

A Clean, Well-Lighted Place



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Ernest Hemingway grew up outside a suburb of Chicago, spending summers with his family in rural Michigan. After high school, he got a job writing for *The Kansas City Star*, but left after only six months to join the Red Cross Ambulance Corps during World War I, where he was injured and awarded the Silver Medal of Military Valor. Afterward, he lived in Ontario and Chicago, where he met his first wife, Hadley Richardson. In 1921 they moved to Paris, where he worked on his writing (including writing "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" and also developed a long friendship with F. Scott Fitzgerald and other ex-patriot American writers of the "lost generation." After the 1926 publication of his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, he divorced Hadley and married Arkansas native Pauline Pfeiffer. The couple moved to Florida, where Hemingway wrote *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), which became a bestseller. Hemingway finally moved to Spain to serve as a war correspondent in the Spanish Civil War, a job that inspired his famous 1939 novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. After its publication, he met his third wife, Martha Gellhorn. Hemingway married his fourth and final wife, Mary Hemingway, in 1946, and the couple spent the next fourteen years living in Cuba. After a final move to Idaho, Hemingway took his own life in 1961, following in the footsteps of his father who had committed suicide in 1928. Hemingway left behind his wife and three sons.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

After Friedrich Nietzsche's proclamation that "God is dead" in *The Gay Science* (1882), the Christian value system that had supported western ethics and values left a vacuum of meaning. Where once God's commands established human purpose, nothing remained to tell people how to conscientiously and happily live life. The despairing nature of *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* (1933) stems partly from this void in western consciousness. By misquoting the Lord's Prayer, a prayer that brought meaning to millions in the West for centuries, Hemingway contributes his own answer to and criticism of Christianity. The despairing nature of the story also stems, in part, from Hemingway's exposure to WWI, where he not only witnessed the death of a group of female workers at a factory, but he also suffered shrapnel wounds in both of his legs. Additionally, it's important to remember that he published "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" during the Great Depression (1929-1939), a time when many Americans faced extreme economic poverty after the collapse of the stock market on what is now called Black Tuesday.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

How to live in the face of despair—the central question of "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place"—is a common question throughout literary history. Homer's *Iliad* (800 B.C.) suggests that people stave off despair by seeking immortality through glory in battle. Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872) suggests that people treat life as a kind of aesthetic endeavor. Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), published only ten years after "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," asks whether suicide is the preferable option to living with the knowledge that life is without meaning. William Faulkner, the most prominent fiction writing contemporary of Hemingway, grapples with despair in *The Sound and the Fury* (1929), where his most despairing character, Quentin, commits suicide. Hemingway's fascination with one's approach to death also appears in some of his other works. *Death in the Afternoon* (1932) and *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) both reveal Hemingway's fascination with bullfighting in Spain. Through both books, Hemingway admires the Spanish-people's sport-like posture toward death.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** A Clean, Well-Lighted Place
- **When Written:** 1926
- **When Published:** 1933
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story, modernism
- **Setting:** A clean, well-lighted café
- **Climax:** The older waiter recites his take on the Lord's prayer
- **Antagonist:** The young waiter
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Secret Agent. Hemingway worked for the U.S. government as a spy in China prior to and at the start of WWII.

Magnum Opus. In a biography written by A.E. Hotchner, Hemingway is quoted as saying that "A Clean, Well Lighted Place" might be his favorite story. James Joyce also once noted that the story might "be one of the best short stories ever written."



PLOT SUMMARY

In a quiet **café**, an old deaf man decides to stay late into the night to get drunk. The young waiter serving him is frustrated

that he'll be stuck at the café serving the old drunk instead of at home in bed with his wife, a grievance he airs to the older waiter working with him. The older waiter, however, sympathizes with the old drunk, highlighting the fact that the man tried to commit suicide the week before. He imagines that it must be nice for the old drunk to stay up late in a quiet, clean, well-lighted place.

