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LIGHT AND NOTHING. AN ANALYSIS OF HEMINGWAY'S A CLEAN, WELL-LIGHTED PLACE

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In this article I provide an analysis of one of the most well-known story by E. Hemingway A Clean, Well-Lighted Place. The analysis will try to focus on the one hand on the structure of the story, and on the other on the oppositions and analogies that provide the text with coherence. Furthermore some symbolic aspects of the story are put forth.

Keywords: analogy, dialogue, dichotomy, suicide, loneliness, nada, opposition.

«[...] light is a place»

Dylan Thomas

Introduction. In one of his letters to Maxwell Perkins, dated 7 December 1932, Hemingway told him that he had finished writing three new “excellent stories”: (i) *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, (ii) *Homage to Switzerland* e (iii) *Give Us a Prescription, Doctor* (later called *The Gambler, the Nun and the Radio*)¹ [1, p. 380]. The three stories were considered ‘safe’ by the author [2, p. 362], that is, they fitted a magazine (the *Scribner’s*) suited to families. A fourth story, entitled *The Light of the World* and dealing with the world of prostitution was rejected because it was too racy.

A Clean, Well-Lighted Place (from now on *CWLP*) was, in a sense, an autobiographical story, for «it offered a brief look into the underside of Ernest’s spiritual world, the nightmare of nothingness by which he was still occasionally haunted» [2, p. 362]. Actually, we can find in *CWLP* one of Hemingway’s most typical topics, insomnia, which is dealt with in other two well-known stories, *Now I Lay Me* (1927) and *A Way You’ll Never Be* (1932).

No doubt, *CWLP* is an example – maybe the most famous one – of that philosophy of despair, that lucid nihilism characterizing Hemingway’s literary production in almost its entirety, but which in this short story acquires a particular significance thanks to the ‘prayer of *nada*’. Moreover, *CWLP* is very difficult to interpret, due to the fact that the so called ‘theory of the iceberg’ is fully used in this story. Hemingway explains this ‘theory’ very clearly in *Death in the Afternoon*: «When writing a novel a writer should create living people; people not characters. A character is a caricature. [...] Prose is architecture, not interior decoration [...]. A good writer should know as near everything as possible. Naturally he will not. A great enough writer seems to be born with knowledge. But he really is not; he has only been born with the ability to learn in a quicker ratio to the passage of time than other men and without conscious application, and with an intelligence to accept or reject what is already presented as knowledge. [...] If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing. A writer who appreciates the seriousness of writing so little that he is anxious to make people see he is formally educated, cultured or well-bred is merely a popinjay» [3, p. 169–171].

In this passage, on the one hand the need and the validity of a prose characterized by the highest simplicity are claimed, and, on the other, the reader is invited – or better, he is urged – to cooperate, to fill those gaps which are intentionally, expressly, and cunningly scattered by the author. Yet here I will not present an interpretation based on imagination, fancy or arbitrariness; quite the opposite, I will resort to a procedure that aims to make the truth shine out, more than to have it revealed or disclosed, and which just in *CWLP* finds one of its most fitting implementations.

Main part. Before dealing with the analysis of the text, I have to point out some philological questions.

First of all, in the text I am using here², at a certain point the author writes: “‘We are of two different kinds,’ the older waiter said. He was dressed now to go home”. On the contrary, the version of the story included in *The First Forty-Nine Stories*, London, Arrow, 1993, is as follows: “He was now dressed” (p. 361).

A more serious philological case can be found in a fragment of dialogue between the two waiters [5–8]. In the text I am using here the author writes:

[1] ‘His niece looks after him.’

[2] ‘I know. You said she cut him down.’

Very likely [1] is uttered by the old waiter, while [2] is uttered by the young one. These utterances follow one another in the same way also in *The First Forty Nine Stories*, London, J. Cape, 1944. Instead, in *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, New York, Simon & Schuster Inc. [The Finca Vigía Edition], 1987, the text reads:

[1] ‘His niece looks after him. You said she cut him down.’

