

ANALYSIS

“My Old Man” (1925)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“‘My Old Man,’ a good piece in its own right, is Hemingway’s version of one of [Sherwood] Anderson’s best efforts, the widely reprinted ‘I Want to Know Why,’ which had appeared two years earlier. Both stories are about horse racing, and are told by boys in their own vernacular. In each case the boy has to confront mature problems while undergoing a painful disillusionment with an older man he had been strongly attached to. It doesn’t look like coincidence....

The story is, by the way, one of only two that escaped the theft of the suitcase at the Gare de Lyon: ‘Lincoln Steffens had sent it out to some editor who sent it back’ (*A Movable Feast*). Indeed it never was published at all until Edward O’Brien broke his rules and put it in his *Best Short Stories* of the year, otherwise culled from the magazines. (‘I laughed and drank some more beer’: O’Brien had in addition dedicated the volume to Hemingway, who was almost completely unknown, and ‘after all that he had spelled the name wrong.’)”

Philip Young
Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration
(Penn State 1952,1966) 177

“It was an invented story about a boy who learned with sick dismay that his adored jockey father was a crook. Ernest drew on his memories of the San Siro race track in Milan and his more recent observations at Enghien and Auteuil, where he and Hadley had been betting on the horses whenever they had enough money. The narrative manner showed traces of the influence of Sherwood Anderson, though Ernest was never willing to admit it. ‘The only writing that was any good was what you made up, what you imagined,’ he wrote two years later. ‘Like when [you] wrote “My Old Man” [you’d] never seen a jockey killed and the next week Georges Parfremont was killed at that very jump and that was the way it looked’....

As for the alleged debt to Anderson, Ernest could not agree. ‘My Old Man’ was about a boy and his father and some race horses. Sherwood had also written about boys and horses, but ‘very differently.’ Ernest was sure that he had not been inspired by Anderson, whom he knew pretty well but had not seen in the flesh for several years. Sherwood’s recent work seemed ‘to have gone to hell, perhaps from people in New York telling him too much how good he was.’ But Ernest was very fond of him. He had written good stories.”

Carlos Baker
Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story
(Scribner’s 1969) 100-01, 119

“Though often seen as the weakest story in the collection, ‘My Old Man’ remains pertinent to *In Our Time*’s exploration of corrupt social systems, innocence betrayed, and its near-obsessive evocation of toppled father figures, who fail through lack of personal authority (the doctor) or because of their obedience to strict cultural regimes (Krebs’ father, the Indian father). But the implications of the father’s death in ‘My Old Man’ are actually quite different. ‘Seems like when they get started they don’t leave a guy nothing,’ concludes the young narrator, laying the blame on an unspecified ‘they’ composed of corrupt owners and jockeys and in particular the unsympathetic bettors who claim that the boy’s father ‘had it coming to him on the stuff he’s pulled.’

Yet the boy’s father dies accidentally after extricating himself from the corrupt system in which he was enmeshed—and which places no obstacle to prevent him from pursuing his racing elsewhere. His death results either from a particularly virulent form of poetic justice (which leaves George Gardner, who is still throwing races, untouched) or from a kind of perverse randomness. In neither case does the father’s demise

relate causally to his demerits, lack of skill, or the nature of the social system. His death, inexplicable in terms of a social context and apparently unrelated to his expertise as a jockey, thus signals a departure from previous stories that have, however covertly, placed their protagonists within situations conceived in relationship to cultural and historic events.”

Thomas Strychacz
“*In Our Time, Out of Season*”
The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway
ed. Scott Donaldson
(Cambridge U 1996) 79

“Joe, the narrator of this short story, is the main character, even though the story is about his father, a steeplechase jockey named Butler from Kentucky, who turns crooked in European racing. Joe’s language in the narration is that of a young, perhaps 12-year-old, uneducated boy, and it is clear that he does not fully understand why, at the end of the story, two men speak of his dad as if he deserved to be killed: ‘Well, Butler got his, all right.’ And the second man says, ‘I don’t give a good goddam if he did, the crook. He had it coming to him on the stuff he’s pulled.’ And the first man tears a ‘bunch of tickets in two.’

Another jockey, a friend of Butler’s but who has thrown at least one major race himself, tries to stop Joe’s crying and tells him not to listen ‘to what those bums’ say. ‘Your old man was one swell guy.’ And the story ends with Joe saying to the reader: ‘But I don’t know. Seems like when they get started they don’t leave a guy nothing.’ Butler was killed on a horse named Gilford as it stumbled and fell going over a water-jump at the Auteuil steeplechase course in Paris. The horse, recently purchased by Butler, broke its leg and had to be shot. So Joe is left with ‘nothing,’ except, perhaps, the memories of how much he loved his father, the fun of traveling with him to the various steeplechase courses, and the idea of his dad having enough money to finally buy his own horse.

Apparently everyone in the steeplechase industry knows about Butler’s crookedness. But Joe doesn’t, and since Joe is telling the story, it is only by quoting the comments of the two men at the end of the story that the reader is able to infer, finally, the truth about Joe’s ‘old man.’ There are other hints at his crookedness—he has to leave Italy in a hurry, for example, and he has difficulty getting his license transferred to France—but since the hints come to the reader only through Joe’s point of view, they are not clear enough to enable the reader to draw fully developed conclusions.”

Charles M. Oliver
Ernest Hemingway A to Z
(Facts on File/Checkmark 1999) 230-31

Michael Hollister (2015)