Eventually, the old drunk waves the young waiter over to ask for more brandy, which irritates the young waiter even more. When he arrives to take the order, the young waiter warns the old man that he will get drunk. The old man, however, does not reply, and the young waiter reluctantly returns to get a saucer and some brandy. While pouring the brandy, he tells the old waiter that he wishes the old drunk would have killed himself—then he repeats this sentiment to the old drunk himself, who cannot hear the young waiter since he is deaf.

The young waiter and the old waiter discuss why the old man tried to kill himself. While the younger waiter argues that he's "lonely" or that old people have nothing to live for, the old waiter speculates that the suicide attempt was not from loneliness or destitution, but rather out of despair about the meaninglessness of life. Moreover, the old waiter finds the old drunk to be admirable in his manner: he is dignified in the face of meaninglessness and despair, as he doesn't get drunk in an unseemly way. To this, the young waiter replies that the old waiter is "talking nonsense."

After requiring the old drunk to leave the café, the young waiter finishes his conversation with the old waiter and leaves as quickly as possible. The old waiter, however, continues the conversation with himself, trying to locate the reason for both his empathy for and his fear of the old drunk. He decides that both his empathy and fear spring from his knowledge that "it was all a nothing and man was a nothing too." In other words, he decides that what's bothering him is how the old man's behavior reminds him of the meaninglessness of life. Upon this realization, he recites the Lord's Prayer, swapping out many of the words with "nada." He also recites the Hail Mary, swapping out words for nothing: "Hail Mary, full of nothing. Nothing is with thee."

After finishing his soliloquy, the old waiter decides to go to a bar to get a drink. After telling the barman he would like "nada" to drink (and getting called a crazy person), he decides that, like the old drunk, he does not want to get drunk in a dirty place. In order to face meaninglessness with dignity, he needs a quiet, clean, well-lighted place. He then goes home and waits until the morning to fall asleep.

depicts the old waiter as kind, dignified, and wise in his belief that, since life is meaningless, one must prioritize being comfortable and dignified above all else. Because the old waiter understands the importance of small pleasures, he is sympathetic toward an old drunk who likes to stay up late drinking at his café. While the younger waiter hurries to get home, the older waiter is unrushed; he doesn't want to be anywhere else because he recognizes that lingering at the café is a pleasure. The old waiter is shown to be empathetic, since he carefully considers what led the old drunk to attempt suicide the week before, imagining what it must be like to be 80 and without a wife. He decides that "nothing" was the cause for the attempted suicide—life's meaninglessness, in other words. He then recites a version of the Lord's Prayer that replaces many words with "nada," suggesting that he, too, thinks there is no reason for anything. The old waiter's own actions mirror the old man's; when he goes for a drink at the nearby bar after his shift, for example, he quickly leaves because its shabbiness fails to provide him with the atmosphere necessary to feel comfortable and dignified, which are his priorities in life.

Young Waiter – The young waiter, the antagonist of the story, is a server in the **café** with the old waiter. He is brash and callous toward the old drunk (a patron at the café) because he wants to get home to his family instead of staying at work. He even tells the old drunk (who is deaf) that the man should have killed himself the week before. During conversations with the old waiter about the old drunk, the young waiter betrays his naive attitudes about growing old, saying that an "old man is a nasty thing" and suggesting that the old waiter is simply talking nonsense by trying to empathize with the old drunk's suicide attempt. The young waiter thinks that his time is more valuable than the two older characters' time because he spends it on things that he thinks matter. Thus, after refusing the old drunk another drink and reducing the old waiter's conversation points to "nonsense," the young waiter exits the café and goes home.

Old Drunk – The old drunk is a dignified, elderly deaf man who spends his late nights in the quiet, pleasant **café** at which the two waiters work. He likes to sit underneath the shadow of the tree in the electric light because the atmosphere is pleasant for drinking and relaxing. The week prior, the old drunk attempted suicide because, as the older waiter notes, he is in despair about life's meaninglessness. When the old drunk speaks, it is only to ask for more brandy from the young waiter. Otherwise, he drinks with the purpose of getting drunk. More importantly, as the old waiter also notes, the old man chooses not to get drunk in a wild or undignified manner. In fact, though he gets drunk enough to walk "unsteadily," he never loses his composure, which reflects that—in spite of his despair over the meaninglessness of life—he is committed to an existence of pleasure and dignity.



