

## ANALYSIS

“Wine of Wyoming” (1933)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“Of those who recognized the significance of ‘Wine of Wyoming’ [in *Winner Take Nothing*], Horace Gregory, writing for the *New York Herald Tribune*, identified it as one of the two stories (‘Gambler’ was the other) ‘that show a sudden expansion of Hemingway’s range.’ It was, Gregory claimed, ‘one of the few instances in contemporary literature where the short story may be regarded as a superlative work of art.’ Its ‘emotional truth,’ Gregory said, ‘has its source in the most universal of human experiences,’ and the story was successful because, in Gregory’s interpretation, ‘Hemingway is no longer content to present a situation and then let it answer for itself.’ In this latter point Gregory was setting ‘Wine of Wyoming’ apart from Hemingway stories to which critics objected on the grounds that the author was far too objective—that he merely ‘observed, overheard, impaled with his intelligence,’ as Louis Kronenberger complained in the *New York Times Book Review*.

What Gregory broadly called ‘universal human experience’ was defined somewhat more specifically by the *Cincinnati Enquirer’s* reviewer J. R. who found that ‘an expression of human sympathy’ was the dominant quality of ‘Wine of Wyoming,’ particularly in the contrast of ‘the sweet and generous natures of Madame Fontan and her husband’ and ‘the rudeness and vulgarity of their American customers.’ Perhaps the brevity of a newspaper review cut short further development of this idea; it deserved elaboration, for the contrast of immigrant European generosity and native American crudity is the heart of the story and a comment particularly on the American experience as well as upon ‘universal experience’....

After the 1933 reviews of *Winner Take Nothing*, despite favorable mention, ‘Wine of Wyoming’ went into eclipse...a literary orphan... ‘Wine of Wyoming’ has never been separately reprinted or anthologized. (The odd exception to this bibliographical fact is its translation into many other languages, for foreign editions; it can be found in Norwegian, Korean, and Czech, among others.)... It is, if anything, quite domestic—hardly ‘Hemingwayesque’... Yet it is quintessentially in the Hemingway fashion in its rhetorical obliqueness, perhaps Hemingway’s most distinctive literary trait.

Like almost all of Hemingway’s fiction, ‘Wine of Wyoming’ began with the artist’s personal experience. After six years in Europe, Hemingway returned to the United States with his second wife Pauline Pfeiffer in the spring of 1928, via Havana to Key West. In the summer of that year, he left Key West for the Rocky Mountains, partly to go fishing but mainly to work on the draft of *A Farewell to Arms* away from the tropical heat and humidity of his new home. After staying at a dude ranch for a few days, Hemingway abruptly left and took up residence at another ranch less frequently by tourists near Sheridan, Wyoming.

In Sheridan he took Pauline in late August to meet Charles and Alice Moncini, a French couple who operated a speakeasy at their house, where one could sit ‘on the vine-shaded back porch drinking cold home-brewed beer, with a view across the yellow grainfields towards the distant brown mountains,’ and where the Moncinis and the Hemingways ‘all spoke French together’ (Baker, *Like Story*, 252). Because 1928 was a presidential election year, with the vote between the Roman Catholic Alfred E. Smith and the postwar reconstruction expert Herbert Hoover only a few months in the future, conversation turned naturally to politics, as well as to Prohibition; the noble experiment of the Eighteenth Amendment, which the Moncinis (and much of the country) were flouting, had been law since 1920 and would continue so until 1933.

