

INDIVIDUAL'S PLIGHT IN CRISIS: NOTION OF WINNER TAKE NOTHING AND OTHER STORIES

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Abstract:

In Winner Take Nothing Hemingway deals with his notion of man. In these stories it is the individual who has to face the trials alone, that is, he has to rely completely on himself, and this “incurable reliance on the individual” as Leo Gurko observes, “makes Hemingway the great contemporary inheritor of the romantic tradition”. The First World War, in fact, brought in its wake widespread feeling of insecurity and collapse of values. It is recognized as a period of unparalleled spiritual desolation and a decay of civilization as a whole. It was a period of intense soul-searching amongst the writers and artists, dismayed by a world which has lost its sense of purpose. The aftermath of war resulted in widespread sense of insecurity and chaos and man found himself rootless everywhere looking with dismay at the wholesale disintegration of all the values he had hitherto cherished and valued.

Key words: Contemporary, Soul-Searching, Psychological.

INTRODUCTION

In a broad sense what Hemingway represents in these stories is the individual's plight in situation of crisis where he faced life without the conventional inner resources of strength derived from religion, faith or philosophy. The Hemingway protagonist seeks his salvation by trying again and again, and in the face of tremendous odds, to reassert his individuality through rash and desperate acts of courage and by his refusal to give in. These stories also depict the destruction and suffering in modern mechanized warfare and its inhuman nature, leading to the loss of faith in the established values and we find the protagonist making his 'separate peace'. The Hemingway protagonist declares that he is 'not in God's Kingdom' and in this state of alienation he goes about the task of restoring himself. The nature of modern warfare and the brutal scenes of horror not only resulted in disenchantment, but also brought about a total collapse of all values man had hitherto cherished leaving him dazed in a meaningless world, struggling to justify his existence.

“A Clean Well-Lighted Place” is a dramatic exposition of the chaos and disorder prevailing in the world, loss of faith in the established values, and the state of nothingness that man finds himself in. The story progresses mainly through dialogue between two waiters in a café about an old man who sits drinking till late every night. The older waiter identifies himself with the old man:

“I am of those who like to stay late at the café.... With all those who do not want to go to bed. With all those who need a light for the night.”ⁱ

The old waiter is acutely conscious of the chaos and disorder that he finds the world in. In direct contrast to him is the younger waiter who represents those who are not aware of the chaos and still identify themselves with the prevailing traditions and patterns of society. He is in a hurry to go home because he is not lonely but has a wife waiting for him and above all, he has confidence, which the older waiter lacks. The older waiter, on the other hand, does not want to close the café early as there may be persons like the old man who need the café which is clean, pleasant and well-lighted. The clean, well-lighted café here becomes a symbol

of order and refuge, a tiny spot in the middle of the huge, overbearing darkness outside. The surrounding darkness becomes a symbol of the chaos resulting from the widespread disintegration of values. The spiritual void or the nothingness that is a consequence of the collapse of the prevailing system is “so huge, terrible, overbearing inevitable, and omnipresent that, once experienced, it can never be forgotten. Sometimes in the day, or for a time at night in a clean, well-lighted place, it can be held temporarily at bay. What links the old waiter and the old patron most profoundly is their brotherhood in arms against this beast in the jungle”.ii

In fact, the story of “A Clean Well-Lighted Place” is a sad commentary on the post war man who finds himself so utterly helpless that he finds it difficult even to hold himself together. As Joseph F. Gabriel rightly observes that:

the only order and meaning he can find is offered by a clean, well-lighted place is an indication of the extremity to which he is driven as well as the crisis of age.iii

The crisis is so acute that it brings about a freezing, as it were, of the human will and one feels “of having got to the end of everything, of having given up heroic attitudes and wanting only the illusion of peace.”iv Man feels as if totally crushed by a set of hostile forces over which he has no control.

Hemingway does seem to make use of the feeling of nothingness and soul weariness in this story, especially in the parody of the Lord’s Prayer by the older waiter at the end of the story:

What did he fear? It was not a 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 clearness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it was all nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada. Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom, nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada and nada is our nada as we nada our nada and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing it with thee.v

These lines show that sense of loss and disorder in society seems to weigh down so much on man that he gives up all hope. A kind of inertia sets in, and it takes time for him to even think of reasserting himself. Slowly he tries to find means to ease himself a bit, to hold himself together, and the need for a clean, well-lighted place symbolizes this effort. As Leo Gurko very rightly observes:

The nada is unavoidably there, but so is the light and the light can be nurtured by human effort. Inside the iron flame of nihilism, inside the gloomy aspect of things, there is place for man, room for the exercise of his energy and will.vi

While the old man and the older waiter in “A Clean Well-Lighted Place” need a clean, well-lighted café for the night, Mr. Frazer in “The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio” plays the radio every night. He is also one of those who have realized the lack of relevance of any prevailing pattern that sustains society and, therefore, find it in complete disarray. This is evident from his observations towards the end of the story:

Religion is the opium of the people. He believed that, that dyspeptic little joint-keeper. Yes and music is the opium of the people. Old mount-to-the-head had not thought of that, and now economics is the opium of the people; alongwith patriotism the opium of the people in Italy and Germany. What about sexual intercourse; was that an opium of the people? Of some of the people. Of some of the best of the people. But drink was a sovereign opium of the people, oh, an excellent opium. Although some prefer the radio, another opium of the people, a cheap one he had just been using. Along with these went gambling, an opium of the people if there ever was one of the oldest. Ambition was another, an opium of the people, along with a belief in any new form of government. What you wanted was the minimum of government, always less government. Liberty, what we believed in, new the name of a MacFadden publication. We believed in that although they had not found a new name for it yet. But what was the real one? What was the real, the actual, opium of the people? He knew it very well. It was gone just a little way around the corner in what well-lighted part of his

mind that was there after two or more drinks in the evening; that he knew was there (it was not really there of course). What was it? He knew very well. What was it? Of course, broad was the opium of the people.vii These lines point towards total rejection of society alongwith all the things that go with it, which was the most significant feature of the post-war man. Mr. Frazer finds himself unable to adjust with society. What matters to him, at this stage, is to keep himself under control. In order to achieve this, he searches for occupations that would keep him engaged so that he would succeed in preventing himself from thinking: His nerves went bad at the end of five weeks.... Mr. Frazer had been through all this before. The only thing which was new to him was the radio. He played it all night long, turned so low he could barely hear it, and he was learning to listen to it without thinking.viii

His wish to preserve the same two views from the window of his room in the hospital shows the extent of his yearning for some sense of order in the chaotic society.

There is another character named Cayetano Ruiz in the story, who also finds himself in the world of violence, disorder, and misery. Ruiz has two bullets in his stomach but does not show any sign of suffering while Mr. Frazer “is shamed to suffer less but visibly”.ix It is not with Mr. Frazer that Ruiz is contrasted in the story, but with the Russian, who was accidentally hit by a stray bullet fired at the Mexican and makes a lot of noise in the hospital. Mr. Frazer on the other hand, has some similarities with Ruiz. He confesses to Ruiz that he cries when the nurse goes out and Ruiz also expresses his desire to cry if he could get some privacy. Ruiz has to fight off only physical pain while Mr. Frazer’s pain is even more difficult to bear. He is desperately trying to get a hold on his nerves, to fight off that feeling of nausea that is the result of his rootlessness and spiritual bankruptcy. He is not “the victim of illusions”,x like Ruiz. A sense of world-weariness becomes oppressive in such short-stories. The initial sense of purpose which is cruelly rebuffed by a callous and indifferent social order is slow to rise again.

The Hemingway protagonists in the short stories carry with them a sense of paralyzing trauma which is difficult to overcome. Their initial failure is not due to their ignorance of hope but due to a sense of inertia that sets into them a result of widespread decay and disintegration. Nick Adams in “A Way You’ll Never Be” is acutely conscious of the chaos and disorder that he finds the world in. he can not sleep without a light because his terrible war experiences haunt him in the dark. Hemingway depicts the horror and inhuman nature of modern warfare, which results in widespread destruction and brings unimaginable suffering and misery to the combatants and non-combatants alike; and to the soldiers, the exposure to brutalities during war results in callousness, leading to psychic disintegration.

Hemingway in “A Way You’ll Never Be” projects the state of mind of Nick Adams. Nick Adams has fought in the war and has also been wounded. He has seen unimaginable scenes of horror and bloodshed in the war and this traumatic experience of being wounded has affected his mind. He is in critical mental condition. He gets fits of insanity and he desperately tries to hold them off. Nick is riding a bicycle, going to Captain Paravicini’s battalion near the front. On the way he passes an area where fighting had taken place and he sees dead bodies lying singly or in clumps, covered with insects and flies, their pockets turned inside out. The exposure to war makes people so callous and insensitive that the only thing they are bothered with, when they see a dead body, is to search the pockets for any money. Among the papers lying about the dead, he sees propaganda postcards, showing a soldier in Austrian uniform sending a woman backwards over a bed, which he compares to the actual brutal scenes of rape he has seen in which a woman’s skirts and pulled over her head to smother her, one soldier sometimes sitting upon the head.

Nick’s mental condition is critical because of his terrible experiences in the war. He has been “certified as nutty”xi and has not yet recovered. He has been in situations where in order to divert the mind of soldiers from the fear of impending death, their noses would be broken. Nick’s subsequent wounding was the final blow to his already battered mind. It makes him lose his mental balance. As Joseph De Falco rightly

observes that Nick “is poised on the borderline of sanity and insanity, reality and unreality, and, ultimately life and death”.^{xii} He tells Paravicini that he has come there to show the American uniform to the soldiers, so that they will think that many American soldiers are coming to assist them in the war. It is possible that Nick has gone to Paravicini in a fit of insanity. When he lies down to rest for sometime, his mind wanders. His thoughts go back to his war experiences. In order to divert his mind from these painful recollections, he starts talking, as though giving a lecture, about grasshoppers and locusts to the adjutant and runners present in the room, possibly posted there by Para to look after Nick and take care of him and to call him as soon as Nick gets up. When Nick starts the lecture, the adjutant immediately sends the runners to call the major, knowing that Nick is again getting one of his fits of insanity and realizing how the wound has affected his mind.^{xiii}

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