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## The Old Man, The Sea and Hemingway

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# The Old Man, the Sea and Hemingway

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MIGUEL A. BERNAD

THE recent showings in Manila and the provinces of certain films based on Hemingway's stories have had a somewhat nostalgic effect upon a reading public that had begun to forget the man who so profoundly influenced Philippine writing a generation ago. At the same time, one of the films (*The Old Man and the Sea*) has served to emphasize the profound change that has come upon Hemingway himself. His recent court action against a publisher that had tried to reprint three of his earlier stories has been interpreted by some as implying a change of heart. This implication has been denied by some, including apparently Hemingway himself. But no one will deny that there is a vast difference between Hemingway's older stories and his more recent novelette, *The Old Man and the Sea*.

## I

✓ The old Hemingway may be seen at work in *A Clean Well-lighted Place*. Despite its brevity (one of the shortest in English) it is one of the representative works of modern fiction for it presents a character and distils an atmosphere typical of Hemingway, and typical of many writers of Hemingway's generation and of ours.

The story opens in a café late at night when only one customer and two waiters are left. The customer dallies over his drink, unwilling to leave the café. One of the waiters is im-

patient to close up for the night. He is the younger of the two waiters and he has a wife and a home waiting for him. The other waiter is in no hurry. He has no wife, no children to go back to, and he lacks "everything but work." It is this other, older waiter that is the protagonist of the story.

He is unnamed. He is referred to merely as "the older waiter" or "the unhurried waiter." He is unwilling to go home. He dislikes the darkness of the streets or the dim light of "bars and bodegas." He wants to linger in the café because it is a "clean well-lighted place."

"I am of those who like to stay late at the café," the older waiter said. "With all those who do not want to go to bed. With all those who need a light for the night."

Malcolm Cowley speaks of "a strange mortuary light" that casts a glare over Hemingway's pages. By that light one sees a profusion of corpses, of suffering animals, of wounded hyenas "first snapping at their entrails and then devouring them with relish"; of "morally wounded men who also devour themselves." One meets with hard calculating women, with nymphomaniacs, with men who spend their days in drink and their nights lying awake, afraid of sleep and afraid of death.

This may suggest morbidity—or is it unerring artistic insight into the ethos of the age, the author depicting ugly things because he sees them as the necessary concomitants and the expressive symbols of the deathly morass in which his characters are bogged down? They are indeed bogged down. Their malady is despair. And of this despair the unhurried waiter of the story is the perfect embodiment. He is at the head of a multitude of characters (in and out of Hemingway) in whom despair is chronic. They do not laugh. They do not sing. They drink heavily but they are not merry. They carry on fervid and sordid love affairs but they do not really love. They are bored with life, yet they fear death. They have a vague nameless dread of the dark. What they want is to linger dully in a clean well-lighted place.

## II

It is significant that by "a clean well-lighted place" our unhurried waiter does not mean a cheerful living room with a

roaring log fire in the winter where one is surrounded by one's family and friends, nor a sunny porch in the summer from which one could see the grass and the trees and the distant prospect of sea or mountains: rather, he means a clean well-lighted café at two o'clock in the morning where one could sit dully, drinking or watching others drink, because one is afraid to go home and sleep.

There is perhaps something symbolic in this dread of the dark and this preference for cafés. It is different from similar fears and similar preferences described in traditional literature. Dante for instance describes his terrible dread on finding himself lost in the dark wood, but it is a fear soon overcome by the reassuring presence of Vergil, and a darkness from which he emerges into the inaccessible light of Him Who moves the sun and the other stars. Housman, six centuries after Dante, expresses a like desire for clean well-lighted places and a poignant regret at having to go into the dark:

The lofty shade advances,  
I fetch my flute and play;  
Come, lads, and learn the dances  
And praise the tune today.  
Tomorrow, more's the pity,  
Away we both must hie:  
To air the ditty  
And to earth I.

