

Hemingway's Desolation Laid Bare, Perhaps

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Abstract

"A Clean, Well-lighted Place," was first published in Scribner's Magazine, in 1933, and ever since has been a significant focus of the literary world, with few daring to risk their literary aspirations, in rebuttal of previously published assertions as the dark forebodings of a world bereft of faith or joy. One is left to ponder a literary profession that appears bereft of a critical examination of the work, or, may not being able to see the forest for the trees. Responding to the assertion by Robert Penn Warren, that Hemingway lived in a "world of violent action," WB Bache preferred to see the writer as a representative of unique craft and insight, and that he should be seen as, "a creative artist." This is why I too, found Hemingway an enigma, as someone with a unique literary style, but possessing too, a wicked side. In his art, as he was in life, a hard drinking, womanizing, errant joker, who I feel certain here, is having a laugh at us all, from the other side. Sam Bluefarb (1971) wrote of the "Need to break through to some transcendent purpose—esthetic or religious—without which life seems to have little or no meaning." Indeed, the melancholia which pervades this literary offering drags the reader down, into its darkness and despair, its depths of the maudlin, the mundane. The pathos may be evident, but does the meaning of the story have to be so dark, and so bitter? The "illogical dialogue sequence," Warren Bennett (1990) ascribed to the tale, appears to be too bad, too lacking substance, too illogical for words, and so devoid of natural development that it takes on an artificiality such that it could only be a frolic that Hemingway is having, at our expense. Hemingway was a disciple of misogyny, this brute found love so often, not with docile, "pleasant", or amenable women, but independent, vibrant, aggressive, articulate, intelligent, and yes, "feisty." None of them was just a decoration, all were treated abysmally, and yet they all loved him till they had no more love left to give, until he had drained them of their capacity to continue to love him. These relationships open the door to a less discussed possibility, that "A Clean Well-lighted Place," was actually a metaphoric celebration of femininity, in praise of womanhood, an explanation of the clean illumination of our lives (places), without whom, we are dark and dull, and lifeless, much like the iconic short story.

Keywords: rebuttal, unique, illogical, misogyny, metaphoric, femininity, iconic

1. Introduction

1.1 *The Environment*

Hemingway has been, is, and will continue to be, grist for the literary mill. What certainly fueled, and continues to fuel, the fires of ambiguity and complexity in this work, "A Clean Well-lighted Place," more than his others, and demonstrates a unique self-recognition of his inherent wickedness, is that he knew the academic hierarchy would argue over this work, and while he couldn't really give a damn about their opinions at that time, he thrived on their critique of his sparse style, so he fed the fire! I mean, who cares whether the literary convention of the time demanded a new paragraph for a new speaker? The complexity of his character dialogue is distracting, creates uncertainty, and at the very best, imbues the reader with self-doubt even as they are reading, let alone upon reflection. We can ask too, why such inane conversation, sorry, dialogue, and its meaningless activity takes place at night, and why so late at night? Well, here's a thought. Maybe he was saying to us that the cleanliness and light of the café would not be as obvious, or even so obvious, during the day? Maybe he was challenging us to see what is obvious in this off-beat environment, yet an environment that one can imagine himself and the likes of Ezra Pound, James Joyce, F Scott Fitzgerald, or Picasso taking a Bloody Mary breakfast, an afternoon Martini, and early evening Chianti, or a late night Absinthe. He loved the stuff! In the light of Hemingway's well chronicled exploits across a lifetime of drama and melodrama, it has always intrigued that the literary world appears unwilling to debate this particular offering.

1.2 The Debate

Really, it should matter. Regardless of whether it matters to an individual or not, it should matter in a literary world, that rather than actually taking a fresh look, and postulating different perspectives which Hemingway may have been dialoguing, a generation of literary institutions appear to, with some lethargy, promote the regurgitation of previously held opinions. A thorough literature search revealed an alarming lack of diversity of opinion as to the author's intent in this wonderfully gritty and real, to the point of surreal, dialogue. The mutterings, perceived imaginings, and half-formed opinions of the participants are as ill-informed, half-debated, and woefully inadequate as those of most of us. This leaves so much to debate, alone, without considering the symbolism and tragedy of Hemingway's own life. The purpose, therefore, of this article, is to stimulate lively discourse, seeking out alternatives to the darkness, the tragedy, and the "nada"-ness of this gripping dialogue.

