

The Killers



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Ernest Hemingway was the second of six children born to Clarence and Grace Hemingway in Oak Park, Illinois. Clarence Hemingway often brought Ernest camping and hunting with him in rural Michigan, instilling in him a lifelong love of the outdoors. Hemingway played a number of sports in high school (including boxing and football) and enjoyed writing short stories for the school newspaper and magazine. In 1918, Hemingway joined the Red Cross and was sent to the Italian front during World War I. He was seriously injured and spent the rest of the war recuperating in Milan before returning to the United States. Hemingway famously spent much of the 1920s in Paris, falling in with a group of writers dubbed the “Lost Generation” by the poet Gertrude Stein. Hemingway’s short story collection *In Our Time* was published in 1925, resulting in almost overnight fame that continued to grow with the publication of his first novel, [The Sun Also Rises](#), in 1926. Hemingway’s love life was notoriously messy: he divorced his first wife, Hadley, for his mistress, Pauline; he divorced Pauline a few years later after meeting a journalist named Martha Gellhorn; and he divorced Martha after falling in love with Mary Welsh, who remained married to him until his death. Hemingway enjoyed decades of fame and fortune, but his fast-paced and unhealthy lifestyle combined with poor physical and mental health began to take its toll on his work and his personal life. In 1961, Hemingway died by suicide at his secluded home in Ketchum, Idaho. In his lifetime, Hemingway published seven short story collections, seven novels, and two works of nonfiction. Several more works, including *The Garden of Eden* and [A Moveable Feast](#), were published posthumously.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

“The Killers” is set in Summit, Illinois (a suburb of Chicago) in the 1920s, at the height of both American Prohibition and organized crime. In nearby Chicago, Al Capone and the Chicago Outfit gained national fame for their involvement in deadly gang wars, gambling rings, murder, and illegally distributing alcohol. Boxing was one of the most popular sports in America during the 1920s, but it was also very vulnerable to match fixing by organized crime syndicates that had enough money to bribe fighters. Both Max and Al in “The Killers” are shown as caricatures of mobsters from Chicago sent to kill Ole Andreson, a prizefighter that is believed to have “double-crossed” somebody in Chicago. In coming to Summit, Max and Al bring big-city crime to a small town that has so far managed to avoid the kind of widespread criminal activity and danger

that characterized Chicago. Hemingway himself came from a small town near Chicago, so it is no wonder that part of the horror of “The Killers” is the idea that big-city crime might expand and invade small towns.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

“The Killers” is one of 24 of Hemingway’s short stories to feature Nick Adams as a protagonist, including “Big Two-Hearted River,” “A Way You’ll Never Be,” and “Cross-Country Snow.” “The Killers” can also be read as a sequel to a story Hemingway wrote as a high school student in 1916 titled “A Matter of Color.” In this story, a prizefighter known as The Swede is instructed to hide behind a curtain and hit another fighter’s opponent so that he will lose the match and the manager will win a bet he made. However, The Swede hits the wrong fighter, causing the manager to lose several hundred dollars. Although Hemingway does not explicitly state that “The Killers” is connected to his earlier work, there are several striking similarities between Ole Andreson and The Swede: Andreson is also a Swede, he is a former prizefighter, and he “got in wrong” doing something in Chicago that resulted in a hit being taken out on him. Additionally, “The Killers” partially inspired the short story “Bullet in the Brain” by Tobias Wolff. In fact, the primary character of “Bullet in the Brain” references “The Killers” by name when he is taken hostage with several other people at a bank and sarcastically declares that the robbers sound just like Max and Al (the hitmen in “The Killers”).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Killers
- **When Written:** 1927
- **Where Written:** Madrid, Spain
- **When Published:** 1927
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story, Modernist fiction
- **Setting:** A small town called Summit
- **Climax:** Nick goes to warn Ole Andreson about the hitmen who are looking for him, but Ole reveals that he already knows about it and is preparing to go out and meet death.
- **Antagonist:** Max, Al, death
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

The Movies. “The Killers” has been adapted into feature-length and short movies four times since it was initially published. Notable stars in these adaptations include Burt Lancaster, Ava

Gardner, Lee Marvin, and Ronald Reagan.

Andre Anderson. Andre Anderson was a Swedish prizefighter who was famously shot and killed by members of a Chicago mob in 1926. Many believe that Anderson was the inspiration behind Hemingway's Ole Andreson in "The Killers," which was published the next year.



PLOT SUMMARY

One evening, in the 1920s, in a small town outside of Chicago, two strange men dressed in identical derby hats and too-small black overcoats enter Henry's diner and sit at the counter. Another customer, Nick Adams, sits at the other end of the counter and watches them as the manager, George, tries to take their order. The men—whose names are revealed to be Max and Al—try to order a roast pork dinner, but George tells them that this is unavailable. Frustrated, Max asks why it's on the menu if they can't order it and George explains that it is a dinner option and dinners are not ready until 6:00. George looks at **the clock** and tells them it's only 5:00, but Max points out that the clock actually says 5:20. George explains that the clock is actually 20 minutes fast, which further frustrates Max and Al. Once again, Max tries to order a dinner and George tells him he can't order it yet and has to choose between sandwiches or breakfast options. Max accuses George of deliberately trying to work against them, saying, "Everything we want's the dinner, eh?" Finally, Max and Al order some of the options George lists for them.

While they wait for their food, Al asks what kind of drinks they can order, implying that he is looking for alcohol. George, however, follows the Prohibition laws of the 1920s and tells them they only have non-alcoholic drinks. Max sarcastically says Summit is a "hot town" and Al asks what people do there for fun at night. Max makes the snide remark that everyone comes into the diner for "the big dinner," finally frustrating George enough that he makes his own sarcastic remark that Max was right. In retaliation, Al starts calling George a "bright boy" and turns his attention to Nick and asks his name. Nick tells Al his name and Al starts calling him a "bright boy," too.

George finally brings Max and Al their food and they start eating. When they finish, they abruptly order Nick to go around behind the counter and tell George to call the cook out to the front of the diner. The cook, Sam, comes out for just a moment before Al says he is going to take Nick and Sam back into the kitchen while Max and George stay out front. In the kitchen, Al, armed with a sawed-off shotgun, ties up Sam and Nick and puts towels in their mouths so they can't call for help. In the front of the diner, George asks Max what's happening, and Max reveals that they are there to kill a Swede named Ole Andreson. Max asks George about Ole's habits and George reluctantly confirms that Ole does frequently come to the diner for dinner

at 6:00.

