

The iceberg theory in a clean, well-lighted place essays example

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As one of the most important writers of the 20th century, Ernest Hemingway provided many innovations in the way poems and prose were written and read. One of the most important theories that have been developed by Hemingway in his writings is the 'iceberg theory', or 'theory of omission,' which alludes to his minimalist, almost workmanlike prose, which nonetheless manages to obscure a great deal of thematic depth below the surface. The iceberg theory is found throughout his works, as Hemingway's prose just discusses what is right at the plot surface of the events unfolding in his stories, but which also provides a great deal of room for examination. Hemingway's short story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" is a perfect example of the 'iceberg' elements of his writing - what is a simple story of two waiters observing an old man on the surface is actually an example of Hemingway's complex meditations on the circle of life and death, as well as themes of regret and despair.

The 'iceberg theory' comes from Hemingway's perspective that the story's thematic content should be discerned from the reader independent of the prose that is contained within the story itself. Hemingway's history as a journalist contributed significantly to the development of this style; in his stories, "he objectively reported only the immediate events in order to achieve a concentration and intensity of focus - a spotlight rather than a stage" (Meyers 98-99). In essence, the deeper themes of a work must be able to be seen through the surface story, and the writer should not do any extra work for the reader to discern these readings. This perspective is taken from his book *Death in the Afternoon*:

"If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit

things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing" (Hemingway 154).

Following this philosophy, Hemingway's writings provide the reader with just the proper amount of story and characterization needed to convey these deeper meanings (Kossack 2).

In the case of his short story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," the iceberg theory is used effectively to showcase the rich thematic content of the story through efficient writing. In the story itself, a pair of waiters - one older, one younger - observe and scrutinize an old, deaf man drinking alone in their café. The older waiter is much more familiar with the old man (a regular at the café) while the young waiter is impatient and hostile towards him. All of the characters have a certain amount of despair: the young waiter's impatience seems to stem from a general hostility toward the old waiter and old man, the old man himself is calm and collected despite a recent suicide attempt, and the older waiter is sympathetic towards him because of their similar ages. All of these things are not explicitly found in the text, but the iceberg theory permits the reader to extrapolate them from what little has been written in Hemingway's words themselves.

One of the ways in which Hemingway stresses minimalism in the story is the use of extended yet short dialogue sequences: during one of the initial conversations in the story, when the waiters talk to each other, the dialogue comes without modifiers, instead being just a single stream of dialogue from

one character to another: “ He’s drunk every night.” “ What did he want to kill himself for?” “ How should I know” (Hemingway 11) By choosing not to identify which waiter is speaking, it is up to the reader to keep track; Hemingway gives just enough information to discern the entirety of the conversation and what the characters are talking about (Gerhard 13). By using such an uncomplicated, almost theatrical structure for the characters’ dialogue, Hemingway uses the shape of the text itself to convey the themes of the story.

The use of the iceberg-theory writing style in this story plays well into the work’s themes, which involve the emptiness of life and the despair people feel at the prospect of nothingness. By giving us so little information, a void is left open for us to fill – this is synonymous with the characters’ search for meaning in life, whether it is through youthful naivete and arrogance, the compassion of elders, or just a “ clean, well-lighted place” in which to enjoy one’s drink and the solace that comes from being around people (Hemingway). No explanation is given for why the old man tried to kill himself, but it is easy to see why from what information the reader has: the old man is in the twilight of his life, he has little to look forward to, and his wife is presumably gone. Hemingway correctly presumes we do not need to explicitly hear his back-story: all of that is conveyed through the simple appearance and context of the man himself. The man is sad yet content, because he has his well-lighted place to find peace and calm: “ According to [the old man], life does not need to be senseless and end in despair, as long as one keeps composure and protects one’s own dignity and the dignity of others” (Gerhard 1).

Furthermore, the older waiter's link to the old man's sense of nothingness is clear in his use of the phrase ' nada' (Spanish for ' nothing') as a replacement for many things in his speech. Not only does he use it to indicate the meaninglessness of life and god (" Our nada who art in nada"), he demonstrates the need to acknowledge the darkness in order to recognize the good things in life - the ' light' (Hemingway). As Stock says, "[nada] is expressed in terms which ordinarily have no spiritual significance and can be comprehended in a religious sense only if the auditor, too, has had the felt experience" (55). Hemingway seems to argue through this idea of nada (personified further in the minimalist attributes of iceberg theory) that religion and spirituality is entirely a human construct, if it is real at all; people assign to it what they glean from their own lives, their ' felt experience.' In this way, even something as simple as word substitution in common phrases can convey a great deal of meaning, further showcasing the effectiveness of Hemingway's iceberg-theory style of writing.

Hemingway's " A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" is one of the clearest examples of his iceberg theory, as information is disseminated regularly as the narrative flows, allowing an elegant reading of the text that conveys its meaning without an abundance of overt statements in the prose itself (Jing-jing 17). Statements and sentences are extremely short, and dialogue is comparatively sparse as in other works, with the characters not talking very often - this forces the reader to engage with what they feel is between the spaces, not being written (Hietanen 8). By having the writing be so minimalist, the reader becomes acutely aware of the universal themes of the

work, including the inevitability of nothingness, the despair of old age, and the need to find solace in one's own desires and comforts throughout life.

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Revision Summary:

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Page 1:

- added phrase about ' theory of omission'
- Changed ' many of his works' to ' throughout his works'
- Changed ' around Hemingway's writings' to ' in his writings'
- I think the ' perfect example' sentence still works as intended; it don't get the impression it comes from someone else.
- Added sentence/quote from Meyers source about Hemingway's journalism
- Changed ' looked at' to ' read'

Page 2:

- ' bare minimum' to ' just the proper amount'
- Changed to ' observe and scrutinize'
- Changed to ' familiar with the old man (a regular at the café)'
- Changed ' simple' to ' efficient'
- Changed ' framing the story' sentence to something more comprehensible

Page 3:

- Added ' and the solace that comes from being around people'
- Changed to ' sad yet content'
- Changed ' older warmth' to ' the compassion of elders', also ' young naivete and arrogance'

Page 4:

- Added sentence about religion reference
- Changed ' textbook example' to is ' one of the clearest examples of his iceberg theory'