ANALYSIS

"The Light of the World" (1933)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

"'The Light of the World' (1933) shares many striking similarities with 'The Battler' (1924) and "The Killers' (1927). Despite their different composition dates, all three are initiation stories…in which Nick (or a central consciousness very much like him) learns by indirection. Further, the stark, brutal experiences of these stories are unlike anything else in the Nick Adams stories, even the war stories. Each of these three stories shows the transient Nick walking along tracks (streetcar tracks, in 'The Killers') through autumn darkness and ends with Nick walking (or about to walk) out into that same darkness.

The experience really seems to begin in 'The End of Something' and "The Three-Day Blow,' as Nick breaks off his late-adolescent love affair with Marjorie and breaks out of the whole context of his boyhood and youth. The trip by which he accomplishes this takes him through northern Michigan in "The Light of the World' and "The Battler,' with a stay in Summit, Illinois, in 'The Killers'… These five stories carry Nick up to the time of his military service. Where the slightly older Bill had seemed the architect of Nick's conduct back at Horton's Bay, the slightly older Tom is his guide in 'The Light of the World.' In 'The Battler' he is completely on his own, and in 'The Killers' he disregards the advice of George by warning Ole Andreson. His personal involvement and response show a gradual increase with the stories in this sequence. Still, the lesson learned in each story is more apt to be stored and ruminated upon that to issue soon in direct action. This seems particularly true for the entranced Nick at the end of 'The Light of the World.'

The 'light' of Hemingway's title certainly contrasts with the prevailing darkness of the story. Tom and Nick find no 'light,' physical or spiritual, in their entrance to the bar at the outset. Their youth works against them here. Hostile and suspicious, the bartender denies them free lunch, even beer, until he sees their money, then insults them by placing the bottle of rye whiskey out on the bar for his regular customer. Here Nick controls the angry Tom well enough to avoid a brawl but submissively shows his money and suggests departure just before being ordered out. Uncharacteristically, Hemingway offers scant description or visualization of scene. Only the bar and the hands playing across it come into focus: guardedly serving beer, serving rye, reaching for free lunch, reaching for the unrevealed pistol, placing coins on the wood. The dialogue is monosyllabic, curt. This is a place where men drink in catatonic silence. If 'light' involves such qualities as love and hope and truth, this bar is properly dark.

At the railroad station the boys' entrance is met by apparent indifference from everyone but the homosexual cook. The group includes five other white men, apparently all lumberjacks, five whores (the three-hundred-and-fifty-pound Alice, two two-hundred-and-fifty pounders, and two peroxide blondes, 'just ordinary-looking'), and four Indians, who diminish to three. The bartender's use of the word 'punks' for the boys has been oddly prophetic, for its Elizabethan meaning anticipates the whores in the station. The boys' youth ironically works 'for' them with the cook, and their reactions to him show their levels of experience. Angry and disgusted, Tom turns him aside with a crudity about 'sixty-nine' when he asks their ages, but Nick naively tells the truth and talks to him 'decently,' an unintentional encouragement. Tom chides Nick for this, but himself naively asks the whores their names.

Hemingway does visualize the scene this time, though he restricts it to the bench near the stove. The whores, like the iridescent dresses three of them wear, attract what light there is in the room, turning the bench into a stage. The cook's evident interest in the boys sets off some automatic antagonisms: of the heterosexual men toward the cook, of the whores toward the cook (their 'natural rival' for men), and of the whores toward 'mossbacks' (men who don't spend money on whores). Hemingway's dialogue here, and in much of the story, has the quality of counterpunching in boxing, with a brash assertion met by a brash response. This is a place where men and women badger each other; the potential violence implicit in the bar

is vented here. Again, ‘hands’ are in focus, as Alice and the lumberjacks turn the cook’s white and delicate hands into a humorous symbol of his effeminacy. Alice has begun to shake with laughter at the attacks on the cook and on the mossbacks (the lumberjacks and the boys). Ridicule of the cook is in high gear when the shy lumberjack mentions ‘Steve Ketchel’ and touches off the dialogue between Peroxide and Alice. Then for a time a false ‘light’ plays over the scene, as each of the two argues the love of her life.