George asks Max what Ole did to him and Al that makes them want to kill him and Max tells him that it's just "to oblige a friend." Al starts to get nervous about how much Max is revealing to George and tells him he is talking too much. Max tells George that if anyone does come in, he needs to tell them that the cook is sick, and if they insist on getting food then he has to prepare it himself. For the next hour, George frequently checks the clock and, at one point, he goes back into the kitchen to make a sandwich for a customer and sees Al with a sawed-off shotgun and Nick and Sam tied up together. At 6:55, George tells Max he doesn't think Ole is coming in, but Max insists on waiting a few more minutes. When Ole still doesn't show up, Max and Al prepare to leave. Before they go, Al asks what they should do with the hostages and Max insists on leaving them alive despite Al's concerns that it would be "sloppy" to leave witnesses.

After Max and Al leave, George unties Sam and Nick and tells them what Max and Al were planning. George tells Nick that he should go find Ole Andreson at his boarding house and tell him about the hitmen, but Sam tells Nick to "stay out of it" because it "ain't going to get you anywhere." Despite these warnings, Nick goes to Ole's room to warn him. Nick is shocked to discover that Ole already knows there are hitmen looking for him and has actually been preparing to leave his room and let them kill him. Nick offers to go to the police or do something else to help Ole avoid death, but Ole tells him that he's "through with all that running around" and is only working up the courage to leave his room. Nick continues to make suggestions, but Ole finally tells him there "ain't anything to do" and dismisses him.

George returns to the diner to tell George what happened. Sam refuses to listen to what he has to say and stays in the kitchen, but George does ask him a couple of questions and spends a few seconds thinking about what "an awful thing" it is. Finally, George decides to put the situation out of his mind and shows this by picking up a **towel** and cleaning the counters. Nick, however, has a difficult time working through his feelings about the situation and says he "can't stand to think about it." In response, George tells him he "better not think about it" and the story ends.



CHARACTERS

Nick Adams – The story's young and naive protagonist, Nick Adams is in Henry's diner talking to George when two hitmen, Max and Al, come in and take them hostage. Nick is bound and gagged in the kitchen with the cook, Sam, while Max tells George of the plan to kill Ole Andreson. Nick gets free, though, and, at George's suggestion, agrees to go warn Ole about the hitmen. Throughout the story, Nick tries to be stoic and brave.

He tries not to react when he's freed as a hostage, and he finds the courage to risk his life and safety to go warn Ole because he believes that it's the right thing to do. This seemingly relates to a belief that death is awful and avoidable, and that evil shouldn't win. However, Nick is disappointed and confused when he finds that Ole is already resigned to his fate. Seemingly not understanding Ole's resolve, Nick makes several suggestions for how Ole could get away, but Ole tells him that he's "through with all that running around" and is unwilling to do anything to save himself. Nick struggles to understand Ole's seeming indifference towards death as he returns to the diner to tell Sam and George what happened. Sam refuses to listen, but George briefly talks to Nick about what "an awful thing" it is. Feeling overwhelmed, Nick says he plans to leave town and that he can't stop thinking about it, but George tells him to put it out of his mind. Nick is left feeling disillusioned and frustrated by the idea that Ole can't be saved. He has become a little more mature through this episode, as he can now conceive of the reality of death, but he's not yet mature enough to look death in the face and accept it.

George – George is the manager at Henry's diner. His age and background are unknown, but his paternalistic way of talking to Nick and giving him directions indicates that he is older and more experienced than Nick. When Max and Al come into the diner, George becomes the primary target of their harassment. He is repeatedly called a "bright boy," which is meant as a slight to both his masculinity and his intelligence. Despite these insults, George's fear prevents him from standing up for himself. While Al ties up Nick and Sam in the kitchen, George is left alone with Max. George is horrified to learn about their plan to kill Ole Andreson and he frequently checks the clock while he counts down the minutes until the hitmen will give up. When Ole does not come in, they tell George he's "got a lot of luck" and they leave without hurting any of their hostages. George is better at hiding his fear than Nick is, but he is still too scared to go warn Ole about the hitmen himself, and so he tells Nick to do it. When Nick returns with news of Ole's acceptance of death, George quickly tries to put it out of his mind. He gets out a **towel** and begins wiping down the counters, telling Nick he "better not think about it" anymore. In general, George is slightly more able to cope with the possibility of death than Nick is, but he still can't accept and embrace the inevitability of death, a mark of immaturity in Hemingway's eyes.

Ole Andreson – Ole Andreson is a former prizefighter now living in a boarding house in a small town outside of Chicago. For unexplained reasons, Max and Al are sent to kill Ole. After being held hostage by the hitmen, Nick Adams gets free and finds Ole and warns him that there's a hit out on him, encouraging him to save himself. However, Ole has already accepted his death as unavoidable and is lying in bed with all of his clothes on preparing to meet death. Ole seems profoundly depressed, and he drives Nick out of his room, telling him that

while he hasn't been able to steel himself to leave his room and meet death yet, he's working up the courage and he's going to do it soon. George believes Ole "must have got mixed up in something in Chicago," implying some kind of involvement with the mob. Ole himself tells Nick that he "got in wrong" and that there "ain't anything to do" to stop Max and Al (or someone else) from killing him. Ole's passive acceptance of death is a major contributor to Nick's ultimate disillusionment.

Sam – Sam is an African-American cook at Henry's diner. Sam is the target of racial slurs from both George and Al and is evidently not taken seriously by anyone. After Max and Al leave and he is untied, Sam tries to distance himself from the situation by repeating that he doesn't "want any more of that" and doesn't "like any of it at all." Sam understands that becoming any more involved in the situation would be a serious risk to himself, both physically and emotionally. He also tries to warn Nick to "stay out of it" instead of going to warn Ole Andreson, but his well-intentioned advice is quickly dismissed. From that point on, Sam refuses to even listen to anything Nick or George has to say about what happened.

Max – Max is one of the hitmen who take over Henry's diner and hold George, Nick, and Sam hostage. While Al guards Nick and Sam in the kitchen, Max stays in the front of the diner and talks to George. Max is more aggressive and talkative than his partner, Al, and Al frequently scolds him for talking "silly" or "too much." Max is the one who tells George about the plan to kill Ole and reveals that they are only doing it "to oblige a friend," providing a major clue about why Ole is being targeted. Max also takes on a leadership role, determining how long he and Al should wait for Ole and deciding what to do with their hostages when they finally leave.

Al – Al is one of the hitmen who takes George, Nick, and Sam hostage in Henry's diner. While Max and George stay in the front of the diner, Al guards Nick and Sam with the same gun he plans on using to kill Ole. Max makes the anti-Semitic and misogynistic comment that Al is from a "kosher convent," revealing some possible tension between the two of them. Al rarely speaks directly to the hostages and frequently expresses his anxiety about Max talking "too much" about what they are doing and why. On the other hand, Al also reveals that he is more willing to actually murder someone when he complains that leaving witnesses is "sloppy."

