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The Good Death: 'Grace Under Pressure' or Escape from the *Nada* in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," "Indian Camp," and "The Killers"

"Death was Hemingway's great subject, and his great obsession."

(Donaldson 287)

Introduction

For most of his adult life, Ernest Hemingway was downright obsessed with death and specifically violent death and suicide. Few of his critics would argue the truth of this statement, yet the interpretations of his treatment of those themes vary considerably. Hemingway approaches these subjects from two perspectives: firstly, from the point of view of a writer, arguing that "violent death" teaches a writer how to truly write. Secondly, his individual attitude was distinctly shaped by his personal life, including his war experiences, at least one near-death encounter and various severe injuries as well as the incidence of his father's suicide. As with many of Hemingway's themes that carry over from his personal life, death and suicide also feature prominently in his writings. Even though no major novel is concerned with the theme of suicide, many of his works of shorter fiction discuss this taboo topic (cf. Watts 67).



Suicide carries a strong societal stigma of failure and admittance of defeat, yet, in literature, it is often, quite to the contrary, portrayed as an indicator of power, freedom and agency. Hemingway seems to be oscillating between condoning and condemning the issue in his fiction. This paper strives to examine his very peculiar view on and representation of the topic, distinguishing between what could be termed "good" (justified) and "bad" (unjustified) suicides. It supports the claim that Hemingway held complex, sometimes even contradictory views on the concept of suicide and challenges generalized interpretations of the subject matter that undistinguishingly mark suicide a sign of cowardice and impotence in Hemingway's writing.

By analyzing three works of his short fiction, namely "Indian Camp," "The Killers," and "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," I will therefore demonstrate that Hemingway's views on the topic are by far not as unambiguous as they are often presented to be, but that, in fact, the fluid connotations he employs concerning the issue of suicide, are very much consistent with his work on the whole.

Suicidology and Literary Suicide

Suicide is a complex, controversial, cross-cultural phenomenon that has invited theorists of varied disciplines, from philosophy and sociology to medicine and cultural studies, to form claims about the concept of human voluntary death, most frequently commenting on the ethical issues involved. Albeit subject to historical change, suicide has long since been viewed as a moral wrong against God and/or society. Christianity's argument against self-inflicted death mostly relies on the fifth/sixth commandment ("Thou shalt not kill") and on the premise that, by killing

themselves, humans elude burdens placed upon them by God for a good reason (cf. Decher 84).

In contrast, Stoics accept suicide in order to preserve dignity or honor. Indeed, the “later Stoics continued to look upon reason as the supreme guide of human action and favored suicide as a suitable and rational alternative to a life devoid of pleasure” (Neeley 38). Likewise, Nietzsche supports the freedom to choose the time of death over a continued life of meaninglessness (cf. Decher 188).

Advocates of the right to commit suicide frequently argue with the concepts of free will and individualism. Even though Schopenhauer acknowledges the individual's right to take their own life, he still views it as a rash act with the aim not of dying, but of escaping current undesirable conditions. In this, the German philosopher is in line with current psychiatric thought (cf. Retterstøl 19). According to naturalistic ideas, suicide runs counter to the instinct of self-preservation and is therefore, at the least, to be considered counter-intuitive and unnatural (cf. Retterstøl 184). In its nihilistic preoccupation with death, Dadaism welcomes suicide as a premature end to the futility of life (cf. Watts 66).

Nowadays, most Western societies perceive suicide as a shameful, irrational act performed impulsively by mentally disturbed persons and offer suicide prevention programs. In many religious countries, suicides are often reported as natural deaths or accidents to alleviate the burden on family members and in order not to deny the deceased religious burial rites (cf. Farberow 12). Whether in favor of individual choice over ending one's life or opposed to voluntary death, most agree on the act of terminating one's own life being, at the very least, a powerful expression of self-determination and freedom (cf. Decher 183).

Suicide in literature and other art forms is often used to supply this symbolic function of denoting free will and independence rather than presenting explicit moral judgment, promoting didactic purposes or simply acting as a plot device. Prominent suicides occur in Shakespearean drama as well as in the works of Kate Chopin and Virginia Woolf. Furthermore, many contemporary movies present the topic of voluntary death in various forms.

The subsequent textual and autobiographical analysis will place Hemingway's fiction within the realm of these texts that present self-inflicted death in an ambiguous light, but ultimately, as I claim, rather stress self-determining and liberating aspects.

Suicide in Hemingway

Most critics agree that Hemingway “wrote himself into all, or most, of his characters until his death” (Roberts 11). Keeping this in mind, an analysis of the portrayal of such a theme as suicide in his writing is, therefore, all the more interesting and relevant, especially considering his own death. Meditating on the fact that, as Sanderson asserts, “Hemingway, more than most authors, portrays only what he has personally felt and seen and known. His imagination is firmly anchored to his own experience” (29), and taking his father's suicide into consideration, are we not tempted to conclude that his writings on suicide are equally significant and genuine?

Watts notes that no protagonist of Hemingway's novels ever commits suicide and that self-inflicted death only plays a role in one of the author's novels (67). This, however, by no means suggests that the theme was not an important one to Hemingway; he rather chose short stories to tackle this topic, most notably “Fathers and Sons,” “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” and “Indian Camp.” An explanation for

this might be found in the idea that Nick Adams, Hemingway's alter ego, expresses in "Fathers and Sons", a story influenced by Hemingway's father's suicide in 1928—that too many family members were still living to write an honest piece about topics such as abuse and suicide (cf. Smith 79). Still, it is of note that suicidal characters in Hemingway are most frequently minor figures whose actions the protagonists, acting as observer figures, reflect upon. Suicidal tendencies can also, however, be observed in more central characters such as Robert Jordan (*For Whom the Bell Tolls*) and Colonel Cantwell (*Across the River and Into the Trees*) (cf. Smith 98).

