seen in **A Clean, Well-Lighted Place**.

In his writing, Hemingway "wanted also to be as objective and honest as possible about what he saw and wrote." A quotation in **The Encyclopedia Americana vol. 14** of what Hemingway said about this is:

I was trying to write then and I found the greatest difficulty, aside from knowing what you really felt, rather than what you were supposed to feel, and had been taught to feel, was to put down what really happened in action: what the actual things were which produced the emotion that you experienced...the real thing, the sequence of motion and fact which made the emotion.... (The Encyclopedia Americana Vol. 14, p.83)

Hemingway left it up to the readers to find the true meaning of his work for themselves.

His idea was to describe a series of actions without comment or emotional rhetoric; the reader would then visualize the sequence and experience the emotion, which the author had deliberately left out. (The Encyclopedia Americana Vol. 14, p. 83)

With regards to his thoughts and views in life, Hemingway is said to be “opposed to didacticism, preferring rather to let the incidents convey the meanings” (The Encyclopedia Americana Vol. 14, p. 83). Philip Young, as written in **The Encyclopedia Americana vol. 14** reveals that “(p)hilosophy in a novel,...should be submerged like the seven eighths of an iceberg that is invisible.” (The Encyclopedia Americana Vol. 14, p. 83).

The philosophy that lies behind **A Clean, Well-Lighted Place** is the movement called existentialism. Existentialism is:

(t)he belief that man forms his essence, his essential being, in the course and pattern of the life he elects to lead. Existentialism is a loose term with several meanings, but it is normally applied to writing that emphasizes man’s responsibility for forming his own nature and that stresses the prime importance of personal decisions, personal freedom, and personal goals. The doctrine of existentialism hold that man is completely responsible for himself because he has a free will to do exactly what he pleases. (Shaw, p. 106)

According to Harry Shaw, there are two groups of existentialists -- atheistic and Christian existentialists. The former group of existentialists, led by Jean-Paul Sartre, is mentioned as stating that “man is alone in a godless universe,” and that “the universe is meaningless” -- a perception that “produces anxiety, loneliness, acute discomfort, and despair,” (Shaw, p. 107) while the latter asserts that “in God man may find freedom from tension, for in Him the finite and infinite are one.” (Beckson, pp. 56-57)

Concise Dictionary of Literary Terms records the following: Both groups of existentialists are (1) concerned with man’s essential being and nature, (2) convinced that thought and reason are insufficient to understand and cope with the mysteries of living, (3) conscious that anguish and despair are the common lot of everyone, and (4) fixed in the belief that a sense of morality depends upon positive and active participation in life. (Shaw, p.107)

Readers will find that these views are put forward by Hemingway in **A Clean, Well-Lighted Place**.

Human Existence as Reflected in A Clean, Well-Lighted Place

The short story **A Clean, Well-Lighted Place** opens up with a description of an elderly man having his drink in a sidewalk cafe late at night. No other customers are there, only two waiters inside the cafe waiting for the man to finish his drink so that they can close the cafe. The waiters are watching and talking about the old gentleman, who is getting drunk. According to one of the waiters, who is older than the other, this old man tried to kill himself the week before by hanging himself with a rope. The other waiter wonders why. The older waiter explains it was because of his "despair" -- a despair over "nothing." It certainly wasn't because of money for he owns a lot of it. (English for Today Book Six: Literature in English, pp. 14-15)

This is the part where the word "nothing" is mentioned for the first time in the story. This word will be repeated for seven more times, not including the word "nada," which also means nothing in Spanish. "Nothing" is a key word to understand the content of this short story. The writer will discuss the significance of the word later on.

The young waiter becomes irritated because he wants to go home as soon as possible, yet this one customer seemingly wants to stay at the cafe as long as possible. The young man concludes that it is loneliness that causes him to want to spend his time in a useless way.

"I wish he would go home. I never get to bed before three o'clock. What kind of hour is that to go to bed?"