Mrs. Bell – Mrs. Bell is the manager of Hirsch's boarding house, where Ole Andreson lives. Nick Adams confuses her for Mrs. Hirsch as he is leaving Ole, which magnifies his confusion about Ole's acceptance of death. This contributes to Nick's realization that he does not really know the people around him as well as he thought he did.



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.



INNOCENCE AND EXPERIENCE

In “The Killers,” Max and Al—a pair of hitmen—travel to a small town to kill one of its residents, the former prizefighter Ole Andreson. At

the diner where the murder will take place, Max and Al take three hostages: Nick Adams (a young man who is eating there), George (the manager), and Sam (the cook). When Ole Andreson doesn't show up, however, Max and Al leave, and the hostages grapple with their experience of evil. Sam and George—who are older and more experienced—want to stay out of the situation, but Nick Adams, the youngest of the men, feels that he needs to do something to help Ole Andreson—a plan that fails when he finds that Ole Andreson himself is resigned to his fate. By showing Nick's naivety in thinking that he could save Ole Andreson from evil or death, and then showing Nick's subsequent disillusionment (which brings him more in line with the worldviews of the older men), Hemingway suggests that aging and maturing is a process of learning to accept the inevitability of death.

Although Hemingway does not provide many details about Nick's age or his past, it is clear that he is still very young and naïve. Other characters (including Max, Al, and Sam) make comments that provide clues about Nick's age and level of maturity. Max and Al repeatedly refer to Nick as a “boy,” calling attention to both his youth and their complete lack of respect for him. After Max and Al leave, Sam also calls Nick a “little boy” for choosing to go to Ole Andreson's, which Sam sees as an immature lack of judgment. During his visit to Ole Andreson, Nick rather innocently suggests that there is an easy resolution to the issue or that “it was just a bluff” and Ole will be fine. Only when Ole makes it clear that he's “through with all that running around” and is not willing to avoid his problems anymore does Nick begin to accept that Ole's death, no matter how terrible, is unavoidable and that it was foolish of him to think Ole could escape it.

In contrast to Nick's naïve desire to get involved with Ole, Hemingway presents Sam and George—who are somewhat older and more experienced—as jaded. They are resigned to what is happening and feel like they cannot, or should not, fix it. Sam, for instance, prefers that they all stay out of it. Even though he has literally been tied up in the back of the restaurant by a man with a gun, Sam's first reaction is simply to say, “I don't want any more of that.” In service of this goal, he

discourages Nick from going to see Ole Andreson, because—while Nick believes that warning Ole Andreson is a courageous and good thing to do—Sam finds it foolish, thinking that it will just bring more trouble. Furthermore, once Nick returns from Ole Andreson's, Sam literally shuts the kitchen door that he can't hear Nick and George discussing the situation. He doesn't want to be involved at all, because, it seems, experience has taught him that avoidance is best. George, meanwhile, encourages Nick to go warn Ole Andreson, but refuses to go himself. Perhaps this is simple cowardice, but clearly George doesn't want to be personally involved, either. Later, when Nick returns from warning Ole Andreson and seems haunted by the man's inevitable death, George tells Nick that he had “better not think about it.” This shows that George, like Sam, ultimately prefers to shut out difficult realities and pretend they don't exist.

Ole Andreson, whose name implies that he is the oldest and wisest of the men, has the most cryptic reaction to the story's events: like Sam and George, he accepts that he will die, but unlike Sam and George, he's not in denial about it—he's depressed. When Nick visits Ole Andreson, he finds the man unable to get out of bed and barely willing to speak. Nick warns him about the hitmen and Ole, at first, “did not say anything” and then says, “There isn't anything I can do about it.” Nick suggests fleeing town or going to the police, but Ole believes this “wouldn't do any good.” Instead, he plans to “make up his mind to go out”—and, presumably, meet his death. On the one hand, Ole seems to be paralyzed and unwilling to take action to fix the situation, much like Sam and George. On the other hand, unlike Sam and George, Ole is not ignoring a difficult reality: he has fully internalized what is going to happen to him, and he plans to work up the courage to meet it head-on. Unlike George's advice to “not think about it,” Ole is thinking about it deeply and deciding how to act based on this knowledge. Hemingway implies that Ole is correct to accept his fate; Nick, after all, feels “silly” as soon as he warns Ole about the hitmen, and his attempts to give advice seem more annoying than helpful. Furthermore, across his published works, Hemingway equates courage and dignity with the ability to accept death as inevitable and meet it without flinching—something Ole is steeling himself to do.

In the story's final scene, Nick returns to the diner a disillusioned man: what he thought was an act of bravery was actually silly and useless, and he knows now that Ole Andreson will certainly die. Instead of becoming as wise as Ole, however, Nick only becomes as mature as George and Sam: rather than confronting the inevitability of death, he seems to resort to denial. This is clearest when Nick tells George that he's going to “get out of this town.” Instead of staying and grappling with the reality of what is happening (like Ole, who refuses to flee his killers), Nick's impulse is to get far away from a difficult situation. It's somewhat similar to Sam closing the door on a

conversation he doesn't want to hear. Furthermore, Nick says of Ole contemplating his death, "I can't stand to think about him." This shows Nick's weakness and immaturity. Nick is now mature enough to know that he can't change fate, but not mature enough to be able to live with the reality of that fate. He behaves more like George, who advises him to push difficult truths from his mind, than like wise Ole, who actively contemplates and accepts his fate. In this way, Hemingway shows a progression of maturity from young idealists like Nick, who naively think they can thwart evil and death; to middle aged men like Sam and George, who understand that these things are inevitable but prefer to ignore this reality; to the wisdom of age—embodied in Ole—in which one accepts their fate and acts accordingly.



EXPECTATIONS VS. REALITY

Throughout "The Killers," Hemingway depicts the fallout of dashed expectations. Whether the characters are merely disconcerted by their banal assumptions proving faulty (Max and Al when the diner won't serve them dinner yet), or thrust into a moral and emotional crisis by the world not conforming to deeply-held beliefs (as Nick is when Ole Andreson contradicts his ideas about mortality), the story shows profound consequences for those who believe too much in their own expectations. Max and Al, after all, fail in their plan to murder Ole, while Nick becomes panicked to the extent that he considers uprooting his whole life. In this way, Hemingway suggests that those who cling too deeply to their expectations of the world are maladapted. The world will always defy expectation, and it's best to be able to take things on their own terms.