[2] ‘I know.’

¹ These three stories were then published in 1933 in *Scribner’s Magazine* and later they were included in *The First Forty-Nine Stories*.

² The text is the one included in [4, p. 62–66].

I think that the right sequence of the utterances is

- [1] 'His niece looks after him.'
- [2] 'I know. You said she cut him down.'³

CWLP can be split into two macroparts (**MP**). The first macropart (**MP₁**) is that in which the old man appears (pp. 62–64); the second macropart (**MP₂**) is that without the old man (pp. 64–66). These two macroparts are divided by the utterance «The waiter watched him go down the street, a very old man walking unsteadily but with dignity» (p. 64).

The second **MP**, in turn, can be divided into two microparts (**mp**). The first micropart (**mp₁**, pp. 64–65) is characterized by the dialogue between the two waiters (a young one and an old one) when left alone; the second micropart (**mp₂**, pp. 65–66) is completely focused on the old waiter who, after saying the 'prayer of *nada*' and stopping «before a bar with a shining steam pressure coffee machine» (p. 66), starts walking home alone. All that can be shown as follows⁴:

MP₁ <+ old man>	MP₂ <- old man>
mp₁ <+young waiter>	mp₂ <-young waiter>

The story can then be seen as a series of oppositions between what is present and what is missing. In the following, I will show the main dichotomies of the story.

Let's take into account the description at the very beginning of the text: «It was late and everyone had left the café except an old man who sat in the shadow the leaves of the tree made against the electric light. In the daytime the street was dusty, but at night the dew settled the dust and the old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and nor at night it was quiet and he felt the difference» (p. 62).

In this passage the following oppositions can be pointed out:

shadow vs *electric light*
night vs *day*
dust vs *dew*

As can be easily seen, all these oppositions can be narrowed to the following dichotomy:

<-lightness> vs <+lightness> (<+brightness>)

namely

opacity vs lightness (brightness)

On the basis of such oppositions, we can also analyse the utterance «the old man liked to sit late because he was deaf and now at night it was quiet and he felt the difference». In order to grasp the oppositional structure of this passage, The terms *deaf* and *quiet* must be correlated first, and then the value of *difference* must be specified. *Deaf* and *quiet* are homologous, inasmuch as they share the same (not marked) feature <-noise>. It is clear that if the old man is deaf he cannot hear any noise (sounds, voices, music, and so on) either during the day or during the night. Therefore the *difference* will not consist in the perception of a 'denotativity' (that is, <-noise>), but in the perception of a 'connotativity', which can be interpreted or rephrased as <-confusion>. Indeed, as we can read just at the beginning of the story, «everyone had left the café». Thus, if it is right to rephrase <-noise> as <-confusion>, we can also suppose that we have to interpret <-confusion> (and then *quiet*) in a psychological sense.

If such a supposition is correct or at least acceptable, then it is possible to assign connotative values also to the pair *light/night*. These two paragraphs can be rephrased and compared by assigning to *light* some connotations like "life", "birth", etc., and by assigning to *night* some connotations like "death", "nothing", etc.

Just after the opening description, there is the passage on the attempted suicide:

- «'Last week he tried to commit suicide,' one waiter said.
- 'Why?'
- 'He was in despair.'
- 'What about?'
- 'Nothing.'
- 'How do you know it was nothing?'
- 'He has plenty of money.'» (p. 62).

First of all, the conciseness, the laconic nature of the dialogue should be noticed. However, it is not expedient to insist on this topic, but rather on the meaning of the final utterance «He has plenty of money», which can be explained only by means of an inference based on the contrast between *despair* and *nothing*, on the one hand, and *plenty of money*, on the other. To put it simply: the one who is rich, since (s)he has got everything, has no reason to be in despair towards life, and therefore (s)he has no reason to commit suicide. Wealth (<+money>) is thus opposed to suicide (<-life>). Yet this explanation based on an inference in a material sense (possession of money) will prove, if not wrong at least misleading, and it has to be reinterpreted in an ontological (existential) sense on the basis of an investigation that opposes, on the one hand, the old man to the two waiters, and, on the other, the waiters' dialogue

³ See the photo of Hemingway's pencil manuscript of the story [7, p. 621].

