

Hemingway and alcohol



An Analysis of the Presence of Alcohol in Ernest Hemingway's Short Stories

Alcohol and Desperation: An Analysis of the Presence of Alcohol in Ernest

Hemingway's Short Stories Throughout the short stories of Ernest

Hemingway, alcohol inevitably lends its company to situations in which desperation already resides. In an examination of his earlier works, such as *In Our Time*, a comparison to later collections reveals the constant presence of alcohol where hopelessness prevails. The nature of the hopelessness, the desperation, changes from his earlier works to his later pieces, but its source remains the same: potential, or promise of the future causes a great deal of trepidation and lament throughout Hemingway's pieces. Whether the desperation comes from trepidation or lament depends on the view point from which it is observed, or rather, experienced. In many of the works written early in his career, Hemingway's characters experience a fear of the future. The fear does not necessarily stem from commonly expected sources, such as "the unknown," but rather, it seems to grow from a fear of failure, a fear of being unable to fulfill potential. A number of stories and vignettes from *In Our Time* reflect these trepidations, and throughout, the presence of alcohol surfaces as a reminder of the desperation felt by the characters as they confront or avoid the circumstances surrounding their fears. It should be clarified, however, that "desperation" here does not insinuate the many nuances that the term conjures, but rather, it describes its simplest meaning of a loss or a lack of hope. For the characters of the early stories, the lack of hope motivates trepidation, while in the later works, the loss of hope creates lament. The lament experienced by Hemingway's characters in his later works corresponds to an older perspective by both author and characters. In most cases of desperation, the later characters retrospectively examine their

lives and realize that they have not fulfilled their potential. The manner in which they choose to live out their lives becomes paramount in the stories, and alcohol often remains integral to the characters' lives. In moving from the earlier stories of *In Our Time* to stories published in later collections, the shift in the attitude of the characters toward potential and promise becomes clear. "Indian Camp" in *In Our Time*, depicts Nick Adams a small boy, exposed to death for the first time. This story does not describe desperation nor does it include alcohol; rather, it demonstrates the promise held in the possibilities of life in Nick's final thoughts: "In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die" (Hemingway 95). Despite the events he witnesses in the camp, Nick's future seems boundless, as well as endless. Potential has no limits, and the pressures of fulfilling potential are, as yet, unknown to him. This first story in Hemingway's first published collection serves as a fitting point of departure for the descriptions of desperation that follow; Nick is free from the weight of potential, and judging by his enjoyment of the idyllic setting that surrounds him, it seems that he looks forward to the promise of life. "The Three-Day Blow" offers the reader one of the first opportunities to observe the trepidation and fear of future potential. The story happens to feature Nick Adams, but as other stories are examined, different characters will also exhibit the same desperation. "The Three-Day Blow" directly follows "The End of Something," save a vignette, and it seems to allude to the break up described therein. As Nick and Bill begin drinking, their talk includes baseball, fishing, the nature of drunks, and eventually Marge. The discussion of girls and relationships inevitably leads to a foreboding of the future. "'Once a man's married he's absolutely bitched,' Bill went on. 'He

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hasn't got anything more. Nothing. Not a damn thing. He's done for..." (Hemingway 122). Nick quietly agrees with Bill's sentiments, but he still longs for Marge. The pleasant memory of the past is stalled by the fear of what the future could hold for his relationship with Marge. The alcohol, in this case, serves to numb the collision between the hopeful past and the hopeless future. The effects of the alcohol leave Nick free of his uncomfortable fears for a while: "None of it was important now" (Hemingway 125). After experiencing this heartbreak in his youth, a little alcohol is enough to clear the trepidation from Nick's mind. "Cross-Country Snow" presents Nick Adams working through a fear of responsibility, again with alcohol in hand. Within the text of the story, it becomes clear that Nick is involved with a girl who will give birth to a baby in the summer. Nick's feelings toward this event are illustrated in his desire to forget the life he has in the States and to stay and ski in Europe. Over a bottle of wine, Nick and George discuss the joy of skiing. For Nick, the discussion's unspoken side describes the monotony of his life at home. Nick's desire to shed responsibility affords the reader another vantage point from which to observe the fear of failing to fulfill potential: rather than trying and falling short, why not shirk responsibility and submarine any efforts to succeed? In this case, the alcohol facilitates the day-dream quality of Nick and George's fantasy to turn their backs on responsibility and potential and to ski for the rest of their lives. It intensifies the notion that choosing to ignore their potential would allow them to keep from failing to fulfill it. They begin to believe that they cannot fail at something at which they never tried to succeed. Unfortunately, fulfilling the promise their lives hold is not something that can be consciously chosen; the attempt to succeed at

