

# A Clean Well-lighted Place in the Perspective of Existentialism

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper gives an existentialist view of Hemingway's story. The despair and the Absurd are two aspects of Existentialism that are less talked about. The paper presents readings of the old's despair, the younger and the older waiter's nothingness, so as to explore into the basis of existence in nothingness.*

**Keywords:** Existentialism; despair; the Absurd

## INTRODUCTION

*A Clean Well-lighted Place* written by Ernest Hemingway enjoys welcome worldwide out of its exceptional minimalist style, emotional and philosophical austerity and bleakness. By the time of the publication of the story, Hemingway was already an established writer who frequented the France literary stage in the 1930s, as Jean-Paul Sartre said in a 1946 essay, "The greatest literary development in France between 1929 and 1939 was the discovery of Faulkner, Dos Passos, Hemingway, Caldwell and Steinbeck.[...] At once, for thousand of young intellectuals the American novel took its place together with jazz and the movies, among the best of the importations from the United States."<sup>[i]</sup> The story is also regarded by many as Hemingway's only article and has been placed under close study since its publication. The story shows the depth of the void modern life and the human spirit, just as Hemingway is labeled by Gertrude Stein "the Lost Generation." The lost sense of the then writers originates from the first World War, seeing the glorious course advocated by the ruling class turn out to be deceptive and illusionary.

*A Clean Well-lighted Place* is imbued with a strong sense of void, the heatedly debated topic of the story. Hemingway faces readers with such a system in the injunction against suicide. David Kerner studies the keyword "nothing", thinking Hemingway takes pains to weave the web.<sup>[ii]</sup> Ben Stoltzfus analyzes Sartre's philosophical exploration into the work of Hemingway, with emphasis on "Being" and "Existence".<sup>[iii]</sup> This story

is also analyzed in perspectives of narrator<sup>[iv]</sup>, iceberg principle<sup>[v]</sup>, and existentialism<sup>[vi]</sup>. The existentialist reading of the story gives in-depth understanding, while the reading could be widened, which is the purpose of this paper. The story presents a strong sense of nothingness through intricate description of the characters and the setting of the bodega. The old man, the young waiter, the old waiter, and the solidier all present something or certain meaning, through which the theme could be well achieved.

### 1. The Old Man's Despair

Despair in existentialism is regarded as a loss of hope. What sets the existentialist notion of despair apart from the conventional definition is that existentialist despair is a state one is in even when he isn't overtly in despair. So long as a person's identity depends on qualities that can crumble, he is in perpetual despair—and as there is, in Sartrean terms, no human essence found in conventional reality on which to constitute the individual's sense of identity.<sup>[vii]</sup>

The old man in the story evokes intense curiosity from the start. Who is this old man? Where is he from? For what purpose does he try to commit suicide? The only information left is that the old man try to kill himself out of despair. The constitution of the old man's sense of identity is lost out of his owning plenty of money. Money should represent richness in material, in opposition to richness in mind. The old man's identity is unknown nor does he show signs or hints of his

identity to the end of the 1400-plus-word story. Reader may infer from the old man's behavior and the waiter's conversation what the old man might have done before. Ambiguous. To no avail could one prove the old man's identity. Except that The old man is a "good client" known from the waiter's point of view. At least, the old man keeps his manner.

Another question may strike the reader that on what condition the waiter could know the old man tries to commit suicide and is rich in money. The above question may help clear hints of the old man's strangeness. It can be inferred that the old waiter has seen through the phenomena of the old man and deeply understands him.

Old may refer to the state of one's life journey, namely closer to the end of being alive and the start of death. When describing the man as old, the man must have experienced the major stage of his lifetime. Also unknown is the old man's past experience that is attributed to the despair. It is then likely that the old man want to take control of his life instead of waiting for the scythe of the Death. The waiter knows clearly that what the old man needs is light and order. Order creates sense of ritual and electric light drives away darkness. At night, the dew settled the dust make the place clearer, the old man could sense the difference, which means the ole man's craze for cleanness or nothingness. The settled dust symbolizes the void of air. With the ability to feel the difference, the old man cares about his environment of existence, the living condition. In the daytime, the air is dusted because of the crowd. Settled dust also refers to the return of the natural order. Light is in opposition to shadow in which the old man sit, however, a dilemma occurs. In the daytime, light is sufficient that it is easy to feel the existence of his surroundings and himself. While the night enables the sense of nihilism to grow, light may drive away the nihilism. The old man's need for light gives hints to readers that deep in his heart and mind something immaterial is accessible to fill the hollowness. Light could not be caught but has such a huge impact on the existence of mind. "Light was all it needed."<sup>[viii]</sup> Carter thinks light is inevitable and points out that "light is necessary to convert *nada* into manna for being."<sup>[ix]</sup>

