

Literary criticism analysis paper

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A Clean Well Lighted Place Ernest Hemingway's short story A Clean Well Lighted Place, is set in a cafe, with two waiters and an old man. The old man is trying to get through the night, with as many drinks as possible, because he has no one waiting for him at home, and nothing else to do once he gets there. On the other hand, the young waiter is impatiently waiting for the old man to finish, so he can go home to his wife who is waiting for him. The older waiter, who has also passed the age, when he can look forward to going home to a wife and family, watches the interaction between the impatience of youth, and the hopelessness of old age. As he ponders, the fact that the old man has money, and yet has tried to kill himself, he wonders, if life becomes meaningless, when there is no purpose to it. After the old man is finally forced to leave the cafe, by the younger waiter who refuses to replenish his glass; the older waiter goes on to a bar, wondering if there is a God or heaven or an afterlife, and if there is none, then, is there a purpose to life? He chides himself for thinking of such things and wonders if his malady is insomnia.

In this short story, Hemingway contemplates the meaning of life. He seems to ask some fundamental questions, about what each one of us has come into this world for. Is there a purpose to our lives, and what is left for us after this purpose has been achieved? The three characters in the story the older waiter, the younger waiter and the old man, each looks at life through his own perspective. The younger waiter is shown as a young man, confident and looking forward to getting on with his life. His life revolves around his work and his family. The old man is at the end of his life and has nothing to look forward to. He has lost his wife, and he has no near and dear ones waiting for him at home. In desperation, he has tried to take his own life. He

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seems to view life as something to be endured taking each day as it comes and trying to get through it as best as he can. The older waiter, is at the center of these two extremes. He believes that life is worth living only if there is some motivation. He realizes that the old man has nothing to look forward to, and hence he has tried to commit suicide.

In this story, Hemingway deals with the malaise of loneliness in old age. Death is the ultimate end of life, and one we cannot escape, but loneliness and the feeling of being unwanted and a burden to society, is what seems worse than death itself. When one is young and full of life and vigor, like the young waiter, one does not contemplate old age, and is impatient with the infirmities of old age. As one grows older, one begins to contemplate, and realize that old age and loneliness is beginning to creep upon one, as is the case of the older waiter. The well lighted, clean cafe is a haven for the old man, who is desperately lonely and fears the darkness of a life that has lost meaning. He finds solace in the presence of others and the atmosphere of the clean and well lighted cafe. In a sense, the three characters in the story seem to embody the three phases of a man's life, youth, middle age and old age; and the changes that occur in man's view of life, as he passes through each of these phases.

Hemingway seems to suggest that man is merely a small speck in a sea of nothingness. He speaks through the older waiter who says " It was all a nothing and man was a nothing too." His substitution of the word Nada, which means nothing, in his prayers for the actual words of the prayer, also seems to suggest the same theme. Loneliness and the futility of man's existence, seems to be the central theme of the story, and it seems that each one deals with it in his own way. The cafe that is clean and well lit

offers a refuge to people battling loneliness and despair.

Hemingway's genius lies in the way he uses a minimum number of words, and is still able to convey his basic ideas to his readers, allowing his style to speak for itself. He often omits certain dialogue tags, for example when the waiters are speaking, he does not always specify which waiter it is who is speaking, leaving the reader to guess the identity of the speaker. His sometimes vague sentences are a deliberate way of conveying something that is confusing or unclear in life. When the waiter says "It was all a nothing and man is a nothing too", the idea is perhaps to convey to the reader that nothingness has no clear definition. His style is unemotional and does not try to be judgemental of his characters. He leaves his readers to decide, how to view their behavior. Perhaps Hemingway gives vent to his own disillusionment with life, through his characters in this short story. The contrasts he uses in his imagery of light and shadow, youth and old age all seem to increase the philosophical aspects of the story.