
“A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” as Depiction of Meaningless Life

Life, on the basis of modernist fiction, is meaningless. In a sea full of people, a single person is just a speck. A small, insignificant part of a larger heterogeneous group in which our life has no value. Using his short story “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” as the means with the literary elements of characterization and light and dark imagery, Ernest Hemingway proposes the aforementioned concepts and advances the notion that a single person's life has no value and is meaningless.

In the short story, characterization through the words of the older waiter is utilized to reveal traits of the old man and subsequently support Hemingway's stance on the value of life. Taking place in a café late at night, an older man drinks to be drunk. He's a regular customer of the establishment, and the two waiters, one old and one young, often muse on the old man, his actions, and his life. They explain that he tried to commit suicide last week because “he was in despair” about “nothing” (Hemingway 1). This introduces the reader to Hemingway's oft-utilized concept of nada, or nothingness. It's evident that the man is lonely and feels nothing because of his suicide attempt. He has nothing in his life and feels worthless. He has no wife, no life, and save for the café, nowhere to live out the rest of his otherwise empty life. In other words, he a lost man and someone who has nothing to live for. He's a man who will likely again attempt suicide.

Furthering the characterization argument, the characterization of the old man through the older waiter's inner thoughts further advance the notion that life is meaningless. The older waiter says that a “wife would be no good to him now” to curb his loneliness, indicating that he infinitely feels that he is nothing and is in deep hole of depression that he can't crawl out of (Hemingway 1). Near the end of the story when the younger waiter tells the old man that he will serve him no more drinks and the older waiter is in the bar himself cleaning up, he recites the “Our Father” prayer, replacing quite a few words with nada, which again means nothingness. Not only does this eschew the idea of religion as meaningless and nothing, it also reinforces the idea that life itself has no meaning. Additionally, through the bit of characterization we get for the older waiter, we learn that is in a similar situation as the old man. After he closes up the café, the older waiter stops for a drink at a bodega because he, like the older man, is reluctant to return to the nothingness that awaits him in the dark just outside the safe haven that is the bodega. Said the narrator: “He [the older waiter] would lie in the bed and finally, with daylight, he would go to sleep” (Hemingway 2). It's only the light that makes him forget the nada, or nothingness.

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Not only does the old man's suicide attempt serve as a form of indirect characterization for the old man, but it also gives him to seek refuge in the café. This is revealed through light and dark imagery. Outside of the safe haven that is the café, there is nothing but darkness, "shadows" and "empty tables" (Hemingway 1). Inside the café, however, things are different. It is described in the title as "clean" and "well-[lit]." The man survived his suicide attempt and stays in the café to stave off his eventual return to nada, or nothingness. He realizes the futility of life and the world itself. The striking juxtaposition of the dark of the outside and the light of the inside makes it clear that it's only the light of the café that keeps the man from thinking about the nothingness of the world and only the light of the café that stops him from trying to commit suicide. Effectively, the café is the man's safe haven from his perceived evil and darkness of the world.

On the surface, the story of the old man in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" is in and of itself nothing. Simply, it details an old, deaf man who enters the eponymous café every night to drink himself to a stupor and wash away the nothingness and the depression of his life and the two waiters who muse over his life and his actions. On a deeper level, though, the story, with the aid of characterization and light and dark imagery, makes a profoundly cynical and depressing statement about life: it is meaningless, tying this back to Hemingway's concept of nada, nothingness and illuminating the work's theme. That is, life is meaningless and has no value. Without Hemingway's masterful use of characterization and light and dark imagery, the story wouldn't be important.

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