

Ernest Hemingway Biography

(1899–1961)

Nobel Prize winner Ernest Hemingway is seen as one of the great American 20th century novelists. Ernest Hemingway served in World War I and worked in journalism before publishing his story collection *In Our Time*. He was renowned for novels like *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *The Old Man and the Sea*, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1953. The author continued his forays into Africa and sustained several injuries during his adventures, even surviving multiple plane crashes.

In 1954, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature. Even at this peak of his literary career, though, the burly Hemingway's body and mind were beginning to betray him. Recovering from various old injuries in Cuba, Hemingway suffered from depression and was treated for numerous conditions such as high blood pressure and liver disease. He wrote *A Moveable Feast*, a memoir of his years in Paris, and retired permanently to Idaho. There he continued to battle with deteriorating mental and physical health.

Early on the morning of July 2, 1961, Hemingway committed suicide in his Ketchum home.

Themes

Life as Nothingness

In “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” Hemingway suggests that life has no meaning and that man is an insignificant speck in a great sea of nothingness. The older waiter makes this idea as clear as he can when he says, “It was all a nothing and man was a nothing too.” When he substitutes the Spanish word *nada* (nothing) into the prayers he recites, he indicates that religion, to which many people turn to find meaning and purpose, is also just nothingness. Rather than pray with the actual words, “Our Father who art in heaven,” the older waiter says, “Our *nada* who art in *nada*”—effectively wiping out both God and the idea of heaven in one breath. Not everyone is aware of the nothingness, however. For example, the younger waiter hurtles through his life hastily and happily, unaware of any reason why he should lament. For the old man, the older waiter, and the other people who need late-night cafés, however, the idea of nothingness is overwhelming and leads to despair.

The Struggle to Deal with Despair

The old man and older waiter in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” struggle to find a way to deal with their despair, but even their best method simply subdues the despair rather than cures it. The old man has tried to stave off despair in several unsuccessful ways. We learn that he has money, but money has not helped. We learn that he was once married, but he no longer has a wife. We also learn that he has unsuccessfully tried to commit suicide in a desperate attempt to quell the despair for good. The only way the old man can deal with his despair now is to sit for hours in a clean, well-lit café. Deaf, he can feel the quietness of the nighttime and the café, and although he is essentially in his own private world, sitting by himself in the café is not the same as being alone.

Important Quotations Explained

1. “Each night I am reluctant to close up because there may be some one who needs the café.”

The older waiter makes this comment near the end of the story when he and the younger waiter are about to leave the café, and it reveals his own loneliness and despair. Until this point, the old man seemed to be the only one who wanted to stay at the café, but now the older waiter seems to need the café as well. A few lines before this, he reveals that he is someone who likes to stay at cafés late into the night, so his reluctance has two meanings. First, he understands why the old man and others may want or need to stay

late, and he keeps the café open as a gesture of kindness and generosity. Second, he himself needs the café, so he is reluctant to close it because he, like the old man and others, will then be without a place to sit and wait out the night. While the younger waiter is rushing to get home, the older waiter leaves the café sadly, once again displaced and alone.

2. *What did he fear? It was not fear or dread, It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order.*

This quotation appears near the end of the story, just after the older waiter leaves the café, and it explains the nature of what afflicts the older waiter and the old man, as well as all those people who want to stay in cafés late at night. We learn that this affliction is not fear or dread, and from the way the older waiter phrases his thoughts, we know that the affliction is not something that is clear, concrete, or easily described. Hemingway fills this passage with the vague pronouns it and that, never clarifying exactly what it and that refer to. We learn only that the affliction is “a nothing.” The older waiter repeats “nothing” over and over again, emphasizing the idea.

The lack of specificity in this passage is confusing, but Hemingway is being vague on purpose. By using vague pronouns and saying only that everything is “nothing,” he conveys the idea that the problem keeping the older waiter and the old man awake at night is related to something huge, even infinite, something beyond what language can describe: the purpose and meaning of life. Existential questions such as the meaning of life and existence make the night a dangerous, empty place for the people who dare to consider them. Only a clean, well-lighted café provides a refuge from these thoughts.

Quiz

When was Ernest Hemingway born?

- ☐ 1889
- ☐ 1899
- ☐ 1909
- ☐ 1919

What was Hemingway's father's job?

- ☐ Lawyer
- ☐ Professor
- ☐ Doctor
- ☐ Accountant

“A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” was published in ____.

- ☐ Winner Take Nothing
- ☐ Our Time
- ☐ Men Without Women
- ☐ The Torrents of Spring

What kind of themes are expertly rendered in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”?

- ☐ Modernist
- ☐ Surrealist

☐ Existentialist

☐ Rationalist

How did Hemingway die?

☐ Car accident

☐ Liver failure

☐ Lung cancer

☐ Suicide