Meaningful and Meaningless Suicides

Sympathy without Sentimentality

Interestingly, many critics agree that Hemingway's portrayal of suicide is a stark reversal, actually the very antithesis of his ideal code hero who displays "grace under pressure". Rovit claims that "suicide appears in most of Hemingway's works as a complete abrogation of the rules of the game. It is even worse than dying badly, which is in accordance, at least, with the rules" (29), while Roberts goes even farther and contends that "a real, authentic man never succumbs; most of all, he does not kill himself" (21). These interpretations strike me as very superficial conclusions drawn rather from rational deductions and logical extensions of Hemingway's characteristic themes than from solid assumptions based on a close reading of actual texts. Possibly, Hemingway's depiction of the phenomenon in less sentimental ways than would be expected draws forth these ideas that wrongly equate the absence of emotionalism with an absence of sympathy or understanding (cf. Benson 118). Margaret D. Bauer, in her teaching of literary works that are oftentimes interpreted

on the basis of authors' reputations, likewise cautions against wrongly relating "some vague impression" of the author's persona to their fictional characters (125). Moreover, she agrees with Baym, who states that many scholars tend to accept a "reading that is likely more the critics' than the author's construction" (quoted in Bauer 126). Thus, in many scholars' interpretation, the stance Hemingway seemingly takes is that of contemporary society, which indiscriminately condemns suicide as weak, unmanly, egotistical, rash and shameful. However, taking a closer look at the texts at hand reveals a more sensitive and complex treatment of the concept and allows a very different interpretation. The following analysis of the portrayal of suicides in Hemingway's short fiction will reveal the exact opposite reading to be true.

Physical and Emotional Death

Watts convincingly argues that "death in Hemingway is not always just immediate physical death . . . it is also spiritual or emotional death" (66). In fact, Hemingway is much more concerned with disillusionment and "emotional death" than with actually depicting dying scenes. "Indian Camp," "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," and "The Killers" are all examples of this spiritual death that precedes actual physical death and makes characters more prone to committing suicide.

The initiation story featuring Hemingway's fictional alter ego, Nick Adams, as a young boy, "Indian Camp" powerfully introduces Nick simultaneously to birth and death as he watches his father perform a C-section on an Indian woman and sees her husband's dead body, who, during the ordeal, has cut his own throat. When Nick asks his father why the man killed himself, the only answer he gets is "[h]e couldn't stand things, I guess" (19). Nick thus learns that violent and painful things may happen without an obvious reason. However, multiple theories exist that explain the

Indian's suicide: the simplest of which certainly is his inability to hear his wife's painful screams and the doctor's coarse attitude towards her screaming. As Nick's father tells the boy that the woman's screams are not important, the Indian turns towards the wall, where he later on silently slits his throat. Another possible interpretation is grounded in the fact that his wife depends on the help from White outsiders to deliver the baby and that the operation performed on her by a White doctor fills her husband with shame at his own helplessness. Lastly, Uncle George's behavior at the camp is frequently interpreted as meaning that he might indeed be the father of the child, the reason for the husband's suicide lying in the shame at his wife's betrayal (cf. Sanderson 21). Even though the feelings of helplessness, shame and the suggested inability to endure them might suggest otherwise, the manner of the husband's suicide actually bears testament to this not being an action performed by a weak, impotent person. First of all, silently slitting one's throat from ear to ear with a razor not only takes a high pain tolerance, but also strong determination and courage. It is thus a willful choice of physical pain over continued emotional pain and shame at the hands of the Whites; it can therefore be seen as a preservation of dignity rather than merely an escape from shame and guilt, especially considering the husband's ethnicity.

In contrast to the Indian's suicide in "Indian Camp," "The Killers" does not feature an actual suicide per se, yet Ole Andreson's behavior clearly is self-destructive and, superficially interpreted, an act of resignation. Moreover, his position on the bed, facing the wall as he waits for death, is eerily reminiscent of the Indian husband in the story just discussed (cf. Roberts 29). He never turns to look at Nick, talking to the wall as he stubbornly asserts that "there is nothing to do about [his death]" (221). At first glance, Nick Adams, now a teenager, might be viewed as

the code hero of the text, as he risks his life in warning the Swede (Ole Andreson) of the killers who are after him. The last lines of the story, however, betray this interpretation, as Nick leaves town, not for fear of the hired killers, but because he “can't stand to think about [Ole] waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful” (222). While the Swede calmly faces his death, telling Nick flatly that “there ain't anything to do” (221) as he has made the decision to stop running, Nick is “sickened in disbelief that a man can passively await his own, certain death” (Roberts 31). It is thus that Ole displays grace under pressure and becomes what Benson terms the “protagonist of courage” (146), whereas, while Nick is not afraid of death itself, he is unable to understand and maybe intimidated by someone not afraid of death. Furthermore, he might feel that his own bravery is utterly in vain, as Ole does not accept his help but has already made up his mind. The important aspect here is not only Ole Andreson's composure, but his conscious decision to stop running—“I'm through with all that running around” (221)—and face the inevitable. His repeated remarks that he “just can't make up [his] mind to go out” (221) call his determination in question, yet his remaining lying in the same spot in bed, facing the wall, underlines his