

A Clean, Well-Lighted Place: Literary Analysis

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A Clean, Well-lighted Place: Literary Analysis

A Clean, Well-Lighted Place is a short story written by Ernest Hemingway and published in 1933. The story shows a dialogue between two waiters in a small café as they discuss their visitor and their own lives (Hemingway, 1933). The story to a large extent consists of dialogues, so characters themselves, their attitudes toward specific issues, words, and expressions they use have a significant role. The setting of a story is important because time and scene of action contribute to the narrative. Moreover, concepts touched and discussed by characters and images presented in a story are crucial, and specific dichotomies will be highlighted among them. Finally, philosophical topics underlie the entire story, they refer to other currents of thought and are important for the understanding of plot message. Therefore, the story presents a consideration of nothingness as the basis of being and provides different attitudes of characters toward this notion.

Characters

Characters in the story and their connection with nothingness differ in many ways. The old man is a lonely, isolated person, and it is underlined by his deafness and alcoholism as an escape from the external world (Hemingway, 1933). The loss of his wife is one of his tragedies and it probably has led him to face nothingness and, subsequently, to commit suicide. The young waiter is opposed to an old man; the former has a wife, job, self-confidence (Hemingway, 1933). However, given his question about money of an old man, the basis of his self-confidence is presented by materialistic values. The reaction to the joke of the old waiter regarding his wife's loyalty demonstrates the vulnerability of young waiter's confidence as material values are uncontrollable (Rui-jun et al., 2021). Therefore, the young waiter has not faced nothingness and

still feels himself confidently. In comparison with the young waiter, the old one questions nada (nothingness): “He knew it all was nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada” (Hemingway, 1933, p. 384). Then, he understands the fragility of materialistic values, but he is not still suppressed by this awareness to such extent as an old man is. Thus, characters’ attitudes to the world are different and it depends on the extent to which the understanding of nothingness has affected them.

Setting

The setting also plays a significant role and helps to understand characters and nothingness more comprehensively. Given the year of publication, the story can take place between World Wars. It is also backed by the appearance of a soldier with a girl at the beginning of a story (Hemingway, 1933). Then, self-isolation, distress, and awareness of the nothingness of an old man are caused by consequences First World War. Sumayyah (2018) also states that society in this period faced frustration and difficulties, so an old man is a direct victim of this war. A time of day is also crucial, it is night, which does not change throughout a story. Night, or darkness, corresponds to the notion of nothingness, so the latter is viewed as constant and natural in parallel with nighttime in a story. Also, electric light is mentioned repeatedly, and this light is artificial against the background of ongoing night. However, as the old waiter mentions, people are striving for this light (Hemingway, 1933). Therefore, electric light at night is viewed as a fragile value in terms of omnipresent nothingness.

Dichotomies

Dichotomies and various contradistinctions are used multiple times in a story, and they underline the specifics of the characters' images and metaphysical notions. For instance, the

dichotomy of old and young is traced throughout the entire story embodying the problem of generations. One of the conflicts takes place between the young waiter and the old man, and, as Sumayyah (2018) claims, the young waiter's generation confronts the old one and does not understand the problems of the latter. Another dichotomy is the appearance of a couple in the beginning and the waiters' dialogue contrast with the loneliness of an old man (Hemingway, 1933). Night and electric light mentioned above contradict each other on the intuitive level, and the former takes a more superior position in comparison with the latter as night is more overpowering than electric light. It corresponds with the dichotomy of nothingness and human values, that has been revealed in the previous paragraph. Nothingness surpasses values that are presented whether by abstract light or real material factors as in the case of a young waiter. Hence, applying conflicting concepts and images demonstrates the significance of specific notions and even their hierarchical relationships (for example, the preeminence of nothingness).

Themes

Nothingness (or nada) is mentioned at the end of the story, but it underlies the entire plot. Even inter-war period's issues and the problem of generations are viewed as secondary because nothingness presents a deeper, existential topic. The metaphysical character of nothingness is also underlined by the appliance of nada's notion to "Hail Mary" prayer, which is recited by the old waiter (Hemingway, 1933). Nada is viewed as a divine, fundamental notion, but it is not a benevolent as a God in Christianity. McParland (2018), for instance, substitutes "nada" with such notions as void, "entropic tendency to disorder". Reference to Christianity is also present in linkage with the old man's suicide; he was saved by his niece, but, as the old waiter says, she wanted to save his soul (Hemingway, 1933). In other words, the niece cares not about the man

himself but rather she was concerned with Christian duty because suicide is a sin. Thus, Christianity is not presented as a fundamental worldview as it has been in the West for centuries, but in terms of the story, it is substituted by belief in nothingness as a basis.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the story presents an existential problem of nothingness, the lack of absolute truth. A review of characters demonstrates that all of them have different concerns with nothingness. Young people, who are represented by a young waiter, do not take such existential challenges into account, they set material values as their life priorities, strengthening their belief in themselves. However, this faith becomes weaker when they become older, because, throughout life, they lose something valuable (for example, the wife in the case of an old man). Facing the absence of a foundation is shocking, people isolate themselves and use various ways to escape from the world. The young waiter is one of the extremes, he has not experienced it yet, so he is selfish and confident. Another extreme is the old visitor, who, by contrast, has been already affected by an encounter with void and has tried to avoid the world. Finally, the old waiter has started to realize the presence of existential emptiness but is not suppressed completely. The setting of a story and numerous details highlight the significance and omnipresence of nothingness, metaphysical void, or nada.

References

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