CHARACTERS

Old Waiter – The old waiter, the story's protagonist, is the older of two waiters at a clean, well-lighted **café**. Hemingway



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



MEANING AND MEANINGLESSNESS

"A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" depicts three men—a young waiter, an older waiter, and an old, deaf drunk—trying to determine how to spend their

night. Each character reveals their posture toward the meaning of their existence through their attitude towards spending time in the **café** in which the story is set. The young waiter is eager to go home to his wife, which reflects his feeling that meaning comes from keeping busy and maintaining the socially-expected balance between work and family. The older waiter and the old drunk, however, both want to remain at the café late into the night, which shows that they've accepted that they can't give their lives larger meaning, so their time is best spent making themselves as comfortable as possible. Ultimately, Hemingway favors the view of the older men—that, in the face of meaninglessness, people should spend their time feeling comfortable and dignified, as the two older men feel in the clean, well-lit café.

The young waiter, who thinks that there is no reason to stay at the café, draws purpose and meaning from clearly-defined obligations. He wants his job and his family to be in balance, so he rushes the old drunk out of the café so that he doesn't have to stay at work too late. By portraying the young man as brash and impatient, however, Hemingway discourages readers from adopting his perspective. During the waiters' conversation about the old, deaf drunk man's suicide attempt, the young man comes off as callous and even cruel. He says directly to the old drunk that he "should have killed [himself] last week," a feeling that the young waiter seems to express purely because he is impatient to get home to his wife and get some rest. Even though the old drunk can't hear him, the young waiter's spiteful attitude shocks the reader into disliking him.

Furthermore, Hemingway depicts the young waiter as petty in his belief that the old drunk has "no regard for those who must work." While it's true that it's much past midnight and the old drunk man is the only café patron left (and therefore the only reason that the waiters must stay at work), the usual hour at which the café closes has not yet arrived, so the old man's behavior is not explicitly disrespectful of the waiters' time. Beyond that, the young waiter—whom Hemingway describes as "the waiter who was in a hurry"—seems indifferent to the man's despair, caring only for his own desire to go home early. In general, the young waiter comes off as being preoccupied

and petty, unable to empathize with the old man or slow down and enjoy his own night.

The older waiter and the old drunk, however, are unhurried and seem to take pleasure in the simple things: both men prefer "a clean, well-lighted place" to enjoy instead of going home to be alone at night. Hemingway encourages readers to take the views of the older men seriously, since their life experience gives them insight into the fact that one should prioritize comfort and dignity in the face of life's meaninglessness.

Hemingway makes clear that both older men find life meaningless through the drunk man's suicide attempt and the older waiter's response to it. After the young waiter leaves, the old waiter asks himself what it was about the old drunk's suicide attempt that makes him afraid. "It was not fear or dread," he says, "It was a nothing he knew all too well. It was all a nothing and a man was a nothing too." This suggests that the older waiter finds the idea of death familiar—the nothing of death is essentially the same as the nothing of life, suggesting a uniform meaninglessness. In this way, the old drunk and the older waiter share an attitude about meaning, which is why the older waiter can empathize with the old drunk (as he clearly does when he tells the younger waiter that he doesn't like to close the "pleasant café" for people who like to stay out late).