But Housman's clean well-lighted places are the sunshine and the outdoors where people play the flute and lads learn the dances and young men go about the woodlands to see the trees in bloom. Housman was not a Catholic as Dante was; he perhaps did not share Dante's certainty that death, which could be the terrible gateway to hell, could also be the quiet portal to heaven. But, though perhaps lacking Dante's faith or even Dante's hope, Housman did not find life boring or death terrible. To him death was merely the inevitable, the tragic night that ends all things. Meanwhile, while death delays, life is worth living: the sun shines, the cherries are in bloom, or the snows are falling quietly and life is all the more sweet for being so poignantly short.

✓ But for Hemingway's waiter—and all the characters of fiction like him—life is not worth living at all. Though "the sun also rises," it hardly shines for long: it is quickly followed by "death in the afternoon." Such characters are bored with the day, yet they dread the approach of night. They are tired of life, yet they cannot think of death. Once in a while, they have thrilling moments at the races when the "horses go shooting out of the field like pulling a cork out of a bottle"; thrilling moments in the jungles when a man is delirious with delight over his new-found courage and stands his ground against the onrush of ferocious beasts. But the thrilling moments are few and brief. They are significantly called the "Short Happy Life." They inevitably end in violent death.

### III

In all this there is an obvious absence of the virtue of hope. Such characters are a dull despairing group who carry about with them the mark of the damned. "*Lasciate ogni speranza voi ch'entrate.*" Abandon hope all ye who enter. But these have no need to abandon hope. They lost it long ago. For them hell has begun.

Thus, in this unhurried waiter, the tragedy of our times is brought into focus. It is the tragedy of a world that has lost its spiritual inheritance: a world that first lost love, and then lost faith, and now has also lost hope.

Joy is of the Holy Ghost: where He is not, true joy cannot long remain. When St. Paul told the Corinthians to "rejoice in the Lord always, again I say to you rejoice" (or as Monsignor Knox has it, "Joy to you in the Lord at all times. Once again I wish you joy") he gave as his reason for constant rejoicing a simple fact: *Dominus enim prope est*, "the Lord is near." It is God's nearness, God-with-us, *Emmanuel*, that makes the Gospel the "tidings of great joy." But to Hemingway's waiter there are no such tidings, no cause for rejoicing. "Joy to you in the Lord at all times. Once again I wish you joy. The Lord is near." That is the point: to Hemingway's waiter the Lord is not near. Indeed there is no Lord at all.

He cannot say, "Our Father Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name." He says, "Our *nada* who art in *nada*, *nada* be thy name!"

As for the Mother of God, spotless one, consoler of the afflicted, refuge of sinners, whose very name brings light and hope and poetry—with *her* the soul that has repudiated hope will have nothing to do. An angel might call her full of grace; all generations might call her blessed; poets might proclaim her "our tainted nature's solitary boast" or compare her to the air we breathe: but not Hemingway's unhurried waiter. *He* has no words for her but a mocking greeting: "Hail nothing full of nothing the nothing is with thee." This twisting of an angelic salutation reminds us, incidentally, that there are two groups of angels, in one of which the angelic nature—made for praise and reverence and joy and love—has been horribly perverted towards hatred, blasphemy and despair.

#### IV

On one point Hemingway's characters would seem to be on the side of the good angels: they show respect for an ethical code to which they rigidly adhere. There are things which simply are not done, and on the other hand there are things which must be done at all costs. A well-known professor in a celebrated university once annotated a paper of mine in red ink. His remark was to the effect that Hemingway's characters "do aspire to a higher code of conduct against which they persist in measuring themselves." It is "a code of conduct which they *need* not honor, and for which they find no sanction in the world, but which, as a point of honor, they cleave to." He added that it was this which made Hemingway such an attractive author to the existentialists.