Hemingway first establishes the tension between expectation and reality through Max and Al's almost comical experience of eating at Henry's diner. The two hitmen believe themselves to be confident and suave professionals, and they appear to assume that the world will conform to their plan: they'll arrive at the diner, eat their meal, kill their target, and get out of town without a hitch. The obstacles to this are initially banal: **the clock**, for instance, reads 5:20 when it's actually 5:00, which immediately shows that reality isn't always as it appears. Furthermore, the menu appears to offer many options for dinner, but Max and Al try to order a few entrees and have to be told repeatedly that the dinner menu is not offered until 6:00. Instead of treating this as a routine inconvenience, the hitmen become angry and frustrated ("Everything we want's the dinner, eh? That's the way you work it."), showing that they feel entitled to an experience of the world that conforms to their expectations and desires. Their inability to be flexible with their expectations is directly related to their failure to kill Ole: when he doesn't show up as they expected, they simply leave without killing him rather than reconfiguring their plan based on the circumstances they're in.

Unlike Max and Al, George (the diner's manager) is someone who can see the world for what it is, and this gives him a strategic advantage over the hitmen. This is first apparent in George's refusal to be intimidated by the rude, blustering out-of-towners who try to bully and insult him. When the hitmen bark orders at him or ask sarcastic questions insulting the town, George remains cool and matter-of-fact. This is likely due to George's ability to see that Max and Al are not who they believe themselves to be. While they fancy themselves to be clever, experienced hitmen, Hemingway depicts Max and Al as being ridiculous and bad at their job. Their outfits, for instance, are so over-the-top that they look "like a vaudeville team" and Al makes it clear that Max's behavior is unprofessional (and possibly dangerous to them) when he tells him, "You talk too goddam much." Furthermore, they show themselves to be either stupid or not paying attention when their food arrives and they can't remember who ordered what. Their theatrical appearance, mishaps, and overconfidence all betray a lack of experience, and since George sees past their attempt to cultivate a suave appearance, he is able to stay calm in the face of danger. In fact, he is even potentially able to exploit their weaknesses and manipulate them into leaving earlier than they otherwise would have: as a hostage, George looks repeatedly at the clock and tells the men that Ole isn't coming. He is potentially emphasizing the clock's fast time rather than the real hour, taking advantage of their inability to distinguish reality from appearance.

All of these misalignments of expectation and reality are relatively minor, but they prepare readers for the story's major instance of subverted expectation: when Nick goes to warn Ole that his life is in danger, and Ole doesn't try to save himself as Nick expected, but instead reveals that he is resigned to his death—a betrayal of expectation that shakes Nick's world. When Nick decides to warn Ole, George and Sam's reactions make clear that Nick is putting himself in danger: Sam says so outright, and George's refusal to go himself implicitly suggests that, with Max and Al still running around, Nick might find himself in a life-threatening situation. But Nick feels that it's worth risking his life to warn Ole because the stakes are so high. Nick either values life or fears death so much that he feels that it is the correct and courageous thing to do to put himself in danger to save someone else.

However, this is all predicated on the unquestioned assumption that Ole will be grateful and will take steps to change his fate. Nick, in other words, assumes that Ole couldn't possibly feel differently about the situation than Nick does. This proves incorrect when Nick arrives at the boardinghouse, tells Ole about the hitmen, and Ole "said nothing" and looked at the wall, leaving Nick feeling "silly" and confused about the situation. Ole's reaction—or lack thereof—is at such odds with Nick's expectations that, at first, all Nick can do is repeat himself stupidly and hope the outcome changes. Despite evidence to

the contrary, Nick cannot admit that his assumptions about Ole's attitude towards death are false. However, as Ole explains that he's "through with all that running around" and that, after grappling with his mortality, he has resigned himself to death, readers begin to see that perhaps some things are worse than dying. This runs in direct opposition to Nick's youthful and naïve assumption that nothing is worse than death, and weighing this possibility precipitates a crisis in Nick that makes him question whether he really knows anyone or anything at all.

Hemingway reveals the magnitude of Nick's crisis when Nick tells George that, in the wake of seeing Ole, he needs to "get out of this town." Having his deeply-held assumptions about life and death undetermined has made Nick want to literally leave his whole life behind—an extreme and destructive act. This drives home how putting too much stock in assumption and expectation makes a person maladapted to reality. While George sees through Max and Al and is able to "not think about" Ole's resignation to death (and can therefore live in the world on its own terms), Nick's false beliefs are so deeply held that, when they're contradicted, he has to take extreme measures to reinvent his life. Obviously that's not something a person can continually do, and the story therefore suggests that it's best to be flexible about expectations from the start and try to see the world for how it actually is.



HEROISM AND MASCULINITY

Hemingway's short stories and novels famously feature what is called a "code hero." The "code hero" is a paragon of masculine virtue, boasting honor, endurance, unwavering courage in the face of adversity, and a refusal to show fear, even when facing death. In "The Killers," however, there is no code hero: all of the story's men fail to live up to Hemingway's masculine ideal, albeit in different ways. Since all of these men fail to be masculine when confronted with adversity, the story suggests that ideal masculinity is rare and difficult, or possibly unattainable altogether.

Throughout the story, Max and Al lob gendered insults at their hostages to try to intimidate and control them. When Max and Al first enter the diner—even before they take hostages—they call both George and Nick "boy." This is an attempt to immediately assert their power over George and Nick, intimidating them by suggesting that they are not worthy of being considered men, but are instead weak and immature boys. This is especially notable due to the clear differences in Nick and George's ages. While George is older than Nick and in a position of power as the manager of the diner, Max and Al's suggestion that George and Nick are both boys is meant to doubly emasculate George, therefore making him easier to control later on. However, calling someone "boy" is not the most extreme form of emasculation—after all, boys eventually become men. Once Sam, George, and Nick are tied up, Max and

Al escalate their emasculation by directly comparing their hostages to women. Al calls Sam and Nick (who are tied up in the kitchen) "a couple of girl friends" and Max tells George that he'd "make some girl a nice wife."

While these insults are meant to make Max and Al seem powerful, their behavior ironically shows them to be cowards, and therefore to be insufficiently masculine themselves. After all, they're only brave enough to compare their hostages to women once these men are tied up and cannot physically retaliate. Were they courageous and genuinely masculine (at least by Hemingway's standards), Max and Al would stand behind their words and believe in themselves enough to let their opponents fight back. Furthermore, while Max and Al view themselves as heroes—ultra-masculine men of action who take everyone in Henry's diner hostage so they can carry out a hit—they are also criminals who have come to town "to oblige a friend" by murdering Ole Andreson, even though he "never had a chance" to do anything to them personally. This plan lacks morality or honor, which Hemingway closely associates with heroism.

Unlike Max and Al, Sam and George might be candidates for heroism, as they manage to keep level heads amidst danger and chaos and do not openly admit their fear while they're tied up and held at gunpoint. Once he is untied, however, Sam seems panicked and unable to deal with the situation head-on. George is more comfortable talking about what happened, but his passivity and potential cowardice (in having Nick warn Ole instead of going himself) puts his masculinity and heroism in doubt.