Furthermore, the old drunk and the older waiter seem to grapple with their understanding of meaninglessness in similar ways. While the old drunk is clearly more perturbed (as he's abusing alcohol and attempting suicide), both men are conspicuously unhurried to do anything else in their lives, and both men enjoy the small pleasures and comforts of the moment. The old drunk, for example, enjoys sitting "in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light," which the older waiter completely understands. When the young waiter suggests that the old drunk could go to a bodega, which is open all night long, the old waiter says that the young waiter does not understand the value of enjoying one's time in a quiet, clean, well-lit place like the café. This suggests that the older waiter, like the old drunk, finds it important to make sure that every moment in life is comfortable and pleasant, while the younger waiter is more goal-oriented, as he believes that, since the old drunk would be able to drink at either a bodega and a café, the experience would be interchangeable. Hemingway suggests that the older men treat life's meaninglessness in the right way. They're not focused on goals, or grudges, or keeping busy; instead, both older men enjoy the moment they're experiencing and seek out the small pleasures that make them feel content in the face of nothingness.



YOUTH AND AGE

The older waiter and the old drunk man share the perspective that, since life is meaningless, people should seek comfort, dignity, and enjoyment. The younger waiter, by contrast, is always too hurried to enjoy the

present moment—he seems to think that he can impose meaning on his life through work or family. Hemingway depicts this difference in perspective not as an innate feature of their personalities or values, but rather as a difference based on their ages. The young waiter is naïve—he doesn't have enough life experience to give up on finding meaning and focus on finding comfort instead—while the older men have learned over time that the best way to live is to prioritize comfort and dignity. This suggests that wisdom comes inevitably with age, and that the worldview of the old should be taken seriously by virtue of their experience.

The old waiter and the young waiter's perspectives on the old drunk reveal their attitudes towards aging. The young waiter says of the old drunk, "I wouldn't want to be that old. An old man is a nasty thing." To this, the older waiter replies, "Not always. This old man is clean. He drinks without spilling. Even now, drunk. Look at him." A little later Hemingway completes the thought. "The [old] waiter watched him go down the street, a very old man walking unsteadily but with dignity." While both the young and old waiters agree that growing old can be lonely and difficult, the older waiter recognizes the value of dignified living and he respects the way that the old drunk has aged, since it shows his wisdom and dignity.

In contrast, the young waiter cannot see the old drunk for who he is at all. He senses that the old drunk's loneliness contributed to his suicide attempt, but his empathy stops there. "He's lonely," the young waiter says. "I'm not lonely. I have a wife waiting in bed for me." Therefore, the young waiter fails to empathize with the drunk man because he himself has never experienced what that man has gone through, demonstrating a weakness of youth.

Hemingway then compares the values of youth with the values of age. After the old waiter makes a joke about the young man's certainty that his wife is, in fact, waiting for him in bed, the young waiter replies that he is confident that she is. "You have youth, confidence, and a job," answers the old waiter, "You have everything." But by virtue of having "everything," the story suggests the young waiter fails to understand the nothingness that is at the core of life. That having "everything" prevents the waiter from understanding life is clear from his inability to understand the old drunk's suicide attempt and the old waiter's beliefs about the virtues of living with dignity. The young waiter believes that the old waiter is talking "nonsense," since he doesn't understand how dignity could coexist with everything being lost. For the young waiter, dignity is found in doing things of consequence, which accounts for his constant hurry. However, through the wisdom and simple enjoyment that the old men exude, Hemingway suggests that it's only once everything is inevitably lost through time and aging that people become wise and knowledgeable enough to grapple with how they should spend their days.



DESPAIR

Hemingway thinks that he has an answer, or at least a partial answer, to despair. The older characters in the story neither ignore their lives' meaninglessness nor succumb to pure indifference. Instead, they come to terms with the fact of despair by deliberately countering its effects—namely, by finding comfortable places in which they can enjoy themselves and by prioritizing finding dignity. While this offers none of the comforting measures of, say, the Catholic faith of the person who confidently recites the Lord's prayer, it serves a similar function: providing a means of living with purpose and peace. By highlighting the old men's approaches to life in the midst of meaninglessness, Hemingway gives a roadmap for how to assuage despair.

It's important to note that Hemingway does not connect the cause of despair with loneliness or poverty. The old drunk is neither entirely alone, because he lives with his niece, nor is he destitute, as the old waiter clarifies. Instead, the old drunk's suicide attempt and the old waiter's fear stem from their mutual recognition that life is without meaning. Both require a drink to "swallow" this truth, of course, but they likewise confront that reality by acting in a dignified manner.