"He stays up because he likes it."

"He's lonely. I'm not lonely. I have a wife waiting in bed for me." (English for Today Book Six: Literature in English, p. 16).

Loneliness is one point that Hemingway wanted to focus on. Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling defines loneliness as "an unpleasant affect, combining sadness and anxiety, a felt response to the absence of sufficient relational contact." (Hunter, p. 663)

It is clear that the old customer is lonely. Though he is taken care of by his niece, this "contact" is not "sufficient," maybe because the niece does not understand his needs as an old man. How youth and old age are compared will be discussed further in the paper.

Another focus relating to human experiences in **A Clean, Well-Lighted Place** is the problem of being old, which is closely related to the previous point, loneliness. On being old, Lewis Sherill in The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling explains that:

The older person is faced with the loss of many important aspects of life -- status, home, material possession, physical health and agility, and important relationships. These multiple losses in a relatively short period of time can result in a telescoped and nearly chronic grief reaction which tests the faith issues of basic values and philosophy of life. (Hunter, p. 809)

The young waiter, probably sensing the aforementioned problems of loneliness and aging, says that he "wouldn't want to be that old. An old man is a nasty thing." However, he reacts insensitively toward the old customer. When the old customer wants more drink, the younger waiter refuses to give it because he wants to close quickly to go home to his wife. The old man then walks away "unsteadily but with dignity" after paying for his drinks. (English for Today, Book Six: Literature in English, p. 16)

The old waiter, feeling some sympathy for the old man, seems to regret the young waiter's attitude toward the old customer, saying that like the old man, he, too, is the kind of man "who like(s) to stay late at the cafe," "who do(es) not want to go to bed," and "who need(s) a light for the night."

Here, the readers see how youth and old age are contrasted. The young waiter is eager to go home because he has someone to go home to; he still has expectations and future, while it is the other way around for the old man and the older waiter.

Being old and deprived of "youth, (and) confidence" himself, this waiter understands the problem facing the elderly customer. What is the problem? It is "Nada and hopelessness," the "nothingness" in life, "man's eternal confrontation with the void." (Williams, p. 102) "Nothing" is ahead of old people -- no more future for them. As mentioned before, the word "nothing" is crucial in comprehending the gist of **A Clean, Well-Lighted Place**. It is what Hemingway wanted to put forward to his readers as he repeated the word over and over again. The old man and the old waiter realize that their time is coming and that they have come to nothing but death -- the "conclusion of life," "the limitation of human life." (Hunter, p. 261)

Both old men, the customer and the waiter, have a reason for their liking to stay late at the cafe, not wanting to go to bed and their needing a light for the night. It is their fear of death. They are afraid of going to bed for fear they might not wake up the next morning -- for fear of the long sleep. They dread night and darkness, the symbols of death. It is ironical that the old waiter denies this as he converses with himself after closing the cafe.

What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was a nothing and a man was nothing too.... he knew it all was nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada. (English for Today Book Six: Literature in English, pp. 17-18)

In his monologue, the old waiter says the Lord's Prayer and a prayer to the Virgin Mary, but he changes some of the words with nada and 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. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee. (English for Today Book Six: Literature in English, p. 18)

What is the importance of a prayer? Prayer is defined as "a dynamic form of communion of the religious person with the deity or transcendent Other...the primordial human language." (Hunter, p. 937) Why does the old man pray?

Caught up in a situation of fundamental insecurity, aware of the disjunction between what is and what might be, the human being utters a cry of anguish or of joy, a cry of terror or of wonder. This cry is the primal religious act arising out of the search for, or affirmation of, whatever help in living with the insecurity of human existence. The one who prays seeks what is trustworthy and dependable in the face of the human existence situation. (Hunter, p. 937)

It is worth noting that some of the words he replaces with *nada* or nothing are Father, heaven, day, Mary, grace, and the Lord. So, this old man believes that nothing can help him, a confirmation of Hemingway's inclination toward atheistic existentialism saying "man is alone in a godless universe" with a helpless situation.

