

Dimensions and theme in the killers



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On the eve of the grand economic crisis of the capitalistic world, the late 1920's is a turbulent period in the U. S. A. with violence and horror permeating the whole society underneath the surface of the temporary steadiness and prosperity. Among all the novels depicting the dark life then, *The Killers* is unanimously considered as the best for its superb technic and profound theme. *The Killers* offers a perfect example of a narrative that challenges and rewards the readers' perception of its structure.

The structure of a Hemingway's story can usually be described, conventionally enough, with a set of scenes marked by a change in setting or by a change of characters. What is unconventional and so inscribes his fame as a modernist is that the scenes often are juxtaposed with little transition and less logic to effect or explain their sequence or rationale as a result of his prose style with its syntax linking sentences and simple clauses without conjunction and subordination.

This is not to say that the structures of the stories lack form or significant pattern, but they are coherent and connected in a sort of dimension which Hemingway said he learnt from Cezanne's paintings. In *The Killers*, there are totally three main scenes: Henry's lunchroom, Hirsch's rooming house, and again Henry's lunchroom. The first scene opens with two strangers entering Henry's lunchroom, where George is waiting on Nick Adams at the counter.

The strangers, Al and Max, try unsuccessfully to order from the diner menu, then settle for sandwiches, after which their small talk turns ugly. Al takes Sam the cook and Nick into the kitchen, gags and ties them up, and then he and Max reveal that they are waiting to kill the heavyweight prize fighter Ole

Andreson when he comes to have dinner at six o' clock. At last, Ole Andreson does not arrive; the killers leave.

In the second scene, Nick goes to Hirsch's rooming house to tell Ole about two men waiting to kill him and offers to tell the police; but Ole, lying on his bed and looking at the wall, says that he got in wrong; there is nothing to do and he is through running. In the third scene, Nick comes back to Henry's lunchroom and tells Sam and George his experience at Hirsch's rooming house. Sam won't listen to it and goes to the kitchen. The story ends as Nick wonders what Ole did, and George says; " Double-crossed somebody. That's what they kill them for. " I'm going to get out of this town," Nick said. " Yes," said George, " That's a good thing to do. " " I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he is going to get it. It's too awful. " " Well," said George, " you'd better not think about it. " In the first two scenes, the readers may get confused with the arrangement and disappointedly fail to work out the theme, for despite all the impending violence and seemingly inevitable bloodshed, nothing happens: the killers do not kill and their victim still lies with his face to wall.

The dimensions of the first two scenes seem to by default direct the readers' attention to the story's factual details: the two killers Al and Max are indistinguishable, dressed like twins or a " vaudeville team"; their sandwich orders are interchanged; they eat with their gloves on; they call George " bright boy" and suggests him going to see a movie; they get the lunchroom prepared for the killing; the nigger cook repeatedly complains and of George gives his careless remarks.

However, no matter what image the readers have of the two dimensions, it will reflect the obvious symmetry between them: the action of the first scene is followed by the reaction of the second. And as the story moves on to the third dimension where the theme finally set in, the readers, with a reminiscent view, can figure out that all the details which seem irrelevant to the killing in the previous two dimensions, now, in re-perception, are closely knitted to serve the theme.

The incident takes place when three men are in Henry's lunchroom: the cook Sam and the two waiters, George and Nick. Sam, from the very beginning, tries best to keep himself away from this killing: when Nick wants to go to inform Andreson, he advises Nick " to stay out of it", " not to have anything to do with it at all. " Then Nick decides to go to Andreson in Hirsch's rooming house, he says: " Little boys always know what they want to do," satirizing young men like Nick know nothing about possible danger in the unsafe society.

Finally, Nick returns and gives his account of Ole Andreson's reaction, he won't even listen to it and shut himself in the kitchen. Having seen a lot of such violence of the society and got frightened by his own experience several minutes ago, Sam knows clearly the danger and darkness, and does not " want any more of that. " Thus he acts in a cowardly way to insure his own security. George also seems quite familiar with this sort of business: he becomes very suspicious of the two men when they mistake their own order and eat with their gloves on.

As soon as the two killers mention Andreson, he knows their purpose of killing that boxer. Although he asks Nick to go to see Andreson, he does not care the whole thing much. When Nick asks him why they want to kill Andreson, he just makes a dismissive explanation " double-crossed somebody, that's what they kill them for. " For him, murdering is not a big event, since there are many " them" killed by " they" every day, he simply has already got used to it.

Of the three men, Nick is the only one who shows great concern to the attempted killing. Innocent enough, he, in spite of Sam's warning, goes to inform the boxer. In Hirsch's rooming house, the boxer, although knowing himself in danger, lies on his bed helplessly and does not want to run. He tells Nick: " There ain't anything to do," " I'm through with all that running around," which gives Nick an even more terrible shock than that he is gagged and tied up by the two killers.

So horrified Nick is, he decides to leave the town, " I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It 's too damned awful. " Thus, at this stage, the readers can see that the theme that Hemingway wants to express is not only to expose the violence and turbulence of society at that time, but in a more profound dimension, to reveal the shock and hurt of all these viciousness and wickedness to the innocent souls like Nick who will bear the image of that doomed boxer into his maturity.

Therefore, although the title of the story is The Killers, the hero is actually the young man Nick, whose innocence in the setting of the cruelty of the

killers, the cowardice of the cook, the indifference of George and the despair of Ole Andreson, refracts the instability and violence of the society at that disordered time.

In *The Killers*, Hemingway, with his geometric design of the scenes, presents a story of simple plot but profound meaning, debunking the unsteadiness and turbulence of the apparently thriving society. Reading this story is just like viewing Cezanne's landscape paintings: one has large room to perceive and appreciate its beauty and meaning in different dimensions.