In other words, the old men practice the very habits Hemingway offers as a counterweight to despair. Both the old drunk and the old waiter seek out a quiet place over a loud place, a clean place over a dirty place, and a well-lighted place over a dark place. This provides the ambiance needed not only to enjoy one's time, but also to function in a dignified manner. While despair might lead some to abandon any concern for how they appear while drunk in public, Hemingway shows the reader an old drunk who is dignified even after a long night of drinking, and even in the face of meaninglessness. This dignity is, in a way, an act of defiance against his despair.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE CAFÉ

The café symbolizes the small pleasures that, in spite of life's meaninglessness, make living feel dignified and comfortable. The old waiter and the old drunk both love to sit and drink at the café because it is quiet, and the shadow of its electric lights provides a nice haven under which to relax. In contrast, the young waiter cannot wait to leave the café and head home to his wife; he finds his meaning not in enjoying the present, but rather from external sources of validation, such as his wife. The waiter cannot appreciate the atmosphere of the café—he suggests that the old drunk could

leave the café for a dirty bar or bodega, since he could also get drunk in those places, but this misunderstands the pleasure and dignity of the café itself. The young waiter's goal-oriented outlook is shown to be out of step with the way of life that the café symbolizes, a worldview that recognizes that everything is meaningless except dignity and comfort.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon and Schuster edition of *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* published in 1987.

A Clean, Well-Lighted Place Quotes

Everyone had left the café except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light.

Related Characters: Old Drunk

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 288

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of the story, Hemingway focuses on the ambiance of the café to highlight the importance of finding an appropriate place from which to grapple with the meaninglessness of life. In fact, this description of the shadow of the leaves appears three times in this very short, short story, which further emphasizes the importance of location: the old man doesn't just sit anywhere in the café, he sits in the spot with the best lighting. It's only under the condition of the best lighting in the café that the old man can feel comfortable enough to (as readers find out later in the story) face the meaninglessness of life. The old drunk's appreciation for details, and the care he takes to drink in a nice place, also shows his dignity: he hasn't given up or debased himself.

“Last week he tried to commit suicide,” one waiter said.
“Why?”

“Because he was in despair.”

“About what?”

“Nothing.”

Related Characters: Young Waiter, Old Waiter (speaker), Old Drunk

Related Themes:

Page Number: 288

Explanation and Analysis

This is the first conversation between the young waiter and the old waiter, and it hints at the topic the two will discuss throughout the remainder of the story: the cause of the old drunk's despair. By asking what it was that caused the old drunk to attempt suicide, the young waiter shows that he believes that despair must have a specific cause—for him, despair is not the natural condition of living, but rather an aberration brought about by external factors. The older waiter's response (that the old drunk was in despair about “nothing”) seems, at first, like a way of blowing off the younger waiter's question. This is plausible, since the older waiter clearly does not share the young man's worldview, but as the story goes on his answer seems more honest and direct: the old drunk was literally in despair about “nothing,” in the sense that he realized that life is nothing and that living is meaningless. In hindsight (after reading the rest of the story), then, the older waiter seems empathetic in his ability to easily understand the old drunk's pain, while the younger waiter is oblivious to the older man's feelings about the world.

“I wish he would go home. I never get to bed before three o'clock. What kind of hour is that to go to bed?”

“He stays up because he likes it.”

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

“He had a wife once too.”

“A wife would be no good to him now.”

“You can't tell. He might be better with a wife.”

Related Characters: Young Waiter, Old Waiter (speaker), Old Drunk

Related Themes:

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

After serving the old drunk another brandy, the young waiter complains that he's ready to go home to his wife and insinuates that the old man wouldn't be there if he were married. This shows that the younger waiter believes family

is more important than drinking in a clean, well-lighted café (and, implicitly, that his own life is better than the old man's). In the young waiter's view, the old man only comes to the café to waste what little time remains to him—and by virtue of that, waste the time of the young waiter, too (which implies that the old drunk is selfish). However, the young waiter's view is a limited one—the older waiter, by contrast, can see that the old drunk's life contains pleasure and possibility. He's at the café because he "likes it," not because he wants to waste time, and a wife might benefit his life (which implies that his life is dynamic and far from over). This shows the older waiter to be the more empathetic man, since he refuses to reduce the old drunk to someone whose life doesn't matter—he sees the old man as a full person.