The summer of 1928 was a time of consolidation and recommencing for Hemingway. He had a new marriage, a new son, a new book nearing completion, and, in effect, a new country to enjoy and understand.... In this interlude full of optimism and promise, it is not surprising that he resolved...to ‘put

the Moncinis into a story, a character sketch full of cleanliness and order, a quiet account of simple people who made and drank the wine of Wyoming' (Baker, *Life Story*, 252)... 'I write some stories absolutely as they happen i.e. 'Wine of Wyoming'...others I invent completely... I'm a reporter *and an imaginative writer* and I can still imagine plenty and there will be stories to write as they happened as long as I live' (*Letters*, 400)... While it is possible that Hemingway's own example 'Wine of Wyoming' was recorded 'absolutely as it happened—his biographer Baker says on uncertain evidence that at the Moncinis 'Ernest listened intently, watching the faces and trying to remember all that was said' (*Life Story*, 252)—it is evident that this story is more complex, and far more interpretive, than the 'skillful reporting' of a *Toronto Star* dispatch....

The apparent tranquility of an afternoon with the Moncinis of Sheridan, Wyoming, differs in both subject and tone from...other dramatic moments of suffering and sacrifice, but the artistic goal is the same: to intensify representation into what Hemingway later enigmatically called 'a fourth and fifth dimension' (*Green Hills of Africa*, 27). In 'Wine of Wyoming,' the technique is applied to the domestic and business affairs of the Fontans—immigrants from the provinces of France—and their customers in the home-brewed beer and wine trade. The setting in the American West (which Hemingway was seeing for the first time in 1928) is mildly unusual but not exotic; the Fontans are fairly common folk, and the narrator is rather noncommittal. The ingredients seem far less promising as literary material than desperate outsiders of Paris or the Gulf or bullfighters or soldiers. Yet the episode at the Moncinis is unpromising material somewhat in the way that a solo fishing trip to the Fox River in Upper Michigan was unpromising... 'a story in which nothing happened'...one of the most remarkable demonstrations of the relationship between surface and subtext in all of Hemingway's writing and one of his best works of fiction.

The primary narrative of 'Wine of Wyoming,' the surface story, offers charm, local color, and a boyish delight in the minor crime of drinking illegal alcohol. Read only on this level, the story is a deft character sketch mainly of the talkative Mme Fontan who rattles on from incident to opinion to home truth in a non sequitur torrent of anglicized French. The humor falls short of hilarity, but it does justify Carlos Baker's verdict that Hemingway has 'unappreciated skills as a comic writer' (*Writer as Artist*, 141). But comedy is not Hemingway's metier (though he does it with skill here and elsewhere), and a character sketch, however deft, is not the story's only merit....

The Fontans are undeniably good and simple people trying to live a good and simple life in their new land. They made good beer and wine, and their illegal but ordinary business brings relaxation and pleasure to clients who value a good drink in good company. Nothing could be more 'normal' than this. The generous, voluble Fontans in their cool and pleasant wine garden inhabit a world that seems completely different from the café of 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.' But beneath the surface of the Fontans' 'simple...cleanliness and order' is a world surprisingly discordant and ungovernable. Their world fortunately lacks the horror of *nada* and the infinite despair held at bay only by order and light and warmth, but it is nonetheless a world where things go wrong, where hopes and wishes fail, and where calm order is always under threat.

The opening episode is a thematic statement of the story's tension between order and disorder, satisfaction and disappointment, completeness and incompleteness. The unnamed narrator is relaxing in the shade of the Fontans' back porch, about to drink the cold beer that Mme Fontan has brought from the cellar. A care arrives, two men get out, and one abruptly demands, 'Where's Sam?' When Mme. Fontan replies, 'He ain't here. He's at the mines,' the visitor asks with equal abruptness, 'You got some beer?' Mme Fontan retorts, 'That's a last bottle. All gone.' Protesting 'You know me,' the man asks again for some beer, but Mme Fontan maintains, 'Ain't got any beer.' The men leave, one of them walking unsteadily. Mme Fontan solicitously tells the narrator that he can drink his beer, which he had placed out of sight on the floor, and explains her actions: 'They're drunk. That's what makes the trouble' (SS, 450). Later she confides to the narrator a shocking, amazing incident: 'Americans came here and they put whiskey in the beer...'