The old man's despair about nothing should be understood as the despair about something that is called nothingness instead of no things to feel despairable about. The time is set late into night when everyone is left. The word "late" not only refers to the concept of time, but points out that the old man's life stage is late, to think of the old man who has missed the opportunity of avoiding despair.

Another feature about the old man is that he is deaf. Being deaf means the disability of hearing that constitutes the basis of verbal communication. As the old man can not hear the sound of people and the world, the silence has brought him ultimate suffering if

not relieved just like throwing him into the abyss of life. It is not a matter of whether he could be or not be understood by others, he may feel alternative to both choices, but what the old man can not bear is the similarity of all hours. Silence. What follows him is dead silence, a status that drives him to feel difference between day and night. The old man can only buy himself a drink and get drunk to get solace. Also, the deaf life of the old man has forced him to turn to light, especially at night, to seek psychological comfort. The breakage expressed through the word "deaf" gives hints to the lack of people-to-people communication, says He Changyi, the pain could not be passed on to others, except for being "felt" [5].

One waiter says that the old man was looked after by his niece, but she cut him down. Literally speaking, the old man's suicide of being cut down by her niece has contributed a lot to the old man's despair. The old man's niece to a large extent has considered the right of heritage, the old man's fortune. When kinship is fragile to such a terrible condition, the old man's s hope of existence is broken down. In other words, the old man's one quality--being uncle--has crumbled, because his niece has regarded him as a source of fortune. Despair prevails over the old man's world. Death is not the matter the old man fears, as nothingness is the something that the old man fears. And this despair, after the old man's failed suicide, becomes much more intensified than the previous period. No wonder the old man seeks order and dignity, which are both lost on his family's side, and he could only seek order in dignity outside when traditional ethics are broken down along with the times when the story was written in 1933. The first World War has cracked down Hemingway's outlook on the holy words like honour, freedom, democracy..., and stimulated him to put down on paper despair the spiritual trauma of the generation, reflection of the age on the old man. Nothingness is incurable, neither is despair.

## 2. The Absurd in the Story

The notion of the Absurd contains the idea that there is no meaning in the world beyond what meaning we give it. This meaninglessness also encompasses the amorality or "unfairness" of the world.[7] The Absurd in the story could be understood from several aspects, the time, the space, and the implication of conversation.

Given the two dimensions, time and space, all matters should be discussed under the two factors, out of the limitation of the status of Being. Present in the story is a very usual night just like numerous nights before. The hour is also set before three o'clock. However, there is no such real thing as time. What is time? Time is unseen and untouchable, existing only on the concept of human mind through the change of light by the movement of the earth around the sun and the movement of the earth itself. Time is man-made and the form of the hour is manifested through watches and clocks or any other sign that can distinguish the movement of light. The concept of time becomes dominant in the young

waiter's mind when the night goes deeper, as three o'clock is already the start of another day. The young waiter is bound by the exact hour, by contrast, the old man is not, which differs the old man's concept of time from that of the young waiter's. The light gives meaning to the existence of time, also to the old man's judgment against his deafness. In the daytime, the noise could not be avoided for the ordinary, but not to the old man. At night, the world would become silent so as the ordinary people could not to be disturbed. For the old man, sound could not help determine the time. In this sense, the time is nothingness for the old man, but not to the young waiter. When getting rid of time, the old man's living is more real. The younger waiter could not get rid of the amoral limitation of the man-made concept. However, the old man is free from the bondage of the concepts. Without the bondage of time, the old man is bound by the very essence of nothingness. Nada. In nothingness of time, the old man actually gets nothing. However, the dilemma is that the younger waiter also get controlled by nothingness, because time does not exist. Therefore, both the old man and the younger waiter live in nothingness. And the two men's age has prove the nothingness. The process of being young till being old is nothingness, the existence being nothing, which deepens the meaning of nothingness. Likewise, the existence of nothingness of time is again wiped out by the nothingness. The nothingness of time could only be wiped out by light. Therefore the old man's seeking the light has less meaning of the Absurd, the young waiter is on the contrary seeking the Absurd.

