

ANALYSIS

“The Killers” (1927)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

The opening lines of “The Killers” are the most influential that Hemingway ever wrote—and among the most influential anyone ever wrote. As extended in the story, the terse repetitive bullying dialogue of the hit men in the diner is so powerful it became a model of style for screenwriters, television scripters, playwrights, hard-boiled detective novelists, and serious fiction writers so numerous critics referred to them as “the Hemingway school.” This style defined Hemingway in the public mind and is one basis for the stereotype of him as a simpleminded tough guy. In fact, Hemingway wrote in many different styles as appropriate to different characters and works. He was not a hit man from Chicago.

The setting in the lunch room is comparable to that in “A Clean, Well Lighted Place.” It is an island of light in the vast darkness of the world. The mood here is Existential and absurdist, while at the same time the polarization of light and dark, innocence and evil, turns the story into a moral allegory. Two men in black come in from the darkness and sit down at the counter. Their appearance and the title of the story imply that they are killers. From the opposite end of the counter, the innocent boy Nick Adams watches them. One of the men becomes menacing when he orders a dinner too early, disregarding all restraints on his appetite: “What the hell do you put it on the menu for?” The hit men arrive early in town like a couple of conscientious businessmen and come into the diner where the clock on the wall is twenty minutes fast. Appearances are deceiving and the situation is surreal.

The two men in black look alike: “Their faces were different, but they were dressed like twins. Both wore overcoats too tight for them.” They are short men acting big--inflated and full of themselves, big shot hoods from the big city, demanding alcohol in a lunch room and ridiculing hicksville. Hit men think of themselves as soldiers and these two are dressed as if in uniform. The name of the town is Summit, the term used in reference to international summit conferences where leaders decide the fate of millions and send out hit men on a global scale. These hit men bully George the owner of the diner, mocking both him and Nick as “bright boys.” In this story the clean, well-lighted place is vulnerable to the darkness, or *nada*, embodied in the hit men in black. The word “bright” identifies George and Nick with the limited and somewhat blinding light of the diner, a small island of civilization in the vast darkness of the world. Melville makes a similar contrast in *Billy Budd* represented by two ships, the “Rights of Man” sailing in waters protected by the warship “Indomitable” out in the dark open sea.

The name Nick Adams suggests that he is an innocent headed for a Fall, perhaps even death like Billy Budd. “The town’s full of bright boys.” The hit men in black eat with their gloves on, dissociating themselves from their environment, insulated from feeling and leaving no fingerprints. They take over the diner. Al forces Nick back into the kitchen and ties him to the black cook Sam, gagged and back to back. Max sits out in the diner looking into the mirror behind the counter, watching behind his back. Al prepares to ambush somebody from the kitchen with a shotgun. Max tells George, “We’re going to kill a Swede.” This causal revelation suggests that they are also going to kill all witnesses. Luckily, when the Swede does not show up, the cocky hit men leave. “In their tight overcoats and derby hats they looked like a vaudeville team.” Their swagger, conformity, mechanical behavior, and trite bullying speech make them ridiculous. They are robotic agents of the absurd, a defining mood of Existentialism. Ironically, Hemingway is parodying the style that became misidentified as his own.

George the owner tells Nick he better go and warn the Swede. He is analogous to the national leaders who send young men to war in futile causes. As a young idealist Nick agrees to go. In contrast, Sam the cook is a Realist. His blackness gives him knowledge of the dark world outside the diner embodied in the white hit men in black: “You better not have anything to do with it at all... You better stay way out of it... Mixing up in this ain’t going to get you anywhere.... You stay out of it.” However, Nick chooses to believe

his white boss rather than the black man. Sam turns away from him: "Little boys always know what they want to do." Sam agrees with the hit men that George and Nick are "bright boys," naïve idealists unfamiliar with dark realities. Hemingway implicitly agrees with the black man.

Nick goes to the Swede in Hirsch's rooming-house and finds him lying on a bed in his room. He is Ole Anderson, a former heavyweight prizefighter. Hemingway was a manager of prizefighters for awhile during the period when he wrote this story. When Nick tells Ole about the hit men coming after him, the fighter says, "There isn't anything I can do about it." He keeps looking at the wall, an image of Existential fatalism and death since Melville's story "Bartleby." Ole tells Nick, "I'm through with all that running around." The name Ole evokes the bullfight that follows the running from the bulls in Pamplona. The landlady says, "He was in the ring, you know." Ole tells Nick, "I got in wrong" and later George thinks "He must have got mixed up in something in Chicago." He must have "Double-crossed somebody. That's what they kill them for." We may infer that Ole was supposed to throw a fight but instead he fought truly and won--killing the bull that he was a loser. *Ole!* is the exclamation of tribute to a matador who masters the bull with honor. Ironically, Ole "got in wrong" for doing right.

Ole refused to take a fall. Now the time of Fall has come and Ole too must fall. It is inevitable. The determinism is in the tradition of Naturalism. Ole's refusal to run anymore or to fight--his acceptance of death—gives him a tragic dignity that, paradoxically, elevates him even though he is lying down. The owner of his rooming-house is Mrs. Hirsch, meaning deer or stag in German. Ole refuses to be hunted anymore like an animal. The manager of his rooming-house is Mrs. Bell, whose name is a call to a boxer to come out of his corner and fight, but also the call to stop fighting. When a boxer takes a fall in a fixed fight, he is said to be "lying down." Ironically, Ole is now asserting his dignity as a man by doing what he refused to do before that got him in "wrong." In American literature a bell often represents liberty. In this instance, Ole is opting for liberty in death.

Back in the diner Sam is so disgusted he will not even listen to Nick, who is still naïve at the end of the story, thinking that he can escape the dark forces of the world by moving to a different town. George likewise is a "bright boy" in thinking, "Yes.... That's a good thing to do." Often in Hemingway it is better not to think about something, as in the case of Nick later, at the end of *In Our Time*, trying to forget about the horrors of war in "Big Two-Hearted River." Here, however, coming from George the advice to not think is a retreat from reality. This is what Hemingway criticized in complacent characters who refuse to look outside their well-lighted places, such as his own parents, who were the models for Nick's parents in "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" and "Soldier's Home." The theme is expressed also in characters who run away from the bull.

Michael Hollister (2012)