“I wouldn't want to be that old. An old man is a nasty thing.”
 “Not always. This old man is clean. He drinks without spilling. Even now, drunk. Look at him.”

Related Characters: Young Waiter, Old Waiter (speaker), Old Drunk

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 289

Explanation and Analysis

In conversation with the older waiter, the young waiter expresses his frustration with and disdain for the old drunk by disparaging his age. Since the young waiter cannot fathom despair being the natural condition of life, and the older waiter has already discounted poverty or loneliness as sources of the old drunk's despair, the younger waiter can only imagine that the old drunk is suicidal because of his age. The young waiter's obsession with finding an external cause for the old drunk's despair shows the young waiter's discomfort with the notion that despair might be an honest reaction to living—perhaps, then, to spare himself a confrontation with meaninglessness, he projects his discomfort and rage onto the old man (who, as an old, deaf, drunk man, is an easy target). The older waiter, however, admonishes the young waiter, hinting that there's a right way to grow old. Specifically, the old man's cleanliness reveals his composure in the face of both age and the meaninglessness of life. The old man doesn't just “give up,” as it were; he approaches his remaining time with intention and poise.

“The waiter watched him go down the street, a very old man walking unsteadily but with dignity.”

Related Characters: Old Drunk, Old Waiter

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

After being rushed out of the café by the young waiter, the old drunk leaves to go home. While he is unsteady on his feet (perhaps due to both brandy and age), the old waiter admires that the old drunk walks away in an honorable and respectable manner. It's one thing to leave drunk and out of control; it's another to leave drunk while intentionally maintaining decency. That the old waiter admires this dignity so much shows that he values (perhaps above all else) facing life's meaningless in a respectable way. While life is meaningless and despair is the appropriate response, despair should not defeat a person—dignity is the only way forward.

“What is an hour?”
 “More to me than to him.”
 “An hour is the same.”

Related Characters: Old Waiter, Young Waiter (speaker), Old Drunk

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

After refusing the old drunk further service, the young waiter defends himself against the older waiter's admonitions that he could have worked another hour and allowed the old drunk to stay at the café. The young waiter justifies his actions by noting that his time is more valuable than the old drunk's—to him, getting home to his wife is more important than an old, bored drunk getting to have another drink. He fails to see that the old drunk's perspective of time (or, indeed, his existence) matters. The older waiter's retort is ambiguous. On the one hand, it can be read as a recognition that everyone's time—regardless of how they spend it—has the same value. In the same way that the young waiter enjoys time with his wife, the old drunk enjoys his dignified drinking under the electric light at the café. On the other hand, the older waiter might simply be

making a blasé statement about the meaninglessness of an hour—it's the same to everyone because an hour is nothing.

“You have youth, confidence, and a job,” the old waiter said.
“You have everything.”

Related Characters: Old Waiter (speaker), Young Waiter

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 290

Explanation and Analysis

Realizing that the young waiter fails to understand his own lack of life experience, the older waiter subtly hints that, although the privileges of his youth make him happy, they are not guaranteed over the course of a lifetime. The young man's job keeps him busy, and his family provides him with a reason to work hard. But none of this can prepare him to cope with life where all that external purpose is gone. The young waiter takes his life's apparent purpose for granted, which makes him desperately naïve to lives that are not like his own, especially the lives of his elders. This is why he is painfully ignorant of how life's meaningless might lead someone to attempt suicide. It's also important to note that the older waiter tells the young waiter that he has “everything”: considering the older waiter's subsequent revelation that he believes life to literally be nothing, the young waiter having “everything” implies that he actually

has no comprehension of the truth of his life. When the old waiter later orders “nada” at a bar he's asserting his values, in contrast to the younger waiter who has everything but knows nothing.