1.3 The Literary Appraisal

Mark Schorer, writer, critic and scholar, wrote of "A Clean Well-lighted Place" that, "It is not only a short story, it is a model of the short story, with all the virtues that attend it as a genre, singularly lighted," thus elevating it to a unique literary position in terms of craftsmanship. However the seduction towards the craft, has never satisfactorily explained the implication that has accompanied Hemingway's classic, as being of darkness, and religious dogma. Rhodes Scholar, Robert Penn Warren obviated the limitation of scope that should be applied in identifying the work as a, "world of violent action," surmising that violence is intrinsic to the work. The positioning of the story is not only as seen by European scholars either, as Mi Wei-Wen "illustrates the narratology and thematic ideas in Hemingway's short story A Clean, Well-Lighted Place, so that the reader can better know its cognitive principles and further understand the theme of this story: all is nada; people's life is also nada and meaningless." All of this talk of darkness may have its origins in that most august of volumes, The Old Testament, as Ecclesiastes 11;7-8 reads, "'Truly the light is sweet, and a pleasant thing it is for the eyes to behold the sun: But if a man live many years, and rejoice in them all; yet let him remember the days of darkness; for they shall be many. All that cometh is vanity.'" Yet for all darkness, there is always light, and for all mortality, light. It appears unsettling sufficiently, that Hemingway committed suicide, when life offered him so much, surely then we can find a place within, to search for the candle that simply burned, "too bright."

1.4 The Hypothesis

This is an argumentative analysis of Ernest Hemingway's, "A Clean Well-lighted Place." It calls into question much of the commonly held literary opinion as to the author's literary and personal intent in writing what appears to be no more than a night where nothing happens. Therefore, the research question materializes as, "Could "A Clean Well-lighted Place," be in praise of women, and the light they bring to our lives?" Earlier data focused essentially on other possibilities within Hemingway's style and motivation, therefore what was required was an in-depth assessment of his life from the perspectives of darkness, anger, violence, and the impending doom of religious thinking, but to review the positive factors, the joy, the enjoyment, and because they could not be divorced from the man, the lust and debauchery that were his constant companions.

2. Method

The scope of this review is admittedly, finite, though they include Bernice Kert, Naomi Wood, James Mellow and Mathew Nickel, all well respected in the field of Hemingway's private life. These publications offer significant clarity as to his behavior, beliefs and relationships. It was, therefore, very much an exercise in discovery, rather than research, which led to a significant volume of reading with the objective of understanding Hemingway. Validity is established, I believe, in the societal and media exposure Hemingway was subject to as a hard-drinking, womanizing, carousing, couldn't give a damn, kind of guy! He was grist for the mill for the media of his day, and did nothing that went unreported. It is apparent too, that the more that was learned of his women, the more was learned of Hemingway himself.

2.1 Literary Models

In order to replicate, or perhaps even to understand him, and therefore "A Clean Well-lighted Place," as something positive and praiseworthy, it was necessary to put aside much of that which had been previously expounded of the man, and instead to attempt to see him as a very different person, with a significant emotional involvement in his women. To this end it was felt more appropriate to utilize the writings of either those who were close enough to Hemingway to write with authority, while treasuring the more liberal language and literary freedom of the modern writer, of whom Naomi Wood proved the most liberal, society having moved forward, and being less restricted in its linguistic opportunities today.

