A CLEAN, WELL-LIGHTED PLACE

Ernest Hemingway

Context

Born in 1899 in Oak Park, Illinois, near Chicago, Ernest Hemingway was the second of six children. His father, a doctor, loved hunting and fishing and quickly taught these loves to young Hemingway. He gave Hemingway his first gun when he was just ten. When Hemingway finished high school, World War I was raging across Europe, and he wanted to enlist in the army. His father forbade him from enlisting, however, so Hemingway became a reporter for the Kansas City Star, where he began to hone his writing skills. Eventually, he grew restless and became an ambulance driver for the Red Cross in Italy. After being injured, he recovered at a Milan hospital, where he had an affair with a nurse. He returned home in 1919 but moved to Paris in 1921 to work as a reporter for the Toronto Daily Star. There, he joined a group of expatriate writers and artists who would come to define the “Lost Generation,” men and women whose early adulthood was defined by World War I. Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, and Pablo Picasso were among his circle of friends and colleagues.

Hemingway moved back to the United States in 1928, setting up a home in Key West, Florida, where he lived for more than ten years. In 1937, he went to Spain as a reporter to cover the Spanish Civil War for the North American Newspaper Alliance and eventually published For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940), a novel based on his experiences. In the years that followed, he moved around a great deal, first to Havana, Cuba, and then back to Europe to contribute to the war effort in World War II.

Hemingway published his first novel, The Torrents of Spring, in 1925 and The Sun Also Rises in 1926. The latter novel was his first literary success and coincided with the end of his marriage to Hadley Richardson. Hemingway went on to marry three more times and publish many more novels, including A Farewell to Arms (1929), based on his experiences in Italy during World War I, and The Old Man and the Sea(1952), for which he won the Pulitzer Prize. He also published many collections of short stories, including In Our Time (1925), Men Without Women (1927), and Winner Take Nothing (1933) in which “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” first appeared. The range, skill, and influence of Hemingway’s work won him the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954.

“A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” is one of Hemingway’s most acclaimed short stories, as much for its exquisitely sparse writing style as for its expertly rendered existentialist themes. Existentialism is a philosophical movement whose adherents believe that life has no higher purpose and that no higher being exists to help us make sense of it. Instead, humans are left alone to find meaning in the world and their lives. In “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” the older waiter sums up the despair that drives him and others to brightly lit cafés by saying simply, “It is a nothing.”

Despite his great literary successes, Hemingway struggled with depression, alcoholism, and related health problems throughout his life. In 1960, Hemingway and his fourth wife, Mary Welsh, moved to Ketchum, Idaho, and Hemingway began treatments for depression. He died from self-inflicted gunshot wounds in 1961 at age sixty-one.

Analysis of Major Characters

The Older Waiter

Like the old man, the older waiter likes to stay late at cafés, and he understands on a deep level why they are both reluctant to go home at night. He tries to explain it to the younger waiter by saying, “He stays up because he likes it,” but the younger waiter dismisses this and says that the old man is lonely. Indeed, both the old man and the older waiter are lonely. The old man lives alone with only a niece to look after him, and we never learn what happened to his wife. He drinks alone late into the night, getting drunk in cafés. The older waiter, too, is lonely. He lives alone and makes a habit of staying out late rather than going home to bed. But there is more to the older waiter’s “insomnia,” as he calls it, than just loneliness. An unnamed, unspecified malaise seems to grip him. This malaise is not “a fear or dread,” as the older waiter clarifies to himself, but an overwhelming feeling of nothingness—an existential angst about his place in the universe and an uncertainty about the meaning of life. Whereas other people find meaning and comfort in religion, the older waiter dismisses religion as “nada”—nothing. The older waiter finds solace only in clean, well-lit cafés. There, life seems to make sense.

The older waiter recognizes himself in the old man and sees his own future. He stands up for the old man against the younger waiter’s criticisms, pointing out that the old man might benefit from a wife and is clean and neat when he drinks. The older waiter has no real reason to take the old man’s side. In fact, the old man sometimes leaves the café without paying. But the possible reason for his support becomes clear when the younger waiter tells the older waiter that he talks like an old man too. The older waiter is aware that he is not young or confident, and he knows that he may one day be just like the old man—unwanted, alone, and in despair. Ultimately, the older waiter is reluctant to close the café as much for the old man’s sake as for his own because someday he’ll need someone to keep a café open late for him.

