10 CRITICS DISCUSS

"A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" (1933)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

"I guess the story that tops them all for leave-out was 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.' I left everything out of that one…. May be my favorite story."

Ernest Hemingway

"'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place' is not only one of Ernest Hemingway's shortest stories, it is also one of the shortest stories in the language…it is a model of the short story, with all the virtues that attend it as a *genre* singularly lighted… The quality of this story exists in the fact that it says so much in so little space…it combines maximum economy with maximum implication…. The miracle, in Hemingway, is that nothing, *nada y pues nada*, totally experienced, and explored with such tense unwillingness to talk about it, is made to mean as much as nothingness can mean. He makes, somehow, from nothingness, a moving splendor….

There are few physical details—the tree, the shutters, the light and cleanliness, the shining steam pressure coffee machine—and these are presented in baldest possible words. The few details that appear more than once appear each time exactly as they were before, which is to say that their paucity is increased in the repetition. The poverty becomes richer in poverty. As the diction is of the sparsest, so the rhythms of the sentences are either short and blunt, truncated like the characters' experience, or loose, running on to no organized syntactical end. When these sentences are long, they are long because of coordinating conjunctions, *ands* and *buts*, which suggest that the several elements in the sentence have equal importance or unimportance, exactly as the story tells us that everything has equal value, therefore no value….

Early in the story Hemingway has already established, through his almost unique ability to convey in English the quality of a foreign language, the feeling that the scene is Spain, that this is a Spanish café. Then, more than half way through the story, we encounter Spanish words… There is, in short, careful preparation for the substitution of 'nada' for 'nothing,' suggesting that there is some special force in the Spanish equivalent of our word [and] Hemingway was determined to employ it….

In the whole vocabulary of criticism, 'style' is one of the most difficult words to define; but if we are looking for an example of what style *does*, 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place' is among the most lucid. Hemingway's subject, the exhaustion of value in the world he knows, is perfectly investigated and invested by his bare style…This style, furthermore, is an interesting technical substitute for the conventional narrator or commentator in fiction. Hemingway's own moral view disdains any 'talk' about suffering, any such loss of 'dignity' in even the most ignoble situation…. The verbal economy of Hemingway's style expresses directly his preference for mute suffering in the face of a blankly intolerable universe. His style is not only his subject, it is his view of life."

Mark Schorer, ed.
*The Story: A Critical Anthology*
(Prentice-Hall, 1950,1967) 323-25

"'A Clean Well-Lighted Place' is a fairly 'typical' Hemingway story. An old man has tried to commit suicide, and has failed. He sits alone in a café, until late at night an unsympathetic waiter sends him along and closes the place. Another waiter is the central figure in the story, and he feels quite differently from his colleague about those who need a clean, well-lighted café to sit up late in. There is little else in life to help support it. 'Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee,' he thinks, echoing Mr. Frazer ["The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio"] as he heads homeward in the realization that there is nothing else he can do but go to his room and to bed. The story ends with a characteristic understatement.

[Stephen] Crane's story ['An Episode of War'] is of a lieutenant who, while distributing a ration of coffee, is suddenly shot in the arm. The wound is not serious, but in the conclusion of battle it is not properly cared for, and the arm is amputated. With the same flat, reserved, depressed understatement and absolute lack of comment for which Hemingway is well known, Crane ends 'An Episode of War': 'And this is the story of how the lieutenant lost his arm. When he reached home, his sisters, his mother, his wife, sobbed for a long time at the sight of the flat sleeve. "Oh, well," he said, standing shamefaced amid these tears. "I don't suppose it matters so much as all that." 'After all, he said to himself, it is probably only insomnia. Many must have it'."

Philip Young
*Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration*
(Penn State, 1952, 1966) 195-96

"'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place' [is] a superb story and quite properly one of Hemingway's favorites. It shows once again that remarkable union of the naturalistic and the symbolic which is possibly his central triumph in the realm of practical esthetics. The 'place' of the title is a Spanish café. Before the story is over, this place has come to stand as an image of light, cleanness, and order against the dark chaos of its counter-symbol in the story: the idea of *nada*, or nothingness. The *nada*-concept is located and pinned to the map by a kind of triangulation-process. The three elements consist in the respective relationships of an old waiter and a young waiter to an elderly man who sits drinking brandy every night in their clean, well-lighted café.