2.2 Syntactic Style

Hemingway changed the world with his writing, which in many ways was the antithesis of who and what he could be himself. He shunned adjectives and adverbs in place of nouns and verbs, and the limitations of the vocabulary and palette saw him initially treated with skepticism. It is but a short step to genius however, and his descriptiveness, without being descriptive, is now treated with reverence. Curt, much of the dialogue smacks of a conversation you don't want to be having. We are certainly more likely to have meaningless, almost monosyllabic conversations getting towards the wee small hours, as our conversations gradually slide into the abyss of thoughtlessness, as Robert Benchley wryly observed, by drawing on our fine command of the English language, we say nothing! A case can also be made that the late evening setting for such lack of occurrence, and absence of manner is created by both the lateness of the hour in many of us following the euphoria of our escape from the daily drudge and discipline of the workplace, and the onset of tiredness and lethargy that alcohol tends to enhance, rather than stave off. Hemingway, it appears, invites us into his parlor, the flies to his spider, inviting us to make assumptions, yet he is aware that many will jump to the academic conclusions he so abhorred, in betting on the bay, when the chesnut is better handicapped, choosing clubs when hearts were stronger, and drinking coffee when wine is so much more fun. In death, he charms with his ingenuity and simplicity, like a child with an insect in a bottle.

2.3 The Characters

In "A Clean Well-lighted Place," we are introduced to an almost pathetic cast of an old man who has attempted suicide and drinks, a young waiter who just wants to go home to his wife, and an older waiter who is pragmatic, and resigned. Other characters are included, but incidental it seems. In terms of the story of Hemingway himself, his mother Grace Hemingway, his first love Agnes von Kurowsky, his mistresses who never became his wives, Lady Duff Twysden and Adriana Ivancich, and his wives, Hadley Richardson, Pauline Pfeiffer, Martha Gelhorn, and Mary Welsh, all feature prominently.

3. Results

"A Clean Well-lighted Place," is not, I believe, the futile observation of the lack of life in our lives, nor is it any form of religious disapproval or disappointment at the lack of provenance of faith. It is rather, a eulogy that offers exaltation of the role of women in a man's life. It is a veneration of femininity, a glorification of the female form, it celebrates all of the virtue, the nourishment, the grace, dignity, and beauty that they bring to we mere males. It's not that men are weak, but, as (Manning, 2001) Cameron Crowe wrote for Tom Cruise's character, in the film "Jerry Maguire", "You complete me." Thereby, Maguire was uttering the words that men have been thinking, yet rarely saying, throughout history. Of course Hemingway, in his drunkenness too, was never beyond straight talk, but the bravado and machismo of the last 100 years was just a bridge too far for him.

4. Discussion

Tradition, in the sense of Hemingway's literary legacy, almost demands that we take an acerbic perspective in reviewing the storyline, such as it is, and the characters. We have sympathy for the old man, who has tried to end his life, mirroring Hemingway himself just far, far too closely, though unlike the author he is deprived of the sense of sound through his deafness. His soul was saved, we are told, from the very Catholic state of damnation, though maybe there is more than one form of damnation? Certainly, being deaf, old, and alive can be no cakewalk. Charlotte Bronte wrote that, "The more solitary, the more friendless, the more un-sustained I am, the more I will respect myself." Perhaps this encapsulates the outlook, or perspective, of the old gentleman, for that is how one must see him, maintaining dignity in the face of, at best ambivalence, and at worst abuse, keeping his own counsel, and himself for company. Abandoned, either by nature, or war, he is deprived of not only the pleasure of sound, and sounds, but more pointedly, the joy of conversation. That new engagement with others, the immaculate joy of a revived interaction, the illusions, the expressions of care and love, and the anticipation and expectation of shared confidences. That joy of life that conversation offers us, is lost to him, as surely as the gift of sight is lost to another, life's cruelest of blows is not even dealt with reason, but harsh brutality. He is deaf, not dumb, and may or may not be aware of the dismissive manner of the young waiter towards him, through his demeanor, but he just simply doesn't want to go home yet. Why, to stare at four walls, or to sleep the brandy induced sleep? "Sleep, to the homeless thou art home," wrote Ebenezer Elliot, "The friendless find thee a friend."