In the course of this exchange both whores will claim to have known Ketchel as ‘Steve,’ though the boxer Peroxide refers to clearly was Stanley Ketchel, the fabled ‘Michigan Assassin,’ middleweight boxing champion from 1908-10. However, identification of Ketchel in the story is complicated by two elements: Stanley Ketchel apparently did in real life like to be called ‘Steve’ by close friends, and a boxer using the name ‘Steve’ Ketchel did fight Ad Wolgast in 1915, five years after Stanley Ketchel’s death, but before the time of Hemingway’s story. Thus, it is possible that Alice is referring to the second ‘Ketchel.’

Peroxide turns aside the suggestion that her Steve’s name was Stanley and calls him ‘the finest and most beautiful man that ever lived,’ ‘the only man I ever loved.’ Her pipe dream and perhaps the only romantic ‘light’ of her pathetic life is that he knew and loved her but that she nobly passed up marriage rather than ‘hurt his career.’ She climaxes her performance with the claim: ‘We were married in the eyes of God and I belong to him right now and always will and all of me is his. I don’t care about my body. They can take my body. My soul belongs to Steve Ketchel.’ For the moment Peroxide has affected everyone in the room (except the Indians, who have bought their tickets and gone outside to the platform!). Nick is so deeply involved in the scene that he does not perceive any satire. Alice is shaking now with tears, not laughter. But just as suddenly as Peroxide had seized the floor, Alice strikes back at her, ‘You’re a dirty liar…. You never laid Steve Ketchel in your life and you know it.’ Alice, now calm, bores forward like a boxer and, despite a quick exchange of insults, controls the floor, which Peroxide seems to abandon in favor of her ‘true, wonderful memories.’ Alice, whose moods are now changing like the colors of her iridescent dress, signals her triumph with a smile at the boys.

Critics have felt compelled to take sides in this argument, generally finding the ring of truth in Alice’s words. Carlos Baker set a pattern by declaring for the common sense of Alice, against the sentimental love of Peroxide. Sheridan Baker thought Nick saw the light of truth in Alice. James F. Barbour found Alice drawing on the strengths of truth, because she was a realist who had paid for her memories, where Peroxide was a romantic who had only imagined things. Joseph M. Flora saw ‘heart’s truth’ in Alice’s words, as opposed to Peroxide’s ‘bilge.’ And so the analysis of the dialogue has gone.

Despite her initial hold on the audience, Peroxide is objectively caught in a lie about being in California with Ketchel…and she is wrong about Ketchel’s being shot by his father, but she does know the vital details of his fight with Johnson…. She might indeed have gotten this (except her invention of the smile) from newspaper accounts, as Alice charges. But her words seem to have their own ring of truth when she challenges Alice’s oft-repeated compliment from Ketchel (‘You’re a lovely piece, Alice’) with the statement, ‘Steve couldn’t have said that. It wasn’t the way he talked.’ Alice, for her part, shows no verifiable knowledge of Ketchel’s life and career, and there is no objective evidence that she is telling the truth, only her determined manner. Nevertheless, she does hold sway; Alice levels several charges (including venereal disease and drug use) at Peroxide, who seems simply to drop the argument, as much as to lose it. There is no clear winner in logical terms.

The real point of the dialogue is that Nick is being taken in by Alice, is in fact beginning to respond to her personally, even sexually, and will have to be rescued from the situation by Tom, reversing the roles in the bar earlier. Both whores are lying, either inventing whole cloth or at best exaggerating what was a casual encounter to Stan (or Steve) Ketchel (possibly both) into a major love affair, which of course never took place. What ‘love’ has always come down to for Peroxide and Alice is sex, bought and sold. Both now pathetically glorify a supposed relationship that gives dignity and self-respect to their lives.

The Indians in the station have rendered the actual ‘decision’ in the dialogue between Peroxide and Alice by walking out on it: it was not worth listening to, it was a fake, as in all probability was the prizefight it was partly based upon. At Colma, California, on October 16, 1909, middleweight Stanley Ketchel fought the heavyweight champion, Jack Johnson, for the latter’s title, in what has long been

regarded as a 'fixed' fight—in an era when boxing was generally illegal and unregulated and many fights were fixed. Ketchel was one of a series of boxers billed as The Great White Hope, to regain the heavyweight title for white America, from the black Johnson. At least four inches taller and at least forty pounds heavier, Johnson was supposed to 'carry' Ketchel (not really attack him) for the benefit of the newsreel cameras and the white fans. In an apparent deception Ketchel suddenly charged Johnson in the twelfth round and knocked him down with a vicious punch, but Johnson rose and knocked the charging Ketchel out with three punches. Even the weights recorded for the bout have been suspect: Ketchel's normal 154 pounds was given as 170 ¼, and Johnson's 'official' 205 ½ was regarded by many as deflated.