The old waiter and the young waiter are in opposition. They stand (by knowledge, temperament, experience, and insight) on either side of one of the great fences which exist in the world for the purpose of dividing sheep from goats. The young waiter would like to go home to bed, and is impatient with the old drinker of brandy. The old waiter, on the other hand, knows very well why the old patron comes often, gets drunk, stays late, and leaves only when he must. For the old waiter, like the old patron, belongs to the great brotherhood: all those 'who like to stay late at the café…all those who do not want to go to bed…all those who need a light for the night.' He is reluctant to see his own café close—both because he can sympathize with all the benighted brethren, and for the very personal reason that he, too, needs the cleanness, the light, and the order of the place as an insulation against the dark.

The unspoken brotherly relationship between the old waiter and the old patron is dramatized in the opening dialogue, where the two waiters discuss the drinker of brandy as he sits quietly at one of the tables. The key notion here is that the young and rather stupid waiter has not the slightest conception of the special significance which the old waiter attaches to his young confrere's careless and unspecialized use of the word *nothing*…. They are speaking in Spanish. For the old waiter, the word *nothing* (or *nada*) contains huge actuality. The great skill displayed in the story is the development, through the most carefully controlled understatement, of the young waiter's mere nothing into the old waiter's Something—a Something called Nothing, which is so huge, terrible, overbearing, inevitable, and omnipresent that, once experienced, it can never be forgotten. Sometimes in the day, or for a time at night in a clean, well-lighted place, it can be held temporarily at bay. What links the old waiter and the old patron most profoundly is their brotherhood in arms against this beast in the jungle."

Carlos Baker
*Hemingway: The Writer as Artist*
(Princeton, 1952-73) 123-25

"When Hemingway writes his 'nihilistic' short story, 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,' he can create a character who speaks for him because the story is, finally, not nihilistic at all. Though we have no reason to believe that Hemingway's heart is not in the writer's prayer to *nada*, to nothingness, we know that his heart is also with the waiter in his desire to provide a clean, well-lighted place for all the solitary wanderers who must face the bitterness of *nada*. Unlike some other of Hemingway's stories, in which characters are allowed to speak for his values without having earned, as it were, the right to do so, in this story the author's spokesman carries real power. Expressing a mood of bitterness against the darkness combined with a determination to fight the darkness with light—if only the clean, well-lighted place of art itself—the story can accommodate a dramatized spokesman of a very simple, direct kind. But if Hemingway's effort had really been to substitute *nada* for all our briefs, if he had really been writing a polemic of despair, the

direct voice of the waiter, muted as it is, would have been unacceptable. On the other hand, the poignancy of the writer's vision of nada would be reduced if a reliable narrator intruded to explain the rather flat, comforting points about the writer that I have just made here."

Wayne C. Booth
*The Rhetoric of Fiction*
(U Chicago, 1961) 299-300

"In 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,' the burden of the story is carried by the contrast between a young, unaware waiter who has no feeling for a desperate old man who dreads leaving the clean, well-lighted café, and a middle-aged waiter who knows what it is to experience the horror of nothingness. The older waiter describes the contrast in terms that apply as well to Mrs. Bell [in 'The Killers'], the tourists in *The Old Man and the Sea*, and the other impervious characters so essential to Hemingway's view of the world: 'Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it was all nada."

Robert P. Weeks, ed.
Introduction
*Hemingway: A Collection of Critical Essays*
(Prentice-Hall Twentieth Century Views, 1962) 15

"In…'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,' we find the best description of this world that underlies Hemingway's world of violent action….the sleepless man—the man obsessed by death, by the meaninglessness of the world, by nothingness, by nada—is one of the recurring symbols in the work of Hemingway. In this phase Hemingway is a religious writer. The despair beyond plenty of money, the despair that makes a sleeplessness beyond insomnia, is the despair felt by a man who hungers for the sense of order and assurance that men seem to find in religious faith, but who cannot find grounds for his faith."