Seeking the same state of rest, but, we are told, suffering from insomnia, is the older waiter of the two. A calm man, the more pragmatic of the two waiters, empathizes with the old man, and though maybe not completely understanding him, has some appreciation for his plight and circumstances. He appears intelligent, fairly articulate in that he expresses himself well, albeit with a touch of cynicism. He appears too, to be of a good and

sympathetic nature to all others, with the harshest of his cynicism reserved for his mutterings to self. The oft eulogized “nada” prayer is an example of his religion, and his lack of religion, at the same time. How does anyone know such prayers, yet use them with such flippancy, unless there is a reason? Maybe a line or two would be a commonplace reaction to lost opportunities, but to persist with the entire prayer hints at disillusionment with God. He displays a similar level of tolerance of, concern for, and understanding of every single other character, thus, in view of the other personalities, does appear exceedingly good natured. The overwhelming feeling here was of waste, that it was such a shame this man had no warm heart to go home to. Why do good things not happen to good people, we ponder? He is free to go home, but we are invited to share his reluctance to do so, quizzically, all wondering why there is no-one waiting for him? He is free to go, but does so at his own leisure, maybe exhibiting a Sartrean inspired fear of decision making. Maybe he has been savaged by bad, or wrong decisions in the past, and doesn’t want to be bitten by the same dog again, even prevaricating over his bedtime, and maybe offering apocryphal alternatives under the label of insomnia, as just another evasion. He also brooks at his opportunity to upset the young waiter. Having suggested that another man may be keeping her happy while the young waiter is at work, he immediately steps back from the same assertion, making light of his remark, but the seed is sown one feels. Brodi Ashton (2012) refers to the need to be “stripped of all evasiveness, all lies, defenses and excuses, demands for how and why,” as the recipe for togetherness. This man treads a different path indeed.

We probably have little sympathy for the young waiter however, who appears to be more than what he is, or should that read less than what he is? He is a decidedly unsuitable person for a bar/café job you would think, unsuited to an empathic, environment such as a bar usually is, as they globally prioritize “bums on seats,” and squeezing decent amounts of currency out of their customers. After all, it’s a hospitality industry isn’t it? One can understand his impatience to go home, and his frustration at not being able to if it was simply a matter of inconvenience, but waiting and bartending is his job. It is what it is, and the lack of professionalism, or pride in his work, is quite remarkable. It is more realistic to perceive the young man’s annoyance is based less on the fact that the omni-present old man keeps him at work, than the fact that the same old man makes no overtures towards friendliness. Hence you feel the enmity is directed not at the old man as such, but his pragmatism and isolationism. Why though, is his wife at home in bed, waiting for him, raised as some kind of apology for his behavior? Indeed is it?

And here is where one must divert from the script if one chooses to see, not only the jester in Hemingway, but the romantic, long hidden beneath a gruff, drunken exterior for sure, but there nevertheless. We can be transformed by knowing him a little better, and, using Bernice Kert, the author of “The Hemingway Women,” prominently, alongside recent biographer Naomi Wood, “Mrs Hemingway,” we can learn much about a contradiction who not only searched for love, but who found it. His problem though, like so many men, was in knowing when he had found it. Kert writes, “Women were necessary in Ernest Hemingway’s life, but not constantly. They had their uses for him—in bed, in the kitchen, as listeners, as comforters, as typists, as hunting and fishing companions, sometimes as money sources. For their services they were repaid in occasional kindness—particularly when they were away and he wanted them back. They were expected to be grateful for his affection or love, to cater to his vanity, to endure his jokes, to forget or ignore the occasions when he embarrassed or humiliated them either in private or before relatives and friends, and to forgive his indifference, his quarrels, his obnoxiousness (especially when he was drinking), and his verbal and mental cruelty.” That introduction rightly and it seems, quite accurately paints an unflattering picture of Hemingway as manipulative, scornful, and ill-tempered, a man acknowledged as unique during his 62 year lifetime. A man who surely recognized his sometimes appalling lack of decorum and acceptable behavior as he wrote in a confessional vein in his novel, “*To Have and Have Not*” (1937), something of himself, with the advice to women that: “The better you treat a man and the more you show him you love him, the quicker he gets tired of you.” One feels that Grace, Agnes, Hadley, Pauline, Martha, Mary and Adriana would all wish that he had been so honest with them.