Some of the customers who drink at the Fontans' may be 'pigs'and 'dirty bastards,' but others are a better class of clientele.... The friendly and agreeable Fontans, who provide good beer and wine and companionship in a puritanically 'dry' country, can't comprehend the eagerness of drinkers who mix

moonshine in well-made beer and thus intentionally make themselves so drunk that they vomit on the table and on their own shoes. 'My God,' says the incredulous Mme Fontan, 'I don't understand *that!*' (460). What she doesn't understand is the drinkers' enthusiasm for extreme sensations and their unwillingness or inability to appreciate the moderate sociableness of drinking a product that she and her husband are proud of. The Fontans are abused and insulted not only by their rougher customers but by the Volstead Act enforcers. Arrested and convicted three times for violation of the Prohibition law, M. Fontan has been imprisoned and fined seven hundred fifty-five dollars for the crime of making and selling good wine and beer, for what was legal back in Lens and St. Etienne is illegal in Sheridan. The money for the fines came from the husband's work in the mines and the wife's earnings by doing washing; wine at a dollar a liter and beer at ten cents a bottle produce profit more social than fiscal.

The discussion of the hazards of their trade leads the Fontans into conversation with the narrator about the upcoming 1928 presidential election. Naturally, the Fontans favor Alfred E. Smith—'Schmidt,' they say—a Catholic who favored repeal of Prohibition. Yet the Fontans can not fully believe that Smith, a candidate for the leadership of the country, is a Catholic, and they accept the fact only on the authority of the narrator.... 'Did he ever live in France?' (457). Their doubt is not merely political naivete or lack of factual information. It is something much deeper, an insight about America that is anything but naive.... The Americans don't like you to be catholique,' Mme Fontan says, adding by way of sharp illustration, 'It's like the dry law' (457). The problem with America, as the Fontans had earlier said about their first impression of their new country, is... Too many churches, like too many books, 'c'est une maladie' (456).

The sickness of which the Fontans complain is intolerance, particularly, as Kenneth G. Johnston points out in an analysis of political commentary in 'Wine of Wyoming,' intolerance for foreigners in America. The parallels between the Fontans' disappointments and indignities and the anti-Catholic, anti-immigrant, anti-alcohol prejudices against the Democratic presidential candidate are strong, as Johnston demonstrates in elaborating his thesis that the story is Hemingway's criticism of the parochial, intolerant country he had come home to. In fact, the narrator himself claims to be Catholic (457), and his appreciation for a good drink is self-evident, traits that connect him with Smith and the Fontans. But when asked directly if Smith will be elected—as if he, a 'real' American, despite his religion and his residence abroad, could foresee the future—the narrator answers simply 'No' (458). The narrator's monosyllabic wisdom, which indeed proved true, sets the pervading tone of the story: failed hope, rejected optimism, alienation.

The doomed Smith candidacy is not the only illustration of the Fontans' problem. One of their sons is married to a lazy, two-hundred-twenty-five-pound wife, a native American 'Indienne' who reads in bed all day, neither cooks nor works, and feeds him 'beans en can,' yet [he is crazy for her]. The younger son Andre, a teenager 'on the way to becoming Americanized,' cadges a quarter for the movies but plans to pay the child's fifteen-cent admission, not the full fee, thus saving a dime for himself. Andre also tries to take a rifle and go on a water-rat shooting expedition, but his parents forbid it... And finally, Fontan, trying to show his best hospitality to the appreciative narrator, finds himself locked out of his son's house where the latest vintage is hidden.... He suffers the embarrassment of not being a good host and the narrator is left without a taste of the wine of Wyoming—the wine that symbolically can't be drunk, and ironically can't even be got out of its secret hiding place, even though it can be seen through the window. Significantly, Fontan doesn't have the key, and the neighbor's key won't turn the lock.