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 and our daily nada and nada us our nada as 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.

Related Characters: Old Waiter (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 291

Explanation and Analysis

Upon realizing why he feels anxious and afraid, the older waiter recites his own, unique rendition of the Lord's Prayer. By substituting the primary nouns of the prayer with “nada,” he likewise substitutes the primary ideas and content of Christianity for ideas that are fundamentally barren and empty of purpose or content. In other words, he reduces the Lord's Prayer to utter nonsense and consciously adopts a worldview wholly and unequivocally devoid of purpose. Where some might say that God provides mankind with purpose, the old waiter deviates from that possibility and grows critical of any path that ascribes meaning to life.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

A CLEAN, WELL-LIGHTED PLACE

Late in the night, everyone has left the **café** except for an old drunk man sitting in the shadows cast by an electric light shining on tree leaves. The old man likes to sit there because, even though he is deaf, it's "quiet" at night and "he felt the difference." Inside, two waiters watch him drink, trying to make sure he doesn't leave without paying.

The old waiter tells the young waiter that the old drunk tried to kill himself last week. When the young waiter asks why, the old waiter says that it cannot be for a lack of money or loneliness; the old man is well-off and lives with his niece. Instead, the old waiter says that the reason must be "nothing." The young waiter ignores this and busies himself with his work. When a soldier and a young girl walk by, the young waiter hopes aloud that the soldier will escort the old drunk from the **café**, but the soldier doesn't.

The old drunk waves the young waiter over and asks for another glass of brandy. The young waiter is reluctant to serve the old drunk, knowing that the old drunk will take it as an invitation to stay even longer. "I never get into bed before three o'clock," he complains to the old waiter, wanting to get home to his wife. "He should have killed himself last week." The old waiter doesn't reply, so the young waiter grabs a brandy bottle, refills the deaf man's glass, and tells him "you should have killed yourself last week."

When the young waiter returns to his colleague, he asks again why the old drunk tried to kill himself. The old waiter says, "how should I know?" Then, in response to more questions, he reveals that the man tried to hang himself, and he was spared when his niece cut down the rope out of "fear for his soul." The young waiter asks about the old drunk's financial situation again, but the old waiter notes that the man has "plenty" of money.

Hemingway emphasizes the pleasant atmosphere of the café through his description of the shadows of the leaves and by noting that even a deaf man can feel the difference between this quiet café and others. That the old man is drunk and prone to leaving without paying suggests that he might be troubled.



While the young waiter tries to account for the old drunk's despair by blaming external factors (money or loneliness), the older waiter knows better. When he says "nothing," what he means is that he believes that the old man is struggling with life's meaninglessness, not life's challenges. Instead of inquiring further, the young waiter ignores the older waiter, which suggests that his world is narrow and that he doesn't have time for things he doesn't understand.



The hurried attitude of the young waiter reveals his posture toward life: he's goal-oriented, rushed, and he finds meaning in the future rather than in the present. Since the old drunk stands in the way of the young waiter's desires, the young waiter behaves cruelly towards the man, which (even though the old drunk can't hear the waiter's comments) makes the reader lose sympathy for the younger waiter working late.



According to the Catholic tradition, death by suicide guarantees one's damnation to hell. The old drunk's niece (who is young, just like the younger waiter) therefore shows that she thinks that the old man's actions matter or have meaning when she cuts him down. The old drunk, however, believes that life is meaningless, which drove him to suicide in the first place. This hints at a generational gap in understanding life.



The young waiter remarks that the man must be eighty years-old, and then he complains again about the late hour. The old drunk “stays up because he likes it,” the old waiter responds, and the young waiter calls the drunk “lonely,” in contrast to himself, since he has a wife waiting for him in bed. An old man is a “nasty thing,” the young waiter says, but the older waiter disagrees: “This old man is clean,” he says. “He drinks without spilling. Even now, drunk. Look at him.” The younger waiter does not want to look at him, though; he wishes the man, who has “no regard for those who must work,” would go home.

