

ANALYSIS

“A Very Short Story” (1925)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“The fate of the male character in ‘A Very Short Story’ might...be thought of as one episode in the postwar adventures of Nick Adams. In a base-hospital in Padua, he falls in love with a nurse named Luz—an idea much expanded and altered in *A Farewell to Arms*. But when the young man returns to Chicago to get a good job so that he can marry Luz, he soon receives a letter saying that she has fallen in love with a major in the Arditi.”

Carlos Baker
Hemingway: The Writer as Artist
(Princeton 1952,1973) 130

“An outline of the human arms in the novel [*A Farewell to Arms*] is to be found among these early stories in a piece called ‘A Very Short Story.’ This sketch, less than two pages long, dealt quickly, as the novel does extensively, with the drinking and love-making in an Italian hospital of an American soldier, wounded in the leg, and a nurse, and had told of their love and their wish to get married. But where the book ends powerfully with the death in childbirth of the woman, the story dribbled off in irony. The lovers parted, the soldier leaving for home to get a job so that he could send for his sweetheart. Before long, however, the nurse wrote that she had a new lover who was going to marry her, though he never did; and then, shortly after receiving the letter, the soldier ‘contracted gonorrhoea from a sales girl in a loop department store while riding in a taxicab through Lincoln Park’.”

Philip Young
Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration
(Penn State 1952,1966) 89

“This is the story, is it not: a quasi-naturalistic slice of life that begins almost like a fairy tale (‘Once upon a time in another country...’)—and ends with the negation that proclaims the text’s realistic or naturalistic status?... A nineteen-year-old American Red Cross worker named Ernest Hemingway meets a Red Cross nurse named Agnes von Kurowsky, a twenty-six-year-old American woman, at a hospital in Milan, and falls in love with her. She calls him Kid and he calls her Mrs. Kid. When she volunteers for service in Florence during an influenza outbreak, he writes her many letters. (‘He wrote to her daily, sometimes twice a day. She answered as often as her duties would allow.’ Carlos Baker, *Ernest Hemingway* [1980] 71.) They continue to correspond when she moves to Treviso near Padua to help out during another epidemic. He travels around in Italy, but his wounds prevent him from returning to the front. He sees Agnes a few more times before leaving Italy for the States....

When Ernest leaves Italy from Genoa in January 1919, the romance is still sexually unconsummated (according to Agnes von Kurowsky herself and the best judgment of Michael Reynolds, who reports this in *Hemingway’s First War* [1976] and Carlos Baker, who discusses these events in *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story* [1969].) Hemingway in fact goes home believing that when he gets established in a job that will support two people, Agnes will return and marry him. What she believed at that time cannot be determined.... He still did not have a regular job when a letter from Agnes arrived in March 1919. This is the way his sister Marcelline describes the event:

‘For days Ernie had been watching the mails. He was irritable and on edge with the waiting. Then the letter came. After he read it he went to bed and was actually ill. We didn’t know what was the matter with Ernie at first. He did not respond to medical treatment, and he ran a temperature. Dad was worried about him. I went up to Ernie’s room to see if I could be of any help to him. Ernie thrust the letter toward me. “Read it,” he said from the depths of his grief. “No. I’ll tell you.” Then he turned to the wall. He was physically sick for several days but he did not mention the letter again. Ag, Ernie told me, was not coming

to America. She was going to marry an Italian major instead. In time Ernest felt better. He got out among his friends again. (Marcelline Hemingway, *At the Hemingways*, Boston, 1962, 188)

In June he received another letter from Agnes, in which she told him that her Italian lieutenant's (his actual rank) aristocratic family had forbidden the marriage, so she would be coming home unmarried after all. Ernest did not answer the letter but wrote a buddy from the ambulance unit about it: 'Had a very sad letter from Ag from Rome yesterday. She has fallen out with her Major. She is in a hell of a way mentally and says I should feel revenged for what she did to me. Poor damned kid. I'm sorry as hell for her. But there's nothing I can do. I loved her once and then she gypped me. And I don't blame her. But I set out to cauterize out her memory and I burnt it out with a course of booze and other women and now it's gone.' (Baker, *Selected Letters*, 25)

When the American publication of *In Our Time* was arranged, the little vignettes of the original *in our time* were used to separate the longer stories in the new volume and two of the original set were promoted to the status of stories. In this way the tenth vignette became 'A Very Short Story,' and Ag became Luz, Milan became Padua, and The Fair became a Loop department store. The changes were made, Hemingway said, to avoid possible libel suits: 'Ag is libelous, short for Agnes,' he wrote to Maxwell Perkins (discussing the 1938 publication of his collected stories—see Baker, *Selected Letters*, 469. Brooding still over this episode, Hemingway began a novel called 'Along With Youth,' in which Nick Adams, the hero, was to be followed in his adventures as an ambulance driver 'to a love affair with a nurse named Agnes' (Baker, *Ernest Hemingway*, 191). This manuscript stopped at page 27, with Nick still on a troop transport headed for Europe. But Hemingway continued to brood over this episode of his youth until he transformed Agnes into Catherine Barkley and laid her to rest in *A Farewell to Arms*."

Robert Scholes

"Decoding Papa: 'A Very Short Story' as Work and Text"

Semiotics and Interpretation (Yale 1982)

reprinted in *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*

ed. Jackson J. Benson

(Duke 1990) 37, 43-46

"'A Very Short Story' is a brief account of Hemingway's personal experience in Italy where, in the hospital after his 1918 wounding near the front, he and nurse Agnes von Kurowsky had a relationship that she soon brought to an end. The story progresses through odd shifts of tone. Early on, the protagonist typically exercises great self-control, going under the anesthetic 'holding tight on to himself' so that he would not 'blab...during the silly talky time.' Later, after praying in the Duomo, the couple wish to get married 'to make it so they could not lose it [their love].'

Thereafter, the story's serious tone dissolves into one of the most disconcertingly funny 'Dear John' letters ever written: 'The major of the battalion made love to Luz and she had never known Italians before, and finally wrote to the States that theirs had been only a boy and girl affair. She was sorry, and she knew he would probably not be able to understand, but might some day forgive her, and be grateful to her, and she expected, absolutely unexpectedly, to be married in the spring.' That near-contradictory 'she expected, absolutely unexpectedly' alone gives away the thorough insincerity of the letter. Rarely has Hemingway's technique of parataxis seemed so appropriate as in the airy insouciance of Luz's stumbling string of cliches, one added to the other in a deliberate evasion of emotional disclosure. And rarely has Hemingway's common technique of flat understatement served such good effect as in the story's bathetic climax: 'A Short time after he contracted gonorrhoea from a sales girl in a loop department store while riding in a taxicab through Lincoln Park.'

The punchline is cruelly funny because it is so incommensurate with the Italian experience. The messiness of disease and the transience of relationships consummated in moving taxis replace the old ethos of appropriate behavior ('holding on tight to himself'). Luz and the protagonist lose all sense of emotional strength and connectivity; and the story, likewise, fragments into disconnected styles and emotional colorings."

Thomas Strychacz

"In Our Time, Out of Season"

The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway
ed. Scott Donaldson
(Cambridge 1996) 72-73

Michael Hollister (2015)