Hemingway’s mother Grace Hall Hemingway, was treated contemptuously, and frequently referred to as “the bitch,” or “that bitch,” neither of which are very appealing. He blamed her for his father’s suicide, and had little contact with her until she died at the age of 79. She must have been a strong and resolute woman however, as she never stopped offering her advice and support to her son, who nevertheless, didn’t attend her funeral.

Hemingway was an ambulance driver during World War 1, and while being nursed back to health, the 19 year old fell in love with his nurse, 26 year old Agnes von Kurowsky. We are told that she was similarly enamored, but for only a short time, as though he passionately declared his love, she preferred to concentrate on her nursing career. They wrote passionate letters to each other daily, but Kurowsky’s own insecurities over her lack of any classically described beauty, and their age difference; saw her refuse to commit to a permanent relationship.

Eventually, she threw him over for a younger Italian officer, and only told Hemingway in her still frequent daily letter, even though she still saw him often. It's believed that she was represented in the form of Catherine Barkley, in his later classic novel, "A Farewell to Arms," in a romantic tragedy, befitting his youthful agony.

His first marriage, in 1921, at the age of 22, was to Hadley Richardson, who, in her homely appearance greatly resembled Agnes, and was perhaps an indication that he still pined over that first, lost, love. A wealthy, charming heiress, the pair were domiciled in Paris though Richardson tripped across much of Europe with her husband as he covered sports and politics for the "Toronto Daily Star" newspaper. The pair were a good-looking couple, urbane and articulate, and were popular in intellectual circles, and according to Hemingway's biographer Jeffrey Meyers, "With Hadley, Hemingway achieved everything he had hoped for with Agnes: the love of a beautiful woman, a comfortable income, a life in Europe." The birth of their first child, John Jr, in 1923 was to restrict the ability of Hadley to travel quite as frequently as her husband however, and thus, the door was opened to infidelity.

Hemingway, never one to let a challenge go by, developed high class taste, maybe appealing as a "bit of rough," by the bored aristocracy, with Lady Duff Twysden, a twice married divorcee prominent among his stream of Parisian confidantes. Married at the time to artist Clinton King, Lady Twysden was a volatile and fairly plain looking socialite, with what Kert described as, "her insouciance, her style, her unerring charm," as the reasons why Hemingway fell for her. However, to this day opinion is fraught with any pursuit of an unerring description of her as his lover, with convincing evidence only of her as a close confidante. She is believed to be immortalized as Lady Brett Ashley, an aristocratic yet sluttish character in his 1926 novel, "The Sun Also Rises." It's difficult to think that he would portray her in this manner unless it contained an element of truth, though he may simply have been upset by her return to her husband, whom she cared for until his demise in 1938.

The other woman who diverted Hemingway's interest from his wife was Pauline Pfeiffer, who presented a much greater danger to the marriage than Duff ever did. Pfeiffer, a journalist writing for the American magazines, Vanity Fair and Vogue, befriended first Richardson, then socially accompanied the couple "around town," before the unthinkable happened when, having cheated on his wife with the impish, vivacious writer, Richardson unwittingly invited Pfeiffer to join them on their family holiday to Schruns, in Austria, in 1925. The first cracks appeared in public when Hemingway and Pfeiffer returned to Paris together, leaving Richardson and their son, in Austria. For some strange reason, his wife was to accept his infidelity, but as Pfeiffer again joined the family first to Antibes, on the Cote d'Azur in June, and then onwards to the Running of the Bulls in Pamplona, in July 1926. Richardson was to regret her decision the instant they arrived at the seaside resort, and her misery was complete as Hemingway brazenly presented Pfeiffer as his lover. The trio returned to Paris, but Hadley had had enough, and filed for divorce as soon as she got back. In 1927, the divorce, which was remarkably amicable considering the public humiliation Richardson had suffered, was granted, allowing the author, and the journalist to marry in May of that year.