⁴ The symbol '+' indicates the presence of a given feature; the symbol '-' indicates that a given feature is missing.

(voice) to the (nearly absolute) silence of the old man who just «looked from his glass cross the square, then over at the waiters» (p. 64). The old man – who communicates more through gestures than through language – stands out and dominates the story as a man by now lonely («He’s lonely»), who to the waiters’ tightened dialogue opposes his dignified drunkenness. The old man’s gestures («The old man motioned with his finger», «pointing to his glass») acquire a ritualized value, just like his daily drunkenness: «He’s drunk every night», says one of the waiters. To the “noise” of the surrounding world the old man opposes the silent meaningfulness of his gestures as well as the bare simplicity and the seemingly unsyntactical structures of his utterances, which are typical of a drunkard («A little more», «Another brandy»). And when he gets up to go away, his gait is «unsteadily but with dignity», and resembles both Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* and the old man in the very short story *Old Man at the Bridge*.

If so far I have pointed out some dichotomous/oppositional structures and situations, nor is it expedient to draw attention to both parallelisms and analogies. So far dichotomous/ oppositional structure and situations have been pointed out, while now it seems useful to draw attention to both parallelisms and analogies. In this field of analysis it could be possible to include (more or less extensive and complicated) text repetitions. These repetitions concern (a) lexical items, (b) analogous phrases, and (c) analogous sentences.

As concerns lexical items, here is the list of the most often quoted ones:

23 occurrences of *waiter(s)*

22 occurrences of *nada*

17 occurrences of *old man*

12 occurrences of *light*

11 occurrences of *night*

9 occurrences of *café*

8 occurrences of *bed*

8 occurrences of *nothing*

To these occurrences we can add the following:

6 occurrences of *drunk*

5 occurrences of *clean*

5 occurrences of *confidence*

3 occurrences of *everything*

3 occurrences of *thing(s)*

As to the analogous phrases, the most significant are:

clean and pleasant (twice)

bright and pleasant (once)

“[The waiter] *poured the glass*”

“The waiter *poured on into the glass*”

The following analogous sentences are instead worth mentioning:

“an old man who sat in the shadow”

“the old man sat in the shadow”

“The old man sitting in the shadow”

“They sat together at a table”

“He sat down at the table”

As is well known, ‘repetition’ (or ‘reiteration’) is a relevant characteristic of Hemingway’s style. Repetitions fulfil at least two purposes: cohesion and coherence. Cohesion concerns the surface level of the text (i.e. morphological, grammatical, syntactical phenomena), whereas coherence concerns the deep level of the text, i.e. the thematic (topic) continuity of the text. Both cohesion and coherence include the various phenomena of coreference (proforms, pronouns, synonyms, and so on).

After pointing out these repetitions, one could try to assign them a metaphorical or symbolic value. Without analysing the symbolic values of the story in detail⁵, one could suppose that the repetitions represent the repetitiveness of a life in which nothing (*nada*) really interesting ever happens – a monotonous and tedious life where only a clean and well-lighted place represents a shelter, a moment of safety, a response and reaction to despair.

Now let’s go back to the structure of the story. If in **MP**₁ the main character is the drunk old man (**OM**), **MP**₂ focuses entirely on the old waiter (**OW**). Several relations and analogies can be highlighted between these two characters, such as the following:

1) **OM** closes **MP**₁ by going home «walking unsteadily but with dignity»; **OW** closes **MP**₂ – and therefore the story – whereas he thinks about his insomnia;

2) **OM** does not like confusion and enjoys the stillness of the night; **OW** does not like music («You do not want music. Certainly you do not want music», says he to himself) and desires only «light [...] and a certain cleanness and order»;

⁵ Some symbolic values have already been pointed out in the previous chapter and others will be shown at the end of this paper.