The old drunk looks up from his glass in the direction of the young waiter and asks for another brandy. The young, hurried waiter walks over and says, “No more tonight. Close now.” The old man asks for another drink again, but the young waiter refuses him, repeating “No. Finished.” He begins wiping the table down with a towel and the old man, defeated, counts the money for his bill, pays, and leaves a tip. He begins walking home in a “dignified” way.

The older waiter asks the younger waiter, “Why didn’t you let him stay and drink?” The young waiter replies that he wants “to go home to bed,” and that an hour means more to him than it does to the old man. The unhurried waiter disagrees, saying that an hour is the same to everyone. He jokes that the young waiter should be more cautious about going home an hour before his wife expects him, but the young waiter says he’s not worried, and that he has “confidence” about what he’ll go home to. “You have youth, confidence, and a job” replies the old waiter. “You have everything.” As for himself, the old waiter says that he lacks “everything but work,” and he never had confidence. The young waiter tells him to stop “talking nonsense.”

Once the young waiter leaves, the old waiter continues the conversation with himself, wondering why he feels fear when contemplating the old drunk’s behavior. After realizing it wasn’t dread, he concludes that what made him afraid was the fact that, “It was all a nothing and a man was a nothing too.” He then recites a version of the Lord’s Prayer, substituting many of the words with “nada”: “Our nada, who art in nada, nada be thy name, thy kingdom nada thy will be nada...”

The younger waiter shows here that he disdains older people—considering this, it makes sense that he makes no effort to genuinely understand them. Alternatively, the older waiter’s age gives him perspective on and empathy for the old drunk. He sees that, instead of being tragic and gross, the old drunk is actually admirable because he remains dignified in the face of meaninglessness and the difficulties of old age.



Here, the young waiter behaves badly: he selfishly kicks an old man out of the café before closing time, and he talks down to the man, seemingly because the man is deaf. In contrast, the old drunk behaves kindly: he tips the waiter (despite his rudeness) and leaves with dignity, showing remarkable self-possession in a difficult situation.



The young waiter thinks that his time is more valuable than the old man’s because he fills it with work and family, while he assumes that the drunk man’s life is pointless. This self-importance, combined with his clear animosity towards old people, suggests that his relative youth has made him callous and lacking in perspective. Since the young man has lost credibility through his cruelty and lack of introspection, Hemingway’s association of the young waiter with “confidence” is backhanded—perhaps this confidence provides a false sense of security.



After locating the source of his anxiety and despair, the old waiter grows critical of the same Catholic tradition that the old drunk’s niece supported in saving her uncle from suicide. By reducing the value of the Lord’s Prayer to “nothing,” the old waiter punctures the meaning that prayer is supposed to offer. For him, the meaning of life is nothing, so religious tradition should be replaced with emptiness.



When he finishes the prayer, the old waiter smiles and gets a drink at a nearby bar. He tells the bartender that he wants “nada” to drink, and the bartender calls him a crazy person. The old waiter takes a quick, small drink that the bartender irritably serves him, and he complains that, although the bar has good lighting, it is “unpolished” and dirty. The bartender ignores the older waiter’s complaint, so he decides to leave and he goes home to fall asleep.

After articulating life meaninglessness, the old waiter adopts the same attitude of the old drunk (even inspiring derision from a bartender, just as the old drunk did). This bar, while well-lit, is dirty. Thus, the ambiance of the bar (in contrast to the café) fails to provide him with the necessary conditions for facing meaninglessness while maintaining his composure and dignity. Realizing this, he leaves the bar and goes home.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Hughes, Kevin. "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 18 May 2018. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Hughes, Kevin. "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." LitCharts LLC, May 18, 2018. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/a-clean-well-lighted-place>.

To cite any of the quotes from *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Hemingway, Ernest. *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*. Simon and Schuster. 1987.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Hemingway, Ernest. *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 1987.