It is also difficult to acknowledge Nick Adams as a hero yet. He does decide to take action to try to save Ole because he believes it is right and honorable to do so (even at the risk of his life), but he also has a difficult time gracefully enduring the horror he feels over Ole's acceptance of death, rather petulantly exclaiming that he "can't stand to think" about the "awful thing" that has happened. This emotional weakness in him needs to be overcome before he can step into the masculine role of a "code hero."

Finally, Ole Andreson has accepted the inevitability of death and is preparing to meet it of his own accord instead of running away, which are key characteristics of a Hemingway "code hero." He reveals that he is "through with all that running around," meaning that he has been trying to run away from death for a while but has now accepted that he must meet it head-on. While Ole has made this important realization, he is not quite ready to meet death bravely the way a hero would; he says to Nick, "I just can't make up my mind to go out. I been in here all day," and this hesitation undercuts his ability to be a true masculine hero.

With all the story's male characters ineligible—in ways both large and small—for heroism, Hemingway paints a somewhat bleak picture of honor, masculinity, and courage. Since none of

the men in this story are true “code heroes,” then maybe *no* men are true men and this standard of masculinity is unattainable. It’s possible to read “The Killers,” therefore, as a commentary on inevitable human weakness and the impossibility of the masculine ideal, but it’s also possible to draw a narrower conclusion. After all, across Hemingway’s collected works, he does write some characters who live up to the standard of the “code hero” (such as Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*). With this context, one might read “The Killers” as a commentary on how rare and difficult true masculinity and heroism are, and how men can easily fall short of this, even when they believe they’re succeeding.



SYMBOLS

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



THE DINER CLOCK

Hemingway uses the diner clock (which runs twenty minutes fast) to symbolize the unreliability of expectations in an unpredictable world. This is especially true for Max and Al, who enter the diner with a seemingly straightforward plan to get dinner and then carry out a hit on Ole Andreson when he comes in. The clock itself becomes a source of frustration when George—the manager and the only one who can accurately read the clock—tells them that they are reading it wrong because it runs fast, meaning they cannot order the dinner they planned on having. The unreliability of the clock reflects the unreliability of Max and Al’s plan, which hinges on the expectation that Ole will come into the diner for dinner at 6:00. As the manager, George knows that Ole only comes in at 6:00 “sometimes,” and he tries to alert Max and Al to this potentially fatal flaw in their plan by reiterating that Ole will only come into the diner at 6:00 “if” he comes at all. However, Max and Al stick to their ill-advised plan and wait for Ole. George is able to use Max and Al’s misguided expectations about Ole’s behavior and the unreliability of the clock to convince the two men that it was too late for Ole to come in, causing them to admit failure and leave the diner. Correctly reading the diner clock requires experience and knowledge of the clock’s unreliability (being 20 minutes fast), just as developing a reliable expectation of human behavior requires a certain amount of knowledge and experience.



QUOTES

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

The Killers Quotes

“I’ll have a roast pork tenderloin with apple sauce and mashed potatoes,” the first man said.

“It isn’t ready yet.”

“What the hell do you put it on the card for?”

“That’s the dinner,” George explained. “You can get that at six o’clock.”

George looked at the clock on the wall behind the counter.

“It’s five o’clock.”

“The clock says it’s twenty minutes past five,” the second man said.

“It’s twenty minutes fast.”

“Oh, to hell with the clock,” the first man said. “What have you got to eat?”

Related Characters: Al, Max, George (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 215

Explanation and Analysis

Max and Al enter the diner and assume that anything listed on the menu will be available to order. They are annoyed when George tells them that they actually can’t order whatever they want because certain options aren’t available for another hour, but their mild frustration with the situation turns to anger when George tells them they’re also reading the clock wrong because it’s twenty minutes fast. Max and Al had confidently entered the diner with the expectation that everything would be straightforward and easy to navigate, but instead they find that appearances are often at odds with reality and even the most basic assumptions cannot be relied upon.

Max and Al both become flustered and frustrated during this exchange, and it sets the stage for the hostility that will characterize their future interactions with George and the other men in the diner. Likewise, their anger over this seemingly minor incident indicates to George that they might be dangerous if he were to confront them or do something to direct their anger at himself.

☞ “You’re a pretty bright boy, aren’t you?”
 “Sure,” said George.
 “Well, you’re not,” said the other little man. “Is he Al?”
 “He’s dumb,” said Al.

Related Characters: George, Max (speaker), Al

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 216

Explanation and Analysis

When George meets Max and Al’s frustration and sarcasm with a deadpan reply, the tension in the diner erupts into open hostility and insults. Max and Al want to command respect, but George’s sarcasm indicates that he doesn’t respect them as much as they think he should. Across Hemingway’s fiction, masculinity is portrayed as a necessary quality for any “real” man to have. By calling George a “boy,” Max and Al are stripping him of his masculinity, treating him as insignificant and unworthy of respect. They are also setting themselves above him: they *are* real men who have the authority to determine who is a man and who is just a boy.

It is notable that George does not try to stand up for himself, but allows Max and Al to denigrate him to each other in front of Nick and possibly within hearing of Sam. He wants to avoid conflict, possibly because he is afraid of what Max and Al would do if he does stand up to them. His acceptance of their insults indicates to them that he will be easy to manage, which proves true as they easily take him—along with Sam and Nick—hostage.

☞ “Where do you think you are?”
 “We know damn well where we are,” the man called Max said.
 “Do we look silly?”
 “You talk silly,” Al said to him.

Related Characters: Al, Max, George (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 217

Explanation and Analysis

Max ironically declares that he knows “damn well” where he and Al are just a few minutes after asking George to tell him the name of the town they’re in and declaring that he had

never heard of it before. Despite the confusion they felt during their first conversation with George, Max is determined to assert himself and hopefully inspire enough fear in George and the other men in the diner that they will be compliant and easy to keep under control.

On the other hand, Max’s question about looking “silly” evokes an unexpected response from Al, who tells Max that he talks “silly”—perhaps because Al realizes that, despite his efforts to appear menacing, Max is coming off as theatrical and even foolish. Al’s willingness to call Max out reveals some tension and even contempt between the two men. Max is hot-headed and *wants* to put on a show for George and Nick, but Al wants to get the job done and resents Max for talking “silly” in such a serious situation.

☞ “What are you going to kill Ole Andreson for? What did he ever do to you?”

“He never had a chance to do anything to us. He never even seen us.”

“And he’s only going to see us once,” Al said from the kitchen.

“What are you going to kill him for, then?” George asked.

“We’re killing him for a friend. Just to oblige a friend, bright boy.”