Hemingway's fight between Peroxide and Alice is also being staged. Clearly, both women are performing for the group in the station, Peroxide in 'a high stagey way.' But more than that, Hemingway has the two whores reenacting the Ketchel-Johnson fight here. As at Colma, the lighter, blonde Peroxide (Ketchel) is being sent up against the much heavier foe, Alice (Johnson), in a fight that is determined by one flurry from each protagonist, with the mountainous Alice definitely winning. Her hammering prose, with its Anglo-Saxon monosyllables, finally dominates…. Alice's 'and you know it' marked her first attack upon Peroxide and is like a boxer's one-two punch as she applies it. Peroxide's complete withdrawal into her memories suggests Ketchel's condition at the end of the fight: Johnson knocked him completely 'out' for several minutes, so that he had to be carried back to his corner. Further, Ketchel soon began to drift off into his memories, for his career waned sharply after the Johnson fight. Often dissipated, he had only three fights and was in temporary retirement for his health when shot to death.

Peroxide's embellishment that Ketchel was distracted and smiling at her when Johnson hit him is contrary to the facts of the fight, as the film shows, but Hemingway may well have borrowed it from the account of Ketchel's fatal shooting almost a year later: Goldie (Peroxide?) Smith, the cook whom Ketchel had just 'insulted' the day before, switched his usual seat at the breakfast table, from one that faced the door, to one that put his back to it, so that her paramour, Walter Dipley, could take him by surprise.

There is a precedent for thinking that Peroxide and Alice are putting on a show. Hemingway identified part of his imaginative source for the 'The Light of the World' as Guy de Maupassant's 'La Maison Tellier,' a story about five whores and their excursion to Madame Tellier's native village of Normandy to attend the Confirmation of her niece. In the process they unsuspiciously make a spectacle of themselves and dissolve in emotional memories of their own Confirmation days. Hemingway's whores, likewise on some sort of excursion, perhaps to Alice's Mancelona, look back to the one sexual encounter for each that had spiritual, meaningful quality, and they too make a spectacle of themselves. Many specific parallels between Maupassant's story and Hemingway's have been brought out by Martine, Peter Thomas, and Flora. However, Madame Tellier's experience was essentially comic. Nick's is not.

As the dialogue on boxing develops, the earlier stress upon 'hands,' in the bar and during the ridicule of the cook, becomes relevant. One way or another, hands, gloved and ungloved, play important parts in 'The Battler,' with the brakeman and Ad Francis, and in 'The Killers,' with Al and Max and Ole Andreson. Most often boxing is involved. Hemingway, as a lifelong boxing fan, who 'taught' boxing to his literary friends in Paris and fought spontaneous bouts right into middle age, knew the sport and knew the legend of Stanley Ketchel. Gregory Green has cited Hemingway's use of the famous 'sandbag trick' or 'gimmick' in his high school story 'A Matter of Color.' In this trick one boxer, with an accomplice hidden behind a curtain, would maneuver his opponent against the ropes in that direction so that the accomplice could hit him on the head from behind. As George Plimpton points out, Ketchel was associated with the use of this trick in one of the best known of boxing anecdotes.

Furthermore, Ketchel was most probably something of a hero to the younger Hemingway, for Ketchel, at sixteen, set off on a tour very much like that of Nick Adams in 'The Light of the World' and 'The Battler.' Like Nick, and Hemingway himself, Ketchel started from Chicago and went north. Though he went across Canada to the Pacific Coast, Ketchel then 'rode the rails' from Seattle to Butte, Montana, where he became the bouncer in a bordello. He, of course, got the look at life that Hemingway tried to give Nick.

‘Christian’ interpretations of ‘The Light of the World’ have followed some familiar patterns. Bruccoli saw in Ketchel elements of a Christian figure: his godlike appeal to Peroxide, his role as ‘savior’ to the two women, his being shot by his father in Peroxide’s account (sacrificed for his father). Thomas cited the ‘Christ-analogue’ and saw Ketchel’s loss to Johnson as Christ’s ‘defeat’ by the dark forces of human evil. Several of Peroxide’s remarks do of course reinforce the notion of deity in Ketchel: ‘There never was a man like that,’ ‘I loved him like you love God,’ ‘he was like a god.’ Both Thomas and Barbour saw a nun’s spiritual marriage to Christ in Peroxide’s love for Ketchel. But the Christ symbolism does not seem broad enough to include all the implications in the story. Ketchel’s brief fame as the Great White Hope of boxing carried an almost religious appeal to both whores, especially to Peroxide, who stressed his whiteness…. This combination of whiteness and godliness suggests still another deity in Ketchel, the one depicted in Madame Tellier’s ‘salon of Jupiter,’ the lounge of her establishment, with its drawing of ‘Leda stretched out under the swan.’ Ketchel is thus the Swan, the whitest of the gods (Zeus, Jupiter). More like Swinburne’s pagan deities than Christ, however, Ketchel has ‘visited’ these mortals, or so they claim.