The matter of existence is universal. Sooner or later, a man will question his own existence in this world. Questions like what the purpose of living is, why people have to die, and what comes after death will arise in every man's mind. So, life and death are contrasted here as well, in **A Clean, Well-Lighted Place**.

Life, according to Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling is "a period of concrete existence from conception to death;..." It is "a divine gift to be valued but not overvalued." (Hunter, p. 647) Further explanation in the previously mentioned book says:

Our appreciation of life often varies depending upon our circumstances, perceptions, achievements, expectations and sense of self. Meaning for life, however, is not given by our experiences, whether they be full and joyous or empty and joyless. The meaning and value of any life is given by God's purpose and caring for that life.

Human beings are not immortal by nature. Life is lived within limits set by conception and by death...Respect for life requires that it be protected rather than attacked, preserved rather than destroyed. Death is both the end of life and its natural complement but is often experienced as its destroyer. Many of the fears and questions raised for us by death are direct reflections of our concerns about the meaning and quality of our life. (Hunter, p. 647)

Hemingway and A Clean, Well-Lighted Place

Carlos Baker in his book Ernest Hemingway and His World writes:

A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,... offered a brief look into the underside of Ernest's spiritual world, the nightmare of nothingness by which he was still occasionally haunted. (Baker, p.238)

Anthony Burgess in his book Ernest Hemingway and His World writes about what happened to Hemingway in the last days of his life:

In the New Year of 1961, Hemingway, a frail old man, whitehaired, pale, meagre-limbed...was asked to contribute a sentence to a presentation volume for newly inaugurated President John F. Kennedy, but a whole day's work produced nothing. 'It just won't come any more.' He wept. Spring came, and Hemingway

seemed, preoccupied with some inner vision or with the coming revelation of *nada*, to see nothing of it. (Burgess, p. 111)

Hemingway knew he was dying as his health deteriorated, but what mattered more to him was his inability to write. He felt helpless in his "process of dying." He probably wanted to deny death, but there was no way out of it for the end was coming for sure. The Dictionary of Pastoral Care and Counseling gives an explanation of the feeling of helplessness in the process of dying :

Modern fear of death focuses as much on the process of dying as on death itself. Having learned to value independence and activity and to abhor dependence and passivity, many persons fear above all the helplessness of dying.... This fear of complete dependence is intensified by the possibility of being kept alive artificially by modern medical technology when all valued life capacities are irretrievably lost. (Hunter, p. 262)

However, Hemingway would not just give in to death. He had his own way of doing things. He would not let death overcome him, for he had his dignity like his protagonist in **A Clean, Well-Lighted Place**, who went "down the street, a very old man walking unsteadily but with dignity" (p.16) Philip Young, the author of Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration writes about this:

"Grace under pressure" was Hemingway's definition of courage, a quality with which much of his work is concerned. In his view, life is painful and complex. The only way to survive is to face what comes with honor, dignity, strength, knowledge, and endurance. These principles make up what is known as "Hemingway code,".... Hemingway's overall message,...is that although life is a lonely, losing battle, it is a struggle that a man can dominate in such a way that his loss has dignity and is itself a victory. (The Encyclopedia Americana Vol. 14, p. 83)

So, he confronted his own death by firing a gun to his forehead. Unlike his main character in **A Clean, Well-Lighted Place**, he succeeded.

Conclusion

One can learn a lot about human existence and problems from reading a work of literature. So is the case with **A Clean, Well-Lighted Place** by Ernest Hemingway. Though predicaments unfolded in the story seem to be personally his, they are universal. To feel lonely and helpless, to fear death and dying and to feel trapped in one's life and death, is only human. However, man is not alone. There is still hope of life after death as long as man believes in God, the Creator and the Redeemer of life. Sensitivity and understanding should be demonstrated to people questioning their existence, unlike what the young waiter does to the old man.

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