The Younger Waiter

Brash and insensitive, the younger waiter can’t see beyond himself. He readily admits that he isn’t lonely and is eager to return home where his wife is waiting for him. He doesn’t seem to care that others can’t say the same and doesn’t recognize that the café is a refuge for those who are lonely. The younger waiter is immature and says rude things to the old man because he wants to close the café early. He seems unaware that he won’t be young forever or that he may need a place to find solace later in life too. Unlike the older waiter, who thinks deeply—perhaps too deeply—about life and those who struggle to face it, the younger waiter demonstrates a dismissive attitude toward human life in general. For example, he says the old man should have just gone ahead and killed himself and says that he “wouldn’t want to be that old.” He himself has reason to live, and his whole life is ahead of him. “You have everything,” the older waiter tells him. The younger waiter, immersed in happiness, doesn’t really understand that he is lucky, and he therefore has little compassion or understanding for those who are lonely and still searching for meaning in their lives.

Themes, Motifs, and Symbols

Themes

Life as Nothingness

In “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” Hemingway suggests that life has no meaning and that man is an insignificant speck in a great sea of nothingness. The older waiter makes this idea as clear as he can when he says, “It was all a nothing and man was a nothing too.” When he substitutes the Spanish word nada (nothing) into the prayers he recites, he indicates that religion, to which many people turn to find meaning and purpose, is also just nothingness. Rather than pray with the actual words, “Our Father who art in heaven,” the older waiter says, “Our nada who art in nada”—effectively wiping out both God and the idea of heaven in one breath. Not everyone is aware of the nothingness, however. For example, the younger waiter hurtles through his life hastily and happily, unaware of any reason why he should lament. For the old man, the older waiter, and the other people who need late-night cafés, however, the idea of nothingness is overwhelming and leads to despair.

The Struggle to Deal with Despair

The old man and older waiter in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” struggle to find a way to deal with their despair, but even their best method simply subdues the despair rather than cures it. The old man has tried to stave off despair in several unsuccessful ways. We learn that he has money, but money has not helped. We learn that he was once married, but he no longer has a wife. We also learn that he has unsuccessfully tried to commit suicide in a desperate attempt to quell the despair for good. The only way the old man can deal with his despair now is to sit for hours in a clean, well-lit café. Deaf, he can feel the quietness of the nighttime and the café, and although he is essentially in his own private world, sitting by himself in the café is not the same as being alone.

The older waiter, in his mocking prayers filled with the word nada, shows that religion is not a viable method of dealing with despair, and his solution is the same as the old man’s: he waits out the nighttime in cafés. He is particular about the type of café he likes: the café must be well lit and clean. Bars and bodegas, although many are open all night, do not lessen despair because they are not clean, and patrons often must stand at the bar rather than sit at a table. The old man and the older waiter also glean solace from routine. The ritualistic café-sitting and drinking help them deal with despair because it makes life predictable. Routine is something they can control and manage, unlike the vast nothingness that surrounds them.

Motifs

Loneliness

Loneliness pervades “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” and suggests that even though there are many people struggling with despair, everyone must struggle alone. The deaf old man, with no wife and only a niece to care for him, is visibly lonely. The younger waiter, frustrated that the old man won’t go home, defines himself and the old man in opposites: “He’s lonely. I’m not lonely.” Loneliness, for the younger waiter, is a key difference between them, but he gives no thought to why the old man might be lonely and doesn’t consider the possibility that he may one day be lonely too. The older waiter, although he doesn’t say explicitly that he is lonely, is so similar to the old man in his habit of sitting in cafés late at night that we can assume that he too suffers from loneliness. The older waiter goes home to his room and lies in bed alone, telling himself that he merely suffers from sleeplessness. Even in this claim, however, he instinctively reaches out for company, adding, “Many must have it.” The thought that he is not alone in having insomnia or being lonely comforts him.

Symbols

The Café

The café represents the opposite of nothingness: its cleanliness and good lighting suggest order and clarity, whereas nothingness is chaotic, confusing, and dark. Because the café is so different from the nothingness the older waiter describes, it serves as a natural refuge from the despair felt by those who are acutely aware of the nothingness. In a clean, brightly lit café, despair can be controlled and even temporarily forgotten. When the older waiter describes the nothingness that is life, he says, “It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order.” The it in the sentence is never defined, but we can speculate about the waiter’s meaning: although life and man are nothing, light, clealiness, and order can serve as substance. They can help stave off the despair that comes from feeling completely unanchored to anyone or anything. As long as a clean, well-lighted café exists, despair can be kept in check.