Robert Penn Warren
Introduction, *A Farewell to Arms*
*Three Novels by Ernest Hemingway*
(Scribner's, 1962) xiv-xv

"So far as the mood of Hemingway's story is concerned, it is in no way frantic, despairing, or 'nihilistic.' Rather, its tone is one of somber and clear courage. As a matter of fact, human moods and reactions to the encounter with Nothingness vary considerably from person to person, and from culture to culture. The Chinese Taoists found the Great Void tranquilizing, peaceful, even joyful. For the Buddhists in India, the idea of Nothing evoked a mood of universal compassion for all creatures caught in the toils of an existence that is ultimately groundless. In the traditional culture of Japan the idea of Nothingness pervades the exquisite modes of aesthetic feeling displayed in painting, architecture, and even the ceremonial rituals of daily life. But Western man, up to his neck in things, objects, and the business of mastering them, recoils with anxiety from any possible encounter with Nothingness and labels talk of it as 'negative'—which is to say, morally reprehensible….

Nothingness has, in fact, become one of the chief themes in modern art and literature, whether it is directly named as such or merely drifts through the work as the ambience in which the human figures live, move, and have their being…. 'Some live in it and never know it,' writes Hemingway in the story 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,' which presents in its six or seven pages a vision of Nothing that is perhaps as powerful as any in modern art; and he continues, 'It was all a nothing, and man is a nothing too.' The example of Hemingway is valuable here, for he is not an artist inspired by intellectual themes; quite the contrary, he is a reporter and a poet intent on reporting what it is he really sees in experience, and what has seen and reports to us in this story is the Nothing that sometimes rises up before the eyes of human beings…to reject Hemingway's vision of the Nothing of Nothingness, might well be to close our eyes to our own experience…. Hemingway's story may seem a tiny thing to pit against the central tradition of Western thought, but one has to take the experience of the real where one finds it; genuine witnesses to experience are so few and far between that we cannot afford not to listen to one, even at the discomfort of having to think in a way that is unfamiliar to us."

William Barrett
*Irrational Man: A Study in Existential Philosophy*

(Doubleday/Anchor, 1962) 62-63, 285

"In 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place'…the old waiter says, 'What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well.' But although the old waiter seems to speak from the depths of nihilism, he suggests a remedy against the feeling of nothingness: it is for the lonely man to sit all night in a bright, pleasant café where he will be surrounded with order and decorum. That appears to be an essential statement, and we can see more clearly in other stories that Hemingway's real subject is the barriers that can be erected against fear and loneliness and the void."

Malcolm Cowley
"Mr. Papa and the Parracides"
*--And I Worked at the Writer's Trade: Chapters of Literary History, 1918-1978*
(Penguin, 1979) 28

"Of the two issues recently engaging critical commentary on 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,' one, largely thematic, was favored until the mid-1970s and then was overshadowed by the second, largely textual. To that time almost all the criticism focused on whether the older waiter's vision of *nada* entailed a desperate negation of meaning or a final but courageous affirmation in the face of chaos. Most critics took the latter view, and their position found persuasive support in Annette Benert's nice perception that the older waiter was smart enough to 'go one step beyond Beckett's tramps,' to become 'neither a hero nor a saint, but, to borrow from Camus, that more ambitious being, a man.' Steven Hoffman concurred and advanced her argument with evidence drawn from the earliest of the Nick Adams stories to the latest set in Africa. But by the later 1970s the controversy—for some instances, a polite term—over the attribution of the two waiters' dialogue was about to become a critical field in itself. And deservedly so, for more than many specializations, it demanded of its candidates a familiarity with critical theory, biography, and textual studies, as well as a good share of common sense.