The Fontans' defeat is complete. Mme Fontan, who earlier had 'looked like Mrs. Santa Claud, clean and rosy-faced and white-haired' (458), now lost 'all the happiness from her face' (464), and Fontan, 'incoherent and crushed...sat down in a corner with his head in his hands' (465). Sensing that they had overstayed their time and were intruding on the Fontans' sad disgrace, the narrator and his companion leave, with a halfhearted promise to return two years later. Once away from the house, they realize that they 'ought to have gone last night' (466), before the good times had turned bad. Wistfully, the companion says, 'I hope they have a lot of good luck' (466). The narrator realistically says, 'They won't...and Schmidt won't be President either' (466)... Driving out of Sheridan and away from the 'ruined' (466) Fontans, the visitors admire the country, yet their thoughts return to their hosts... On this note of pessimism and regret, their story about 'cleanliness and order' ends.

Though the story focuses on the Fontans and uses their misfortunes to express a mood of dissatisfaction with America, it also portrays a writer-narrator changing from a sympathetic friend who enjoys good wine to a pessimistic doubter who foresees a cold future in which the Fontans won't have good luck and Al Smith won't be elected president. What begins as a warmly comic character sketch ends with cool detachment....its four distinct parts move progressively away from anecdotal description of the Fontans toward self-revelation by the nameless narrator himself.... The storyteller, who 'is immediately established as 'one of them' (Flora, 224)—that is, he shares with the Fontans certain attitudes and values—has by the end of the story evaded his host's invitation and made a promise that he probably won't keep....

'The story's irony,' Sheldon Norman Grebstein says, 'apprehended simultaneously by the narrator and the reader, is that a seemingly trivial decision (breaking a promise in a small social occasion) can cause irreparable damage to a fragile relationship and produce strong moral consequences' (64). In this sense the point of 'Wine of Wyoming' is not—or not only—to demonstrate a theme similar to that of 'Cross-Country Snow,' an expatriate's unhappiness with his return to America. 'Wine of Wyoming' may be 'Hemingway's international short story...his most Jamesian' because it juxtaposes the values of two cultures (Flora, 224), but even more importantly it reiterates an established Hemingway theme, the dominant theme of *Winner Take Nothing*: the ironic, if not tragic, outcome....

If 'Wine of Wyoming' is about the 'sweet and generous natures' of its main characters the Fontans, as an early reviewer said, it is about sweetness and generosity undermined by failure and repaid in despair. And if it is about 'cleanliness and order,' those traits are only a momentary stay against chaos, as they are in the far more famous 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,' a story also from the early thirties, published under the same descriptive title *Winner Take Nothing*.

'Wine of Wyoming' differs superficially from other, more typical stories of Hemingway from the period 1925-33, but structurally and aesthetically it is consistent with his work of that time. Missing from it are the characters and events that offended critics whose tastes were formed, evidently, in a gentler era, and who peevishly asked Hemingway to abandon his 'consummate reporting of a highly masculine and often brutal world' (Kronenberger, 6) in favor of a new departure into a less melodramatic, less violent world. 'Wine of Wyoming' is in fact less overtly violent and dramatic than, for example, 'Indian Camp,' but like that early story, also set in an isolated American locale, 'Wine' depends for its sense and force not on surface events but on a powerful undercurrent of unstated attitudes and unvoiced conclusions....

Although in this story the means of expression differ somewhat from those of earlier work, the dominant tone continues Hemingway's view of the postwar world: loss, alienation, regret, mortality. Even in the trivialities of life in Sheridan, Wyoming, the story reiterates the inevitability of suffering and destruction.... 'Wine of Wyoming' exhibits all of the Hemingway structural and stylistic hallmarks—strength of characterization, lucidity of plot, realism of dialogue (even in Anglo-French)—and it confirms once again the central Hemingway credo that, as he said in 1929, while this story was evolving, 'The world kills the very good and the very gentle and the very brave impartially' (*A Farewell to Arms*, 249). 'Wine of Wyoming' is not then an oddity to be set apart from the mainstream of Hemingway's work. It is consistent with the art, the viewpoint, and the attitude of his best."

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