The ‘light’ of Hemingway’s title has of course been the target of every explication of the story. The most obvious biblical source is Christ’s comment in John 8:12, ‘I am the light of the world: he that followeth me shall not walk in darkness, but shall have the light of life.’ Yet this applies to Nick only in the negative sense. He has found no Christian light in the bar, none in the station, and he will literally and figuratively walk forth into the cold Michigan darkness at the end. Furthermore, in the full context of John 8:1-12, Christ offers the woman taken in adultery her only option for salvation—to ‘follow’ Him, an option that Nick is rejecting. Christ’s comment in the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5:14), ‘You are the light of the world’ applies, but only with telling irony, to everyone in the station—there is no one worth emulating. Hemingway might have intended a pun upon Alice, who is addressed by the cook as ‘You big disgusting *mountain* of flesh,’ by Peroxide as ‘You big *mountain* of pus,’ and likened by the lumberjack to ‘a hay *mow’* (italics added). But Alice hardly sheds Christian light upon her fellows, as the evangelist urges; critics have struggled to see Christian quality in her.

Hemingway surely was, among other things, deploring the betrayal of Christian love in our culture, as William B. Stein has argued persuasively, but as Hemingway himself said of this story, ‘It is about many things and you would be ill-advised to think it is a simple tale’…. Hemingway, as his mother’s son, was aware of the Christian suggestions in his title, but also as his mother’s son, he very much realized that his views of life and art had moved beyond them, as Nick’s had begun to do….The prevalence of irony in the religious imagery undercuts the Christian intention of the story. In fact it is chiefly in inverted or ironic sense that ‘light’ has meaning, for there is very little Christian value or sentiment to be found in the surface of the story. Critics who have looked for meaning in a specific biblical text have failed to recognize the extent of Nick’s revolt and the secular character of the world Hemingway is sending him into. If anything, ‘The Light of the World’ shows the failure of Christianity for Nick at this time, just as it is failing (and being failed by) the whores and lumberjacks who call on Christ so often.

The world Nick walks through is anything but Christian. The brutality of the bar and the stale carnality of the railroad station bespeak a world without hope or honesty or even meaning. This is a place of illusion and contradiction: Stan Ketchel is ‘Steve,’ four Indians become three, the man in the staged trousers is at first the cook, but later the man who calls him ‘sister.’ And there is no promise of release from this world, where the five heterosexual white men retreat before the five grotesque whores, who live in memory (if at all), and the two groups join only in the derision of the cook. Sex has become a sick joke, and love a lie, here. As Sheridan Baker observed, the story makes masculine sexuality ‘the light of the world,’ and that is the false limelight that plays alternately upon Peroxide and Alice. It is Nick’s growing excitement over Alice, as well. Martine identifies this light with the red light, ‘the archetypal light in the archetypal houses of the oldest profession in the world.’ Still, it is the only force that rouses this crew from its lethargy.

Nick’s journey in this story may well be the trip into town Saturday night that he talked of in ‘The Three-Day Blow,’ his consolation that he might still see Marjorie again, but what he finds instead is the realization of his earlier comment to Marge, ‘everything was gone to hell inside of me.’ He is in Hell. The lumberjacks, cook, and whores suggest The Carnal, who have betrayed reason to their appetites, in Dante’s *Inferno.* With its pervading darkness, and the bar and station its only features, the whole landscape suggests the underworld….

Pulled away while still under Alice's spell, Nick should find the cold night air salutary. He has come a long way from Marjorie and her castles on the shore at Hortons Bay, but, learning by indirection, he needs time to realize this. 'Light' still eludes him. It might be up the track with Ad and Bugs or outside Ole Andreson's boarding house or on beyond that. Nick has made more progress than he knows, but he still walks through darkness."

Howard L. Hannum
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