

ANALYSIS

“The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio” (1933)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“In 1930 Hemingway was involved in an automobile accident with John Dos Passos near Billings, Montana. Hemingway’s right arm was badly broken, and the recovery was quite painful and slow. Many of the people Hemingway met in the hospital later went into the creation of the characters in the story. In ‘The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio’ Mr. Frazer uses his radio as a kind of ‘opium,’ as had Hemingway, and like his creator he is able to ‘get rid’ of things (the phrase is used by Nick Adams in ‘Fathers and Sons’) by writing about them, under more favorable circumstances. However, it is his leg that is broken by a fall from a horse, and by this change, as minor as it may be, Hemingway suggests that Mr. Frazer is not just a mirror image of himself.

What, then, is the story ‘about,’ if not merely autobiographical material interestingly presented? An answer to that question might be suggested by an episode in which the doctor, ‘who was a most excellent doctor,’ pulled Mr. Frazer’s bed toward the window so that he could see pheasants in the snow but forgot about the reading light on the bedstead: ‘Mr. Frazer was knocked out by the leaded base of the lamp hitting the top of his head. It seemed the antithesis of healing or whatever people were in the hospital for, and every one thought it was very funny, as a joke on Mr. Frazer and on the doctor. Everything is much simpler in a hospital, including the jokes.

First, the jokes. While the story is ultimately disturbingly serious, there is enough humor in it to make one question whether it represents the bottom of Hemingway’s own ‘pessimism.’ There is humor not only in the passage just quoted but in the opening altercation between the detective, the interpreter, and Cayetano; this perhaps reaches its climax when the interpreter insists that ‘he don’t know who shot him. They shot him in the back.’ ‘Yes,’ said the detective. ‘I understand that, but why did the bullets all go in the front?’ ‘Maybe he is spinning around,’ said the interpreter.

Humor is implied in comparing the actions of characters with those in movies and comic strips, in Sister Cecilia’s readiness to pray for things great and small and in her discovery that becoming a saint is difficult in this world, in the complaint of the citizens that the hospital’s ‘X-ray machine’ ‘ruined’ the morning reception of their radios, in having Cayetano serenaded by friends of the man who wounded him, and in the description of the carpenter ‘who had fallen with a scaffolding and broken both ankles and both wrists. He had lit like a cat but without a cat’s resiliency.’ There are other examples, but for some reason readers are slow to respond to Hemingway’s jokes, perhaps because they are often associated with violence. In this story the jokes help to create a sense of completeness.... It will be observed that this kind of humor, given the setting and situation, approaches that of the theater of the absurd, a type of drama which often attempts to present an image, however distorted it may appear to be, of life in general, of life which is held to be philosophically absurd [Existentialism].

‘Everything is simpler in a hospital, including the jokes.’ That statement suggests that Hemingway is using the setting as a microcosm for a parable... Beginning with jokes, turning to a contrast of characters and their responses to their situations in life, including the various kinds of ‘opiums’ all men use to support themselves against the darkest realities, the story at its end describes the plight of all mankind as it is threatened by world revolution and tyranny....

It is Mr. Frazer’s *thinking* (the idea is insisted upon; the word repeated) about his own suffering after his nerves have gone bad and about the suffering of mankind in the early 1930s that so tortures him. Cayetano is much more seriously ill, but he is, though a small-town gambler who will cheat to win, ‘a poor idealist. I am the victim of illusions.’ His hope is that his luck will change; his has been bad so long that if it ever changes (and should remain good as long) he will get rich. Another victim of illusions is the thin Mexican,

who was an acolyte when a boy but who has rejected religion as the opium of the poor. 'Now I believe in nothing. Neither do I go to mass.' He does, however, believe in revolution, *without thinking*. His lack of logic is represented by the sentence just quoted, and near the end of the story he has to confess several times that he cannot follow Mr. Frazer's line of thought, when Mr. Frazer is trying to make him realize the consequences of his naïve faith in revolution....

Lying awake in the hospital, Mr. Frazer recalls the Mexican revolutionary's hatred of religion as the opium of the people: 'He believed that, that dyspeptic little joint-keeper.' Notice that Mr. Frazer's tone is one of *anger*, not of approval. Mr. Frazer continues thinking, with relentless logic stripping away all possible forms of *illusion*, and not with pleasure. Music is another opium, and economics, 'along with patriotism the opium of the people in Italy and Germany.' Then there is sex, drink, and his own radio, gambling (including Cayetano's), ambition, 'along with a belief in any new form of government.' How can it all be reduced to 'the real, the actual, opium of the people'? His conclusion, given with self-mockery, is that 'Bread is the opium of the people.' This conclusion startles Mr. Frazer so much that he asks to have the revolutionary sent to him right away. Why? Because bread is not only the opium of the people. It is, according to the aphorism, the staff of life. In other words life cannot exist without some form of support. The Mexican, who reenters speaking of 'the tune of the real revolution,' would take cruelly from the people these supports of 'opiums.'

"'Listen,' said Mr. Frazer. 'Why should the people be operated on without an anesthetic?' Mr. Frazer, having forced himself to strip away all illusions to understand the consequences, would not have the people of the world operated upon without an anesthetic; he would not have them face worldwide revolution without something to believe in. Revolution, Mr. Frazer thought, is no opium. Revolution is a catharsis; an ecstasy which can only be prolonged by tyranny. The opiums are for before and for after. He was thinking well, a little too well"....

Mr. Frazer's frame of mind is basically that of the modern humanitarian consciousness. The original title of the story, 'Give Us a Prescription, Doctor,' is a kind of secular prayer for all that the story encompasses, a plea for the plight of modern man.... I am not arguing that Mr. Frazer has lost all faith; he has been appalled by his self-enforced attempt to see what his world looks like without any form of hope. He has compassion for those whom the revolution would operate on without an anesthetic. The prayer is 'Give Us a Prescription, Doctor.' In our era of multiple crises and almost instantaneous communication, who has not at times thrown up his hands in frustration?"

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"A Reading of Hemingway's 'The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio'"
Arizona Quarterly 33 (1977)
reprinted in *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*
ed. Jackson J. Benson
(Duke 1990) 283-87