It's intriguing that, knowing Hemingway as she did, and the nature and manner of her own vampish seduction of him, that Pfeiffer wasn't more wary of her husband's peccadilloes. Maybe she thought the births of two sons, Patrick and Gregory, would be sufficient adhesive, along with her beauty and wealth? It surely appeared so as the relationship proved publicly, and privately harmonious, for a decade was to pass before Pfeiffer was to be "bitten by the same dog," as Richardson, when, as Naomi Wood put it so well, "Fife (as she was known), was stewing on a sultry Florida evening when her husband arrives home late for dinner, bringing a young blonde writer, Martha Gellhorn, whom he has picked up in a Key West bar." It appears he developed a distinct antipathy for Pfeiffer in their later years, as she is clearly and harshly portrayed as a man-eating, rich bitch, who insinuates herself into a happy marriage, in his AE Hotchner inspired memoir, "A Moveable Feast." This was quite a remarkable portrayal, and a betrayal of sorts, as Naomi Wood writes off Pfeiffer that, "she never got over losing him," making her unique. Poignantly, she was the only one of his wives to pre-decease him.

Gellhorn and Hemingway shared a love of danger, and the incredibly good looking, vibrant duo travelled together to cover the Spanish Civil War in 1937, celebrating Christmas together in Barcelona. They lived together, on and off, during the next three years, while Hemingway also returned home frequently to Key West and Pfeiffer. However Pfeiffer was determined to resolve the matter one way or the other, and in a scenario she must have known only too well, later that year she was to admit that the pair had indeed become more than just occasional lovers, and by 1940 had divorced her husband. Gellhorn was by that time, like Hemingway, a war correspondent, and also like him, something of an adrenaline junky. She was a ground-breaking journalist in the cause of feminine acceptance, and following the couple's marriage in 1940, featured prominently with her articles from the continuing ascendancy of Adolf Hitler, to D-Day, to Hitler's fall, and eventually to the Nazi Concentration Camp at Dachau. She traversed Europe and South East Asia, chasing stories, and proved a strong

foil for the demanding Hemingway, who in fact tried numerous times to have her “adventures” curtailed. Kert, in “The Hemingway Women,” wrote, “She had found, as had his other wives, that Hemingway could never sustain a long-lived, wholly satisfying relationship with any one of his wives. Married domesticity may have seemed to him the desirable culmination of romantic love, but sooner or later he became bored and restless, critical, and bullying.” A solution to their different directions, needs, and wants was to emerge in the shape of another war correspondent, Mary Welsh, and thus, Gellhorn was to secure her liberty, and a divorce in 1945. Later, Gellhorn, always bold and impetuous herself, was to say that Hemingway’s quest was to “marry everything he fucks!”

Welsh was to become the last Mrs Hemingway, as, though still married to Australian journalist Noel Monks, her second husband, she and Hemingway began an affair in defiance of both of their spouses. Once they were legally able though, the pair wasted no time in tying the knot. In 1946 Welsh lost the baby they were expecting as the result of an ectopic pregnancy. However, through years of drunkenness, irascibility, and volatility, there must have been a relationship that kept pulling the pair back from the brink. Even his affair with Adriana Ivancich, his pretty Venetian Muse, from 1948, unable to break this devoted woman’s bond. Welsh was to find Hemingway dead after his suicide by shotgun, in July, 1961.

It’s patently obvious that Hemingway was a lover and a fighter, a contradiction in so many ways as he fought and bullied his way through a life that was rarely settled and enjoyable. This disciple of misogyny, this brute, this absolute beast in so many ways, found love so often, and not with docile, “pleasant”, or amenable women, but independent, vibrant, aggressive, articulate, intelligent, and yes, “feisty.” None of them was a pushover or a decoration, all were treated abysmally, and yet they all loved him till they had no more love left to give. Was he so charismatic? Or what on earth persuaded these “graduates of the Hemingway University (Wood),” to put their faith in him? What possessed them to think they could change him by keeping the good bits, and throwing the bad bits away? Alas, we’ll never know, because this unrestrained “bear” of a man, wrought with insecurity and paranoia, killed himself.