He was of course right. But that is just the point: "a code of conduct which they *need* not honor, and for which they find no sanction." For on closer examination, this ethical code, apparently so edifying, turns out to be merely another proof of their profound despair. For the code really has no meaning. It has no sanction. It is not imposed by the authority of any

lawgiver. It is a Kantian law, self-imposed and arbitrarily chosen.

A case in point is the hunter in Hemingway's *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*. He is a professional hunter with a well-defined professional code of conduct to which he rigidly adheres. It is a difficult, even a heroic code: one never shoots at wild game from the relative safety of a car; one never takes unfair advantage over lion or buffalo but must meet the animal on equal terms; one never leaves a wounded lion to die in misery but must finish him off at no matter what risk; above all, one never runs away from danger. No one can run away from danger and still retain the respect due to a man. That is the hunter's code. An admirable code indeed—were it not for the fact that it is also a completely arbitrary one. For the hunter, who makes it a point of honor to adhere to this difficult code, thinks it no dishonor to be a cynical adulterer. He would not dream of taking unfair advantage over a lion, but he does not scruple at sinning with another man's wife. Consequently his adherence to a difficult code, which at first blush puts him on the side of the good angels, puts him really on the side of the bad. It issues not from high idealism but from a totally different source: from a deep-seated despair which fatalistically resigns itself to living in a meaningless universe. It springs from a bored desire to have one neat orderly little corner in a hopelessly chaotic world. Life has no meaning except that which one chooses to assign to it. Life is not worth living; but if one must live, one might as well have a neat orderly place to live in—a clean well-lighted place.

What of the dark chaotic world beyond this neat well-lighted corner? For that, one need have no concern for there is nothing there. Nothing. And lest one should forget that, one must keep repeating it to oneself like a creed: "*Nada y pues nada y pues nada.*"

## V

It is an interesting coincidence that Hemingway's waiter recites his nihilistic credo in Spanish: for the cry of "nada" is

not new in Spanish literature. There is St. Theresa's quiet advice:

Nada te turbe  
Nada te espante  
Todo se pasa  
Dios no se muda.

And there is Calderón's complaint:

Qué es la vida? un frenesí.  
Qué es la vida? una ilusión,  
Un engaño, una ficción:  
Que el mayor bien es pequeño,  
Y toda la vida es sueño,  
Y los sueños sueño son.

Calderón's lines are an echo, half-jesting half-serious, of an ancient human complaint: when men are tired and discouraged and disillusioned, they call life a walking shadow, a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing. This does not mean that they are nihilists or agnostics. They are merely disillusioned. Their words, as in the case of Macbeth, are an expression of tragic grief, of weary defeat after a life of foolish striving, of vivid dreams that through the person's own fault have come to nothing.

✓ But Hemingway's waiter is not disillusioned. He cannot be disillusioned who never had any illusions. His words do not proceed from a passing despondency or a bitter disillusionment. They are no expression of tragic grief. They are a grim act of faith in the essential hopelessness of life.

✓ In this, Hemingway's waiter is typical of many heroes of modern fiction. They are weary but not from striving. They are tired because they are convinced from the start that nothing is worth doing. They fiercely cling to despair as others cling to hope. Their days are mostly spent in smoke-filled rooms heavy with the smell of liquor. They lie awake at night, their minds "racing like a flywheel with the weight gone." They lie awake; they have no dreams. Dreams are for the young but these modern heroes are old. Theirs is a dreamless, laughterless, joyless, loveless, hopeless existence, passed in stolid silence waiting for death at the hands of killers, or spent in



silently gazing at a bottle in the wee hours of the morning in a clean well-lighted place.