Space is inevitable for discussing the constitution of material Being, the physical existence. The physical existence is confined to space where order is indispensable and manifested. The old man only comes to the cafe out of its cleanness in that cleanness represents the proper order of setting. The old man's seeking for the order means his seeking for certain rules of spatial arrangement. Here comes another absurd aspect. Order is created automatically to cater to human's aesthetic need and prioritize what should be accessible. There should be no fixed order merely relying on the temporary owner of the spatial area. The cafe's cleanness signifies that the order is not completely lost against the background of the First World War that has destroyed human's cognition of history, of human beings. The cafe is such a place where the old man and the old waiter both consider to be the appropriate symbol of spatial order. Though the cafe is not big enough, it is outright sufficient for the night walker like the old man and the waiter who in their aging years have already seen enough of individual's past experience, be it terrible or terrific. The cafe shelters the man and those who are in the similar condition. The small building is not only an physical shelter but also a spiritual one in that the mind for order or nothing particular meaningful rests, in nada. When sitting in shadow, the old man seems to have melted in the shadow, melting in nothingness and becoming nothingness as a whole. Even the scene could

be regarded as alternative to either existence or non-existence.

The conversation between the old waiter and the young one has been heatedly discussed by David Kerner [2]. Ambiguity generates meaninglessness. The ambiguous implication signifies the possibility of all interpretation, but this is exactly the absurd existence of the conversation. "I wouldn't want to be that old. An old man is a nasty thing." "Not always." [8] The younger waiter's response is absurd. The aging process is inevitable for anyone but the young waiter thinks he wouldn't be that old. Does he mean he would not live as long as the old has lived, or he could be sure of his lifespan, or he is unsure that he could not bear to live that long? The tense suggests that the young waiter seems confident about himself, but the tense is not stronger enough to show his determination to foreseeable doom. The intricate ambiguity shows the younger waiter's groundless confidence or even fear of becoming aged and as nasty as what he is afraid of.

"You should have killed yourself last week." [8] Knowing the old man being deaf, the younger waiter is bold to say such inhumane words. The words could only accelerate and deep the old man's despair and sense of nothingness, but without the old man's consumption at cafe the younger waiter is unable to support his family, to think of the abject poverty and curse on the source of income, the material condition of existence. The older waiter's denial comes from his understanding of the old man. His sensibility and reason keeps him trying to think in the old man's situation. Both he and the old man seeks somewhere clean and well-lighted.

"You have youth, confidence, and a job." "You have everything." "And what do you lack?" "Everything but work." [8] The old waiter's existence resembles that of the old man's in that the old man is in despair of plenty of money, however, the old waiter is in need of work to support. In this circumstance, the old waiter needs alleviation out of the present condition. The dilemma is that when the old waiter becomes as rich as the old man is, the old waiter would become similar to the old man. What they actually share in common is the inner desire for light and order, for nothingness. "I am of those who like to stay late at the cafe." "With all those who do not want to go to bed. With all those who need a light for the night." [8] The time is set late at night, place at the cafe, indicating the two dimensions of existence are similar for one kind of people who have seen through nothingness or can not see through nothingness. The younger waiter is of another kind who does not want to see through nothingness, as the old waiter says to the younger one, "...This is a clean and pleasant cafe. It is well lighted. The light is very good and also, now there are shadows of the leaves." [8] Nothingness melts in the absurd.

## CONCLUSION

The paper presents an existentialist reading of A Clean, Well-lighted Place that despair and the absurd are two aspects the story is less mentioned of. An existentialist view of the old man's despair can clear the sense of nothingness of the modern people. Light, order and nothingness are interconnected so that the unity can play to full the web Hemingway has woven. Existence can be nothingness. With time and space, existence. The absurd is not absurd superficially. Only when the absurd is realized could one realize the essence of

Being, the meaning of existence. Time, space and mind put together form a unity that gives the story in-depth philosophical interpretation that in nothingness people will finally find something to live on.

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