3) both **OM** and **OW** like «to stay late at the café», unlike the young waiter who is eager to go home and sleep⁶;

4) **OM** is «in despair», **OW** suffers from insomnia;

5) **OM** tries to commit suicide, **OW** recites the ‘prayer of *nada*’.

It is not necessary to investigate all these analogies individually. I will rather try to detect a path that could globally piece them together.

First of all, what connects the drunk old man and the old waiter is their loneliness. Such loneliness is apparently inconsistent: the old waiter is lonely regardless despite his close, and still meaningless, nearly ‘phatic’ dialogues with the young waiter; the old man is lonely although he has a niece who takes care of him. Furthermore, even if both characters attend a public place like a café, they remain two outcasts, two dropouts, who are unable to have any real, human relationship with the outside world. Therefore the banality of material wealth as well as the drunkenness and deafness of the old man, on the one hand, and the waiter’s insomnia, on the other, can be seen as two ways they use to isolate themselves from the world, as two *Stimmungen*. Indeed, it is possible to establish a complex relation between the drunkenness and the attempted suicide of the old man on the one hand, and the old waiter’s insomnia, on the other. Once again, both are two forms of absence. In other words: the old waiter wishes he could sleep just the same way the old man wants to be drunk and to be dead. If this interpretation is right, then it is true that the so-called ‘prayer of *nada*’ is recited by the waiter, but as if it were recited by the old man.

And it is precisely here that one has to look for the explanation of the title of the story as well as of this “prayer”, that recalls the *noche obscura* and the “negative theology” of Juan de la Cruz. What is called *nada* is nothingness seen not as the inexistent, but rather as the absence of something that could always return again and again. Indeed the waiter says: «Give us [...] our daily *nada* [...] but deliver us from *nada*» (p. 65). Thus we are here facing (1) a *nada* that is neither absolute nor constant, even if required to be so, and (2) a *nada* one would get rid of. The attitude is once again inconsistent: the existence of *nada* is invoked in the same moment it would and should be exorcised. One can get rid of this inconsistency perhaps only by ambiguously interpreting *nada*, that is, if at least two values are assigned to it: on the one hand, the desired *nada* is that comparable to the void, to the absolute nothing, to what doesn’t or didn’t or won’t ever exist; on the other, *nada* is comparable to what-is-never-more-to-be. In short it is a nothing that fills and empties us at the same time; or rather, it is a nothing that frees us if it destroys us, and destroys us if it frees us, that erases if expressed and that expresses if erased.

Conclusion. It is a nothing that is fulfilled only dialectically and that helps us explain the title of the story: the café is clean and well-lighted because in it that cosmic order is realized which becomes the light of reason and the inner integrity only through the solitude fulfilled thanks to silence. The café – microcosm and *mandala* – is *well-lighted* for it bares, uncovers, reveals, unveils, and lightens the essence of life, and it is *clean* for in the café it is not possible to pretend or to deceive or to lie. In it the *nada* becomes the foundation and the essence of freedom and dignity in contrast to the hypocrisy and falsehood of the outside world.

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СВЕТ И НИЧТО. АНАЛИЗ РАССКАЗА Э. ХЕМИНГУЭЯ «ТАМ, ГДЕ ЧИСТО, СВЕТЛО»

Л. ВИТАКОЛОННА

В настоящей работе анализируется один из самых известных рассказов Э. Хемингуэя «Там, где чисто, светло». С одной стороны, анализ сосредоточен на структуре повествования, с другой стороны – на оппозициях и аналогиях, которые придают тексту связность. Также подчеркиваются некоторые смысловые аспекты символики произведения.

Ключевые слова: аналогия, диалог, дихотомия, суицид, одиночество, ничто, оппозиция.

⁶ Indeed it would be necessary to emphasize also the different attitude of the two waiters towards the old man, towards whom the young waiter shows only hatred and impatience, while the old waiter shows towards the old man sympathy and empathy.