fulfilling that promise begins at birth. They cannot claim they did not succeed because they did not try (the “ I wasn’t really trying” argument); in that case, they do not succeed because they did not try. In this short and seemingly simple story, Hemingway illustrates the magnitude and inescapability of the weight of potential. In *Our Time* also offers a story in which the struggle of fulfilling potential bridges the gap of age: “ My Old Man” shows the passage of desperation from father to son. As the father, an aging jockey, drinks more and more, his son looks on with an innocence that would seem to indicate the perspective of either a boy or a young man. While the father experiences the twilight of his horse-racing career, his son subtly notes his father’s weight gain and his increased drinking. “ My old man was drinking more than I’d ever seen him, but he wasn’t riding at all now and besides he said that whiskey kept his weight down. But I noticed he was putting on, all right, just the same” (Hemingway 201). The excuse of weight loss was clearly meant to hide Joe’s father’s increased use of drinking as a crutch, but Joe astutely and ironically notes that the weight was worsened by the drinking. His father’s loss of hope, resulting from an unsuccessful career, eventually leaves its mark on Joe. After his father’s death, the last lines of the story indicate the depth of Joe’s understanding of his father’s situation: “ Seems like when they get started they don’t leave a guy nothing” (Hemingway 205). The unfortunate comprehension of a father’s loss of hope by his son may also indicate a bit more distance between the narrator and the setting of the story. While the story seems to be told from the point of view of a young man (the son), it may originate from a much older son, at an age where he recollects his father’s experience and realizes that it mirrors his own. This seems probable in light of the fact that the

narrative voice, with its many insights and subtleties, has the wisdom of one who has experienced the loss of hope. In *Our Time* does offer some pieces that afford a view of the lament of failure and of the inability to fulfill potential. In the vignette that precedes Chapter XI, Hemingway describes a youth in his lament over failure as a bullfighter. The young age of the torero is implied, since bullfighters rarely fought into middle-age, and it serves as an interesting bridge to Hemingway's later stories which involve potential. The young torero loses his coleta, his pigtail, marking his disgrace in the ring that day. Strangely, though, his nonchalance concerning the event reveals a certain resilience: " He was very short with a brown face and quite drunk and he said after all it has happened before like that. I am not really a good bull fighter" (Hemingway 171). Perhaps the torero's youth allows him the resilience to move past the failure, much like Nick Adams easily puts Marge out of his mind, after a few drinks. The resilience in these two situations, however, occurs at either end of the spectrum of despair over unfulfilled potential. This young bullfighter knows his failure in that he cannot fight well, while Nick fears the uncertainty of a future relationship. A few drinks and a little youth allow them the resilience to move on. In Hemingway's more mature works, the resilience will have worn down, allowing the onset of lament. In turning to the later stories, it seems that weariness replaces the resilience of youth, and lament replaces trepidation. " The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" opens with a drink. From the outset of the story, Macomber seems rattled, and not until later does the text reveal his cowardice. In running from the lion, Macomber disgraces himself in the hunt. According to his recollections, this failure represents his first in a long list of previous adventures. His reaction to the failure: desperation and alcohol. The

