

A clean and well-lighted place

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“ A Clean and Well-Lighted Place” Analysis Does one's purpose in life diminish after there is nothing left in life to look forward to? In Ernest Hemingway's short story, “ A Clean and Well-Lighted Place,” this question is addressed in terms of the four main themes of existentialism: existence precedes essence, absurdity, anxiety or angst, and nothingness. The author does this by creating a story in which all of these themes are featured individually.

Existentialism is “ a philosophy that emphasizes the uniqueness and isolation of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe, regards human existence as unexplainable, and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts. ” The most prominent theme of existentialism is that of nothingness. This is featured in the story through the old waiter when he comes to the conclusion that without motivation to live, one wanders in a world of nothingness. This story highlights issues like depression, isolation, aging and anguish, but are all centered on the theme of existentialism.

One of the themes of existentialism is, existence precedes essence. In other words, an independently acting and responsible conscious person is more important than the labels, and stereotypes that the individual falls under. This can be found within the first interaction in the story, between the two waiters. They are talking about the old man that is perpetually drinking his life away. The young waiter is judging the old man based on how much money he has, how old he is, and that he is deaf. The young waiter is unable to understand why he should try to kill himself, when he has money.

However, the old waiter is constantly defending the old man like, “‘ Not always, This old man is clean. He drinks without spilling. Even now, drunk. Look at him. ’” The old waiter is focusing more on how the old man conducts himself, rather than looking at his features, and income to judge him. The next theme of existentialism is that of anxiety or angst. This is a feeling of dread, which is not directed to an object, but of the nothingness of human existence. A person that cannot find their purpose in life or is unable to define themselves would feel this dread.

This pertains to the story, because this is what the old man drinking at the cafe is feeling. The first example of this is the soldier that is mentioned. He doesn't recognize nothingness, rather he tries to find something that gives his life purpose, like joining the service. But, he is still left with a sense of nothingness, so he tries to find meaning in the act of sexual gratification. In the opening lines of the story, the two waiters discuss how the old man tried to kill himself. When asked why he tried to commit suicide, one waiter replied, “‘ He was in despair’ ‘ What about? ‘ Nothing. ’” The old waiter understands why this old man tried to commit suicide. The theme of anxiety can be applied to another part of this story, and that is why the old man chose to stay at the cafe and not go home and drink out of a bottle. The clean and bright cafes are the only reason that the old man is able to get through the night, without collapsing into despair. Absurdity is the idea that there is no meaning to life outside of the meaning that an individual gives it. Blaise Pascal, a French mathematician and philosopher states, When I consider the short duration of my life, swallowed up in the eternity before and after, and the little space I fill, and even can see, engulfed in the infinite

immensity of space of which I am ignorant, and which knows me not, I am frightened, and am astonished at being here rather than there, why now rather than then” (Gormley 1). This theme can be seen in the story from the conversations between the two waiters. To the young waiter money and material satisfaction is everything. The young waiter is also portrayed as in a constant hurry.

He wants to be home with his wife, while the old waiter is content to sit in the cafe. The old waiter believes life to be absurd, and his short time on earth isn't going to alter anyone's life. The final theme of existentialism is the idea of nothingness. For many existentialists religion is absurd, because these religions fail to reflect existence. They are in fact part of someone's essence, because people can be classified as a Christian or a Jew. This idea is bleak, and suggests that there is nothing but a void after death. This is part of the reason that many existentialists suffer from depression and insomnia.

The understanding there is nothing structuring one's world, it becomes very daunting. This is the reason that the old man and old waiter search for refuge in a well-lighted place, because for people like themselves, this is the only escape from the lonely and dark night. When the old waiter starts to recite the Lord's prayer, he replaces most of the nouns with “ nada,” or “ nothing” in Spanish, this reflects the atheist view that many existentialists share. They believe that there is nothing after death, but only a void. Understanding that Hemingway actually ended his own life gives this story another meaning.

In the final part of this story, the old man gives up his search of his own clean and well-lighted place, and resigns to go home and lie in his bed. He

admits he suffers from insomnia, and justifies it to himself by stating, “ Many must have it. ” This could be Hemingway’s way of showing pity to his readers who, like him, cannot bear the emptiness. Hemingway gives the reader the bare minimum of information, leaving the reader no way to understand “ nada” and existential depression. However, he offers the reader an escape from this pain of “ nada. ” In order to survive with dignity, one has to find a “ clean and well-lighted” place of their own.