How does any man reconcile a life such as his, forgetting the bullfights, bar fights and drunkenness, what made this man submit himself to marriage in such a cavalier fashion? Maybe he was contradictory in his behavior in that he needed a woman to insulate, or protect him from the banality of the world around him, while enjoying the novelty of change. He apparently once told F Scott Fitzgerald that his vision of heaven comprised two lovely houses in town, one containing his wife and children, where he would “be monogamous and love them truly and well”, the other “where I would have my nine beautiful mistresses on nine different floors”. He must have, at some point believed that, “this is the one,” you would think? Otherwise why do it? Not the absolute “stud” in bed that history would have one think, at first glance, perhaps his insecurities were to affect his abilities as a lover, and he was given to bouts of depression and impotence. So that was definitely not the ideal mental or physical approach to intimacy then. In fact, Martha Gellhorn once described sex with Hemingway as, “Wham, bam, thank you ma’am without the thank you.” Maybe, maybe not, but perhaps the childhood analogy of the kid in the candy store is more appropriate. He would take some of everything, but just didn’t have enough pockets!

So, what is all of the relevance of Hemingway’s relationships to “A Clean Well-Lighted Place,” and especially in light of the fact that all of the key characters are men? The religious aspects of the story are freely, and widely interpreted, on the back of the old man’s flirt with suicide, and this prayer.

Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada and nada us our nada as we nada our nadas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee.

Hugh Allen (1940) took Hemingway to task over his lack of religious belief, attributing that instability to Gertrude Stein, and her own lack of belief, and here, I believe is the first clue to the genuine meaning of “A Clean Well-Lighted Place.” He may have had religious beliefs, but they couldn’t be rationalized initially within his Protestant faith, and when he married Pauline Pfeiffer, a devout Catholic, he converted. He once said to screen star Gary Cooper, “becoming a Catholic was one of the best things I’ve done in my life.” Prior to that however, Hemingway came close to death himself during the Great War. On July 18, 1918, Hemingway was severely wounded by mortar fragments and machine gun rounds. Mathew Nickel book asserts that Hemingway actually experienced a profound religious conversion following his wound. Hemingway recounted that he felt his “soul or something coming right out of my body, like you’d pull a silk handkerchief out of a pocket by one corner. It flew around and then came back and went in again and I wasn’t dead anymore.” Fanciful maybe, but intriguing nevertheless. Almost every scholar or academic concludes that Hemingway was some type of lost soul, yet who could resolve their religious insecurities more prudently, and be able to rationalize the acceptance of religion, than one who has experienced a “near death” episode? And he shot himself! In doing so, he rejected all

of the teachings and beliefs of his faith. No, I must look elsewhere for my rationalization of this tale.

The timing too of the story, which came out while Hemingway was deeply attached to the wealthy Pauline Pfeiffer, following their 1927 marriage (Kert, 1983), leads one further towards the fact that while there are a lack of feminine characters where the meaninglessness of the conversation occurs, this delivers a message as to the absence of women in our lives when there is nothing happening in our lives.

If we reflect upon the women, though they have no dialogue, are certainly characters in the story, we have their presence as comforting, warm, life enhancing, life-savers.

A girl and a soldier went by in the street. The street light shone on the brass number on his collar. The girl wore no head covering and hurried beside him. "The guard will pick him up," one waiter said. "What does it matter if he gets what he's after?" "He had better get off the street now. The guard will get him. They went by five minutes ago."

It's a little exchange that perhaps offers much to the view that the soldier was introduced, in passing, as an analogy to the fact that violence, and war, are never far away, but for a time can be banished to another realm by the love of a woman. Any woman, and any time! The woman too, is brave, because certainly if her soldier is taken, so she too will be in trouble. Yet she is willing to risk it.