## VI

And therein lies the contrast between these older works and *The Old Man and the Sea*. Three decades after his first stories were published, a quarter of a century after his first novel, Hemingway in his old age writes of an "old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish." On the eighty-fifth day he goes farther out to sea than before, and then for three days and nights he battles mightily with a mighty fish. It is a monster fish, eighteen feet long, great, beautiful, indomitable, but it is finally conquered by the equally indomitable spirit of a weakening old man. The great fish is larger than the boat and has to be lashed to the boat on the outside. And then on the homeward journey, sailing with the current and the wind, the old man runs into even greater difficulties. This time his fight is with the sharks that come at first singly and then in packs to eat the flesh of the mighty fish lashed to the boat's side. The old man fights the sharks with the crude weapons at hand: first a harpoon; when that is gone, with a knife tied to the end of an oar; when the knife blade is broken, with the oar itself; when the oar is broken, with the other oar; when that too is broken, with the tiller; and when the tiller is broken he has no weapon left to ward off the sharks. The old man watches helplessly as all the flesh of the mighty fish is eaten away and he is left with nothing but the enormous skeleton. He comes at last to land and he creeps quietly to bed, feeling very old and very futile. He blames no one but himself: he had gone too far out to sea, too far out for his own or for anyone's good. He has nothing to show for his pains but a bare impressive skeleton.

It is impossible to read this story without seeing in it a symbolic meaning. Man comes to the end of life tired and defeated: he has attempted things too great for him.

Strangely enough, despite its seeming note of futility, this is an affirmative story. *The Old Man and the Sea* affirms all

the values previously denied in Hemingway's earlier works. For this reason (despite the mannerisms of a lifetime which often intrude to annoy the reader) *The Old Man and the Sea* may be called a great work.

It is first of all an affirmation of faith in human nature, a nature fallen but essentially good. It is an assertion of man's valor, patience, courage, heroism and even of his unselfish charity. There are only two characters—the man and the boy—and (in sharp contrast with other Hemingway stories) both characters are admirable: the old man for his courage, the boy for his charity, and both for their unselfishness.

The story is also an affirmation of faith in God. During his three-day battle against impossible odds, the old man prays again and again. He prays simply, but with trust. He says many Our Fathers and many Hail Marys and he vows to say many more. In sharp contrast with the blasphemous *nada* of the unhurried waiter, he prays reverently: "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen." He adds: "Blessed Virgin, pray for the death of this fish. Wonderful though he is."

The last remark is significant. It is an affirmation of the beauty of nature and the beauty of life.

It is true that the story ends on a despondent note: the old man has lost not only his fish but even the glory of his achievement. Some tourists come and in their abysmal ignorance dismiss the enormous skeleton as that of a shark! But the old man is unaffected by the inane remarks of ignorant tourists. He is asleep and he is dreaming of lions.

It is noteworthy that this old man has no trouble sleeping. He is different from all the insomniacs of contemporary literature. He has a right to sleep. Life is wonderful despite its hardships. Nature is beautiful despite its hostility. Man himself is admirable despite his failures. The morbidity of the old Hemingway stories is not found here. Nor is the obscenity.

This is a clean story. The note of despair is missing. In his old age, Hemingway seems to have rediscovered the virtue of hope.

## VII

Not only has life a meaning, but even suffering itself is worth while. It seems almost incredible that in a Hemingway story suffering and pain should be presented as worth while precisely because they make the sufferer like Christ! The old man, during his lonely and losing battle in mid-ocean, feels pain in hand and shoulder: and it occurs to him that his pain is like that of a crucified person.

"Ay," he said aloud. There is no translation for this word and perhaps it is just a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hands into the wood."

Hemingway mentions no names. He does not tell us what the wood was or whose hands they were. To call Hemingway a religious writer would be fantastic—but there it is: our pain is not unlike His, Whose hands were fastened to the cross with nails.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL NOTE. The stories discussed at length in the foregoing article are: *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952); *A Clean Well-lighted Place* (in *Winner Take Nothing*, 1933); *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* (first published in *Cosmopolitan*, September 1936, and reprinted in *The Fifth Column and the first forty-nine stories*, 1938). Passing allusions are mainly to the following: *The Sun Also Rises* (1926); *Death in the Afternoon* (1932); *The Killers* (in *Men Without Women*, 1927).