The story had been published in 1933 with the dialogue that attributes the statement that the old man's 'niece cut him down---first to the older waiter who then attributes it to the younger one. No one seemed to notice that confusion for twenty-four years; arguments persisted for another twenty; and finally in 1977, Hans-Joachim Kann looked at the story's surviving manuscript. Two years later Warren Bennett studies that manuscript in precise detail to conclude that the confusion originated in a series of revisions and was then preserved through two publications until Scribner's, on the advice of some scholars, revised the dialogue in 1965. But by then, a critical to-do: some critics called for the restoration of the original dialogue, some simply for the revisionists' heads, and one discovered that Hemingway himself had told an inquisitive reader that the original dialogue seemed fine to him (George Monteiro, 1974).

For five years following Bennett's 1979 article his major opponent was David Kerner. Kerner challenged his reading of the manuscript and argued that the convention of metronomic dialogue (alternating speakers indicated only by paragraphs) was countered by another long tradition of antimetronomic dialogue in Hemingway and others; and in two articles he compiled an anthology of examples (1979,1985).

George H. Thomson, in an admirably conciliatory essay, tried to resolve the dispute, concluding that the original text was not corrupt, that the conversation may violate convention, and that, although 'it requires some ingenuity of reading,' one can make sense of the 1933 dialogue. Kerner refused the overture with a reply in 1984, and Warren Bennett bided his time until 1990 with a long and persuasive counterstatement, that—is it too much to hope?—may settle the issue. Although the controversy may finally rest on whether or not Hemingway nodded when he wrote and edited, it has raised more important biographical, critical, and textual issues than any other in the history of Hemingway criticism, and we are all indebted to those scholars who took a stand…. The new textual studies that drew on the stories' manuscripts and published variants began with Scott Donaldson's essay on 'Canary for One' in 1978…a year before the 'Clean, Well-Lighted Place' industry was established."

Paul Smith
"A Partial Review: Critical Essays on the Short Stories, 1976-1989"
*New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*

ed. Jackson J. Benson
(Duke, 1990) 384-85, 389

"One of his most frequently discussed tales, 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place' is justly regarded as one of the stylistic masterpieces of Ernest Hemingway's distinguished career in short fiction. Not only does it represent Hemingway at his understated, laconic best, but, according to Carlos Baker, 'It shows once again that remarkable union of the naturalistic and the symbolic which is possibly his central triumph in the realm of practical aesthetics.' In a mere five pages, almost entirely in dialogue and interior monologue, the tale renders a complex series of interactions between three characters in a Spanish café just prior to and immediately after closing: a stoic old waiter, a brash young waiter, and a wealthy but suicidal old man given to excessive drink….critics have generally come to see the piece as a nihilistic low point in Hemingway's career, a moment of profound despair both for his characters and the author….

The clean, well-lighted place is not actually a 'place' at all; rather, it is a metaphor for an attitude toward the self and its existential context, a psychological perspective which, like the café itself with its fabricated conveniences and electric light, is man-made, artificial. The 'cleanliness' of the metaphor connotes a personal sense of order, however artificial and temporary, carved out within the larger chaos of the universe, a firm hold on the self with which one can meet any contingency. By 'light' Hemingway refers to a special kind of vision, the clear-sightedness and absolute lack of illusion necessary to look into the darkness and thereby come to grips with the *nada* which is everywhere. At the same time, vision must also be directed at the self so as to assure *its* cleanness. With cleanness and light, then, physical locale is irrelevant. Whoever manages to internalize these qualities carries the clean, well-lighted place with him, even into the very teeth of the darkness. The degree to which the Hemingway character can develop and maintain this perspective determines his success (or lack thereof) in dealing with the Void.