The old man tried to commit suicide:

"What did he want to kill himself for?" "How should I know." "How did he do it?" "He hung himself with a rope." "Who cut him down?" "His niece." "Why did they do it?"

Who saved him? His niece, not his wife, his daughter, a lover, or any passer-by? He was saved by a woman, who, as his niece was close enough to him to have had an excuse to save him, but who was asexual in terms of the relationship, therefore had no motivation other than the affectionate familial love that is that of the offspring of a sibling, close to love, but closer to relationship. Nieces are close enough to treasure and adore, yet not distant enough to love. I believe that Hemingway found this conundrum in his marriages, his affairs, his loves and his failures. He simply couldn't reconcile his relationships with women and their place in his life, any more than he could settle with religion.

The third feminine reference during the story is that of the young waiter:

"He's lonely. I'm not lonely. I have a wife waiting in bed for me."

He isn't lonely he says, and his wife is waiting for him in bed, leading us to think all is well, in his bed, perhaps paraphrasing marriage.

Later this exchange taunts, not only the waiter, but the reader:

"And you? You have no fear of going home before your usual hour?" "Are you trying to insult me?" "No, hombre, only to make a joke." "No," the waiter who was in a hurry said, rising from pulling down the metal shutters. "I have confidence. I am all confidence."

Ouch! No fear of going home.....before your usual hour? That is an allusion to the possibility of a cuckold in his bed isn't it? It appears to strike home too, with the young waiter immediately taking umbrage. But the older waiter immediately backs down, he has made his point, and the young waiter is left to ponder his confidence in himself, though pointedly, none in the faithfulness of his wife, waiting in bed, at home.

And thus has Hemingway been laid bare. Modestly, as befits one who took his own life, and with respect, as befits a literary genius. Humorously, as with one who laughed in the face of adversity and danger, lovingly out of respect for the genre, but above all with humility. Or, as he may have himself written "Why did he kill himself? He had nothing, nada? He wouldn't know nothing if it bit him on the backside."

5. Conclusion

Hemingway wrote so much of life, almost so much more of death, comparatively little of love, and almost nothing of femininity. I don't think he trusted himself to be open about his adoration of females. He was loving and loved, but could never commit completely to the concept of being faithful because he simply loved women, all women, any and every woman. The matador in him would surface, and he would see the next beautiful woman as a challenge. He invested in women, but certainly not for life, and in that, he was a pig! But he wasn't the first, and certainly will never be the last to be tempted and undone by more than one woman. I mentioned investment. I'm sure that on the eve of each of his weddings he must have questioned his ability to be loyal and faithful, but he was so drawn towards, not so much being in love with the woman by his side, as having a

beautiful woman by his side. Could it have been his way of saying, “Look! Here is the smartest, most beautiful woman in the world, and she’s mine, all mine.” When I imagine Hemingway, I’ll bet he was a “spooner” in bed. Sleeping, moulded to his lover, with all of the reassurance that offered him, and if he displayed any guilt over his many illicit affairs, it would not be evident, as a “spooner” doesn’t turn away, but holds on tighter, knowing that not doing so will identify their unfaithful behavior. Psychiatrist Patti Wood says that spooning demonstrates where, “one partner takes a protective stance over the other,” but that it also reflects a high degree of adoration, and is particularly sexual. In any case, I believe, and my study of Hemingway, his women, and his life, lead me to the conclusion that though there was definitely a darker, more sinister, fatalist side to the great novelist, there is also no doubt that he was an extremely passionate, animated, humorous and loving man, who adored his women, even though he did tire of them, and saw each new face as a new challenge. My conclusion, unbidden, and without preconception, suggests that *A Clean Well-lighted Place* is a metaphorical tribute to women, and how they light, offer clarity, and order to our lives. Without whom we are nothing, nada, and incomplete. I am insufficiently egotistical to think that I will change anyone else’s alternative perspective, but maybe given pause for thought, and just maybe, made you consider again an icon, flawed in that manner that only those with genius appear to be, by the knowledge that suicide is the only escape.

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