night he loses face, he loses his wife to Wilson, the successful hunter-guide. At this point, Wilson would say that the safari had gone bad, but that he was still “drinking their whiskey” (Hemingway 7): despite the failure of the hunt, Wilson would still receive his clients’ money. Ironically, for Wilson, “drinking their whiskey” serves as a response to a failed hunt, just as alcohol often serves as a response to failure in general, and as a sign of desperation. The disaster of this safari and the infidelity of his wife should only compound Macomber’s feeling of failure and inadequacy, and further drive him into desperation over his inability to fulfill expectations as a hunter or a husband. As a testament to the maturity present in these later Hemingway stories, however, Macomber does not wallow in his despair, but rather, he slowly emerges from his travails during the next day’s successful hunt. In Macomber’s success, Hemingway presents one of the first examples of how desperation over the inability to fulfill potential can be overcome. In the case of “Macomber,” performance the next day during the buffalo hunt signals a triumph over Macomber’s fears: he can hunt successfully, fulfilling his own expectations, as well as the expectations of those around him. Interestingly, alcohol now becomes a celebratory device in the text: “‘Let’s get the drink,’ said Macomber. In his life he had never felt so good” (Hemingway 28). Desperation gives way to celebration as fear and lament are overcome. Adding to the argument that his later stories represent a more sophisticated view of the issues involved in fulfilling potential, Hemingway presents a case in which fear and desperation are not overcome in “A Clean Well-Lighted Place.” Even though the loss of hope is not overcome, however, the story does depict a means of living that maintains dignity and self-respect. “‘Last week he tried to commit suicide,’ one waiter said....’ He was in despair”

(Hemingway 379). While the reader never discovers the details of the old man's past, it quickly becomes clear that his life did not turn out according to plan. The loneliness that the suicide attempt illustrates also indicates a loss of hope. Despite the loss of hope, lament does not seem to be present in the old man's life. At least, it does not manifest itself to the waiters who see a man who drinks neatly and who carries himself down the street with a quiet dignity, despite his intoxication. Lament and self-pity are not congruent emotions to fit with these behaviors. The alcohol the old man imbibes seems to be more indicative of habit, perhaps even a support which allows him to continue living his life from day to day. It does not seem to serve as a means of wallowing in desperation and self-pity. In "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," Hemingway delineates an alternate mode of existence for those who cannot triumph over their despair, but who instead must learn to live with it. "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" ties the trepidation of Hemingway's earlier works to the lament of his later works in a manner that again displays the level of maturity in his later writing. Awaiting his death, Harry remembers his youth and comments on his current relationship with the woman that accompanies him now in Africa. Like Nick Adams, in his recollections, Harry describes scenes that indicate the difficulty of relationships for him: he could never give himself wholly to his lover—at least not wholly and truthfully. In his thoughts of the past, he also recalls how he had stalled and postponed his writing, always assuring himself that he would start when he had enough information to write all his stories, and to write them all well. Essentially, he remembers the fear of and trepidation over the expectations he had for his potential as a young writer. His promises to write when he is ready seem to echo Nick Adams's desire to shirk responsibility, to avoid fulfilling potential,

in "The Cross-County Snow." In "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," alcohol serves to dull Harry's physical as well as emotional pain over never having written. It had also been the cause of his inability to fulfill his potential as a writer: "He had traded it [his talent] away for security, for comfort too, there was no denying that,..." (Hemingway 62). In his lament, Harry admits that he had sold his talent piece by piece to become wealthy with women and comfortable in alcohol. Now, alcohol would only serve him as a diversion, as he saw drinking as the only thing left to do: "I'm getting bored with dying as with everything else, he thought" (Hemingway 73). Hemingway masterfully combines the lament over lost opportunity and unfulfilled potential with the trepidation of youth looking toward a daunting future by writing a story from the perspective of a dying man who simultaneously experiences both perspectives through vivid memories and an acute awareness of his present state. Harry remembers his potential and knows now that it will never be fulfilled. In moving from the perspective of his early stories to that of his later stories, it becomes clear that Hemingway's deft ability to illuminate the nature of people's attitude toward potential is well complemented by the presence of alcohol. Trepidation and lament are marked by the presence of drink and its quieting effects. On the few occasions where triumph over fear manifests itself, Hemingway seems to imply that the failure to fulfill one's potential is not inevitable,