Related Characters: Max, George (speaker), Ole Andreson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 218

Explanation and Analysis

After Max tells George that he and Al are in town to kill Ole Andreson—and specifically to kill him in Henry’s diner, where he usually comes in for dinner—George is understandably horrified. He rather naively believes that Ole must have really offended or harmed Max and Al, so Max’s revelation that they were actually hired to kill Ole compounds the horror George already feels knowing Ole is going to be murdered at all. In this context, Max and Al represent the impartiality and inevitability of death; if they will kill Ole even though he hasn’t personally done anything to them, then George knows they’d likely be ready to kill him, as well.

Once again, Max calls George a “boy,” reminding him that they know he is too cowardly to stand up to them and that he is at their mercy. This is particularly insidious, as Max and Al have just divulged that they are already prepared to kill a

man in cold blood.

“In their tight overcoats and derby hats they looked like a vaudeville team.”

Related Characters: Al, Max

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 219

Explanation and Analysis

As George watches Max and Al leave the diner, he notices for the first time that they really do look ridiculous. Vaudevilles were a popular form of comedic entertainment in the early 20th century, so noting that Max and Al looked like they were part of a “vaudeville team” means that their appearance is actually in keeping with their theatrical and over-the-top behavior in the diner. Rather than looking like hardened criminals, Max and Al come off as a little too stereotypical, leaving the reader to wonder how dangerous they actually were.

On the other hand, the fact that Max and Al were *hired* to kill someone indicates that they do have some legitimate involvement in organized crime, probably in nearby Chicago. In that case, their theatrical appearance and behavior might actually indicate that they are somewhat inexperienced and are still trying to fit into their new roles as mobsters from the big city. Like with so many other elements of this story, it is difficult to determine how far appearances reflect reality when it comes to Max and Al.

“Listen,” George said to Nick. “You better go see Ole Andreson.”

“All right.”

“You better not have anything to do with it at all,” Sam, the cook, said. “You stay out of it.”

“Don’t go if you don’t want to,” George said.

“Mixing up in this ain’t going to get you anywhere,” the cook said. “You stay out of it.”

“I’ll go see him,” Nick said to George.

Related Characters: Nick Adams, Sam, George (speaker), Ole Andreson

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

After Max and Al leave, George unties Sam and Nick and they finally get the chance to discuss the hitmen’s plan to kill Ole Andreson and what should be done about it. Sam makes it clear that he thinks all three of them should “stay out of it,” refusing to have anything more to do with it himself and trying to dissuade Nick from going to warn Ole. This is presumably because he knows from experience how dangerous getting involved in a life-or-death situation can be. Like Sam, George doesn’t want to get involved, but he wants to help Ole by warning him. George finds a (somewhat cowardly) solution in sending Nick, who is younger and less experienced than the other characters.

Nick agrees to go warn Ole despite Sam’s efforts to talk him out of it because he recognizes it as an opportunity to be the hero. Unlike Sam and George, Nick does not have experience with the kind of evil that the hitmen represent and does not understand how risky going to warn Ole could be. Instead he is optimistically focusing on the possibility that his warning could save Ole’s life.

“They put us out in the kitchen,” Nick went on. “They were going to shoot you when you came in to supper.”

Ole Andreson looked at the wall and did not say anything.

“George thought I better come and tell you about it.”

“There isn’t anything I can do about it,” Ole Andreson said.

Related Characters: Nick Adams, Ole Andreson (speaker), Al, Max, Sam

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

Nick goes to Ole Andreson’s room at a local boardinghouse with the expectation that when he tells Ole about Max and Al, Ole will be extremely grateful to him and make a quick getaway. However, when Nick tells Ole about being tied up in the kitchen and that Max and Al were going to kill him in the diner, Ole doesn’t answer and Nick becomes flustered. When Ole seems to ignore his warning, Nick begins to realize he has misjudged the situation somehow. When Ole finally does respond to Nick, he doesn’t express gratitude or surprise, but resignation.

Nick meant to be a hero by going to warn Ole, but the person he wanted to save has already given up. For Nick—who is young and presumably hasn't had much experience with death—Ole's initial silence and then evident resignation is surprising and difficult to understand, defying Nick's most basic expectation about how the world works: that people want to avoid death.

“The only thing is,” he said, talking toward the wall, “I just can't make up my mind to go out. I been in here all day.”

“Couldn't you get out of town?”

“No,” Ole Andreson said. “I'm through with all that running around.”

Related Characters: Nick Adams, Ole Andreson (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 221

Explanation and Analysis

In Ole Andreson's room, Nick makes several suggestions about what Ole can do to escape the death Max and Al have in store for him, but Ole shoots all of them down. Ole tells Nick that he's been in his room “all day” trying to “make up my mind to go out.” Nick expected him to be surprised, but this statement tells Nick that Ole not only knows about Max and Al, but he's already decided against getting help from the police or skipping town. Nick's expectations for how Ole would react to the news have been crushed, and the knowledge that Ole is willing to die rather than run will force Nick to question a lot of what he innocently believed were fundamental truths about life and death.

Ole's lack of surprise over Max and Al's plan is explained by his next statement that he's “through with all that running

around.” This tells Nick and the reader that Ole has been running from death for a long time and explains why he seems so ready to accept it. Although Ole has shown cowardice by running away from death, he's now preparing to act heroically by accepting and meeting it as an inevitable part of life.

“I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful.”

“Well,” said George, “you better not think about it.”

Related Characters: Nick Adams, George (speaker), Ole Andreson

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 222

Explanation and Analysis

Nick accepts that there is nothing he can do to help Ole Andreson and returns to Henry's diner to tell George about his conversation with Ole. Although he is initially as horrified by Ole's choice to willingly meet death as Nick is, George ultimately decides to put the event and the horror he feels over Ole's impending death behind him. Nick, however, is much younger and has less life experience, and he struggles to come to terms with the inhumanity of Ole's situation. George advises Nick to cope with it the way he and Sam do: “not think about it.”

Ole Andreson had once tried to cope with the reality of death by running away from it, but George tries to cope with it by not thinking about it. In the absence of any other guidance, Nick may also adopt George's method of refusing to acknowledge the reality of death until experience teaches him that he can't live in denial about it forever.



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.

THE KILLERS

Just as it's getting dark, two men enter Henry's Diner and sit at the counter to peruse the menu. The only other customer is Nick, who was talking to the manager, George, before the men came in. Nick stays at the other end of the counter and watches the two men.

The first man, Max, orders a roast pork dinner and George tells him that this isn't available. When Max asks him why it's on the menu if he can't order it, George explains that the dinner options are not available for another hour, until 6:00. The second man, Al, points out that the **clock** actually says it's 5:20, but George says it is 20 minutes fast. "Oh, to hell with the clock," Max says.

George tells the two men—who are wearing matching derby hats, gloves, and overcoats that are too small—what menu options are available and they order sandwiches. While they wait, they ask George what they can get to drink and George tells them they do not serve alcohol.