The man who does achieve the clean, well-lighted place is truly an existential hero, both in the Kierkegaardian and Heideggerian senses of the term…. In his relationship to nada, the old man of 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place' is cast as the polar opposite of the young waiter. Said to be eighty years old, virtually deaf, and recently widowed, he is 'in despair' in spite of his reputed wealth and has attempted suicide shortly before the story begins. Unlike the young waiter, he has the light of unclouded vision because he has clearly seen the destructive effects of time and circumstance on love and the self and directly witnessed nada in its death mask. But unlike the old waiter, he has not been able to sustain a satisfactory mode of being in the face of these discoveries. He therefore seeks escape from his knowledge either through the bottle or the total denial of life in suicide. Undoubtedly, the old man senses the importance of the clean, well-lighted place, but to him it is very literally a 'place' and thereby no more helpful in combating nada than Nick's ski slope. That it is inadequate is suggested imagistically at the outset; darkness has indeed invaded this character's 'place,' for he sits 'in the shadows the leaves of the trees made against the electric light.'

What seems to offer the old man the little balance he possesses, and thus helps keep him alive, is a modicum of internal cleanness and self-possession, his dignity or style. Of course, this is an issue of great impact in Hemingway in that an ordered personal style is one of the few sources of value in an otherwise meaningless universe. The old waiter draws attention to this pitiful figure's style when he rebukes the young waiter for callously characterizing the old man as 'a nasty old thing': 'This old man is clean. He drinks without spilling. Even now, drunk.' But even this vestige of grace has been compromised over time. While the old man leaves the café 'with dignity,' he is 'walking unsteadily'….

The old waiter definitely stands apart from the other two characters in 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.' If the running controversy over dialogue attribution has thrown some doubt on whether he or his younger partner first learns of the old man's attempted suicide, it has done nothing to contradict earlier assumptions on which of the two is more sensitive to the reasons for it. It is evident throughout that the old waiter's insight into the word nothing he so frequently uses is much broader. He recognizes from the first that the old man's despair is not a reaction to a material lack but to a basic metaphysical principle. Thus, he is unable to delude himself into a bogus 'confidence.' When he responds to the youth's boasting with 'You have everything,' he is clearly being ironic; the latter indeed has 'everything,' except a firm hold on the 'nothing' which underlies 'everything.' They are 'of two different kinds' because the old waiter knows the

ability to withstand the dark 'is not only a question of youth and confidence although those things are very beautiful.' In spite of their superficial beauty, both the transitory condition of youth and the illusory confidence that so often goes with it are clearly inadequate tools with which to combat the darkness….

Instead of lapsing into despair or escaping into drunkenness, this character displays true metaphysical courage in raising the concept of nada to a central article in his overtly existentialist creed, climaxing with his mock prayer of adoration, 'Hail nothing, nothing is with thee.' Perhaps even more importantly, he refuses to limit himself to abstract speculation but willingly embraces the impact of universal nothingness on his own person. Thus, in response to the barman's question, 'What's yours?' he demonstrates the ironic sense of humor that typifies him throughout by unflinchingly answering, 'Nada.' No other statement in the tale so clearly designates the old waiter as the central figure of Hemingway's 1933 collection: he is the 'winner' who truly takes 'nothing' as his only possible reward.

If his stoic courage in the shadow of the Void differentiates the old waiter from the old man, so does his method for dealing with it. Again, the old waiter provides some grounds for confusing the two modes of existence when he insists upon the importance of a purely physical haven: 'I am one of those who like to stay late at the café…' Yet, he does more than merely accept the dubious protection of an already established 'place'; he is, in fact, the keeper of the 'clean, well-lighted place,' the one who maintains both its cleanness and its light. To cite Cleanth Brooks on this subject, 'The order and light are supplied by *him*. They do *not* reflect an inherent, though concealed, order in the universe. What little meaning there is in the world is imposed upon that world by man.' Given the stark contrast between his café and the distinctly unclean and ill-lighted bar he frequents after work, his almost ritualistic efforts to furnish and consistently maintain these essential qualities are definitely not representative of those around him. Finally, the old waiter's clean, well-lighted place is distinctly portable—transcending 'place' altogether—because it is so thoroughly internalized. He carries it in the form of equanimity and dignity to the shabby *bodega*, and he carries it home as well."

Steven K. Hoffman
"*Nada* and the Clean, Well-Lighted Place: The Unity of Hemingway's Short Fiction"
*New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*
ed. Jackson J. Benson
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Michael Hollister (2015)