Max makes a snide comment about how "hot" the town is and asks what it's called. George says the town's name is Summit, and Max and Al remark that they've never heard of it. They joke that all the townspeople do at night is come to the diner to "eat the dinner," and George says, "that's right." Al tells George he's a "pretty bright boy, aren't you?" When George says "sure," Max replies, "well, you're not." Al then asks Nick for his name and starts calling him a "bright boy," too.

By not immediately naming them, Hemingway indicates that these two men are strangers in town. Nick is evidently suspicious of them, shown by his decision to keep his distance and just stare at them.



Almost immediately, Hemingway makes it clear that appearances are frequently at odds with reality. What should have been a very simple thing—ordering dinner at a diner—turns out to be complicated, which flusters Max and Al. Their frustration becomes evidence of the potential consequences of putting too much stock in one's expectations, rather than taking the world on its own terms.



Hemingway notes that Henry's used to be a saloon, but was converted into a diner (possibly due to Prohibition). This creates yet another situation in which appearances are at odds with reality (it appears to be a saloon but actually doesn't serve alcohol), which creates tension and frustration. Max and Al's matching clothes indicate that they belong to some kind of organized crime syndicate, but the fact that they're ridiculous and ill-fitting hints that they might not be as good at criminality as they think.



Max and Al use sarcasm to express their frustration with the situation: they could not order the food they wanted, they cannot trust the clock, and they cannot order alcohol in what was once clearly a saloon. When George unexpectedly becomes sarcastic towards them in return, they strip him of his masculinity and authority by calling him a "boy," putting him on the same level as the younger and more naïve Nick.



George brings Max and Al their meals, but they can't remember who ordered what. As they eat, they catch George looking at them. Al suggests that "maybe the boy meant it for a joke," and George laughs. Max tells him not to laugh and George says alright. To Al, Max says "he thinks it's all right," and Al replies, "Oh, he's a thinker."

Looking at Nick, Max and Al tell the "bright boy" to go behind the counter with his "boy friend." Nick asks why, and they dodge the question, repeating their order and asking who is in the kitchen. George says that the cook, Sam, is in the kitchen (he refers to Sam with the n-word). Al orders George to go get Sam. "Where do you think you are?" George asks, and Max replies that he knows "damn well" where he is and asks, "Do we look silly?" Al takes charge, again ordering George to bring Sam out, and he complies.

Al looks Sam over and then drags him and Nick to the kitchen. Once they're gone, George asks Max what is going on. Max calls back to Al that the "bright boy" wants to know why they are there, and Al suggests that Max should tell him, so Max reveals to George that they are there to kill a Swede named Ole Andreson.

Max asks George if Ole Andreson comes in every night at six, and George says that Ole comes in "sometimes." Max tells George that he and Al "know all that" already. George asks what Ole did and Max says he and Al have never met Ole—they're killing him "to oblige a friend." From the kitchen, Al shouts to Max to "shut up" because he "talks too much."

Max tells Al that he has "to keep bright boy amused" and Al tells him that Nick and Sam "are amused by themselves" and that he has them "tied up like a couple of girl friends in the convent." Max asks Al if he was in a convent and Al tell him, "You never know." Max replies that Al was "in a kosher convent."

Max and Al want to seem like they are in control of the situation and know what they are doing, but their confusion over who ordered what reveals how easy it is to fluster them (and shows them to be either a little stupid or unobservant—an inauspicious beginning for criminals). Frustrated by this confusion, they again emasculate George to put him in his place as their inferior.



Even though Max and Al have upped the ante with their insults by insinuating that Nick and George are gay, neither Nick nor George really stand up for themselves. In fact, they both prove rather easy targets in that Max and Al quickly gain total control over them. This reveals just how much Max and Al—as ridiculous as they may seem to the reader—scare Nick, Sam, and George.



Max and Al talk to each other about how to answer George's question rather than talking to George himself, much as two parents would discuss whether or not to tell their child something. This effectively sends the message that they are the ones in control of the situation and they don't take George seriously enough to treat him with any respect.



Max's questions about Ole's habits reveal that they are probably not as knowledgeable about the situation as they want to appear. Furthermore, George isn't encouraging about Ole's odds of showing up, but Max and Al seem to interpret "sometimes" as confirmation that they are correct that Ole comes in every day. This shows them expecting the world to conform to their expectations (rather than dealing with reality), which will ultimately derail their plan.



Now that they have the three hostages entirely under their control and unable to fight back, Max and Al emasculate them by openly referring to them as women. Additionally, Max's gendered and anti-Semitic comments about Al indicate that he is trying to establish control over his partner, as well.



Max instructs George to tell anyone who comes in to order dinner that the cook is gone and to go back and make some orders himself if the customer insists. George agrees, but asks him what he and Al are going to do with them afterwards. Max tells him he isn't sure because it's "one of those things you never know at the time." George looks up at the **clock** and notes that it's 6:15.

A motorman comes in to order dinner, but George tells him that the cook is out and the man leaves. Max tells him "that was nice, bright boy" and Al calls out that George "knew I'd blow his head off." Max disagrees and says, "Bright boy is nice. He's a nice boy, I like him." George looks at the **clock** again and sees that it is 6:55. He tells Max and Al that Ole is "not coming."

Before this, George recalls, another customer came in and insisted on a sandwich, so George went back in the kitchen to make it and noticed that Nick and Sam were tied up and had towels in their mouths. Al was sitting in the back with a sawed-off shotgun. When George came out of the kitchen, Max said that he would "make some girl a nice wife" because he "can cook and everything."

George repeats that Ole Andreson isn't coming in and Max says they're going to wait ten more minutes. At 7:05, Max tells Al that they "better go," but Al says they'll wait five more minutes. Another customer comes in, but leaves when George tells him that the cook is out. Max tells Al it's time to go and Al asks what they're going to do with the hostages. Max says, "They're all right," but Al seems doubtful and asks Max if he's sure. Max says he's sure and that they're "through with it," but Al tells him, "I don't like it ... It's sloppy. You talk too much."

As Max and Al leave, they tell George that he's "got a lot of luck" and "ought to play the races." George watches them through the window while they walk away and notes that they look "like a vaudeville team." George goes into the kitchen and unties Sam and Nick. Sam says he doesn't "want any more of that" and Nick, trying to "swagger it off," asks, "What the hell?" George tells Nick and Sam that Max and Al were going to shoot Ole Andreson if he came into the diner.

George begins keeping tabs on the clock, checking it periodically and noting the time. However, Hemingway never specifies if the time George notes is the time on the clock or the actual time. George may have realized how easy it would be to trick Max and Al into leaving earlier (and keeping him and the other hostages alive) if he can make them think it's too late for Ole to come in at his usual time.



Max continues to refer to George as a "boy," now adding that he likes him because George is "nice" for following his instructions like an obedient child would. This implies that if George can continue to be "nice" then he will be safe and allowed to live.



While most of Max's insults towards George have seemed designed to persuade him of his inferiority, Max's comment that George would make someone a "nice wife" seems to be an escalation of cruelty (after all, comparing a man to a "wife" is meant to emasculate him). This might indicate that Max is losing patience with the situation, since he has to assert his power more firmly by insulting George.



The story's title suggests that someone might be killed in the end, but Ole doesn't come in and Max decides to let the hostages live. Once again, expectations have been subverted and there is a sense of disappointment that nothing has come to a predictable resolution. Al expresses surprise, disappointment, and even fear that their plan has come to such a "sloppy" ending. Al has always seemed to be the crueler and more powerful of the two men, and here he's the one advocating for killing the innocent hostages simply so that there aren't any witnesses.



Once Max and Al are gone, the three hostages are left to grapple with what has just happened to them and what is going to happen to Ole Andreson. Sam's assertion that he doesn't "want any more of that" indicates that he is determined to have no more involvement in this drama. Nick, however, is taken up with the novelty of the experience, although he tries to pretend that he is more experienced with this kind of violence than he actually is.



Sam tells George that he doesn't "like any of it at all" and George tells Nick that he better go warn Ole Andreson about Max and Al. Nick agrees, but Sam tells him that he "better not have anything to do with it at all." George tells Nick he doesn't have to go if he doesn't want to and Sam again warns Nick to "stay out of it," but Nick still says he will go. He asks where Ole lives, and George tells Nick that Ole lives in Hirsch's boardinghouse.

Nick walks to Hirsch's boardinghouse and asks the landlady if Ole Andreson is in his room. The landlady brings Nick upstairs and knocks on Ole's door. In the room, Nick sees Ole lying in bed, fully clothed. Ole, who had once been a prizefighter, is too big for the bed. Without even looking at Nick, Ole asks him why he's there. Nick tells him that two men came into the diner and tied him and Sam up in the kitchen and that the two men planned on killing Ole. At first, Ole doesn't answer and Nick repeats himself, but then Ole tells him, "There isn't anything I can do about it."

Nick offers to tell Ole what Max and Al "were like," but Ole tells him he doesn't want to know and thanks him for coming. Then Nick offers to go to the police, but Ole tells him it "wouldn't do any good." Nick asks if there's anything he can do and Ole tells him no, so Nick suggests that it might have been "just a bluff." Ole tells him it's not and turns to the wall. He tells Nick, "I just can't make up my mind to go out. I been in here all day." Nick suggests that Ole should skip town and Ole tells him he's "through with all that running around." Nick again asks if there's anything he can do and Ole tells him there isn't and that he'll go out eventually. Nick tells him he is going back to see George at the diner and Ole thanks him for coming and tells him goodbye.

As Nick leaves, the landlady tells him that Ole has been in his room all day and that she had told him to go take a walk, but he declined. Nick tells her that Ole doesn't want to go out and the landlady says she's sorry he isn't feeling well. Nick says, "Good-night, Mrs. Hirsch," and the landlady tells him that she's not Mrs. Hirsch—she is actually Mrs. Bell. She just manages the building for Mrs. Hirsch. Nick tells her good night and leaves.

George steps back into his position of authority in the diner, assigning Nick the task of warning Ole Andreson. Nick, recognizing an opportunity to win the respect of the older men and to prove his bravery, immediately agrees to be the one to warn Ole. Sam, however, tries to convince Nick that it's a bad idea, possibly because his own experiences have shown him how dangerous playing the hero can be. The fact that George tells Nick to warn Ole instead of warning Ole himself suggests that George might be somewhat cowardly—clearly he doesn't think it's a safe thing to do, even if he thinks it's important.



Nick innocently believes that Ole Andreson is going to be alarmed to hear about the hostage situation at the diner and anxious to make a quick getaway before Max and Al find him. However, Ole expresses no emotion whatsoever, throwing Nick into a state of confusion. Nick's confusion is only heightened by Ole's statement that there "isn't anything" he can do to stop Max and Al, which insinuates that Ole has already given up out of fear but without any explanation of why.



Nick's confusion intensifies into horror as he realizes that Ole is actually unwilling rather than unable to do anything to protect or save himself. To Nick's inexperienced mind, nothing could be worse than death and Ole should fight it. Ole, however, reveals that he has already spent a lot of time trying to evade death ("all that running around") and it has worn him out. While he doesn't welcome death, Ole has come to realize that it is unavoidable and that sometimes true bravery is admitting defeat and meeting death head on. Nick, however, has not had a similar realization and he continues to grapple with his own fear and confusion over Ole's choice not to fight.



Nick is very vulnerable and impressionable as he leaves Ole's room. Ole's acceptance of death and his revelation that he has been running from death for a long time has forced Nick to question everything he thought he knew about life, death, and the people in Summit. Nick's innocent mistake in calling Mrs. Bell by the wrong name takes on a new significance to him as he finds himself already questioning how well he really knows the people around him.



Nick walks back to the diner and finds George behind the counter again. Sam is in the kitchen, but he opens the door to tell Nick and George that he “don’t even listen to it” and shuts the door. George asks Nick if he told Ole about the hitmen and Nick tells him that he did, but that Ole “knows what it’s all about” already and is going to do “nothing” about it. George points out that Max and Al will kill him and Nick says, “I guess they will.” George says that Ole must have “got mixed up in something in Chicago” and it’s a “hell of a thing,” and Nick agrees. George stops talking, grabs a towel, and starts cleaning the counter.

Nick breaks the silence and asks George what he thinks Ole did. George says he must have double-crossed somebody because it’s “what they kill them for.” Nick declares that he is going to get out of town, which George acknowledges is a good idea. Nick says he “can’t stand to think about [Ole] waiting in the room and knowing he’s going to get it.” George tells him he “better not think about it.”

Nick returns to the diner disillusioned and frustrated that his bravery in going to warn Ole has not ended positively. George expects Nick to tell him that Ole has left town or gone for help, and he is just as surprised as Nick was to learn that Ole has already accepted death as inevitable. Unlike Nick, however, George is prepared to put it behind him. He picks up a towel and starts cleaning, showing that he’s ready to move on with his day-to-day life and put the horror of the situation out of his mind.



As Nick finally accepts that Ole is going to be killed, his first reaction is to leave town and put distance between himself and death, just as Ole had done before. George, however, has accepted death as inevitable, but rather than confront this fact bravely, he pushes it out of his mind and tells Nick he should do the same.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Greenwood, Alissa. "The Killers." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 18 Jul 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Greenwood, Alissa. "The Killers." LitCharts LLC, July 18, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-killers>.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Killers* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Killers*. Scribner. 1987.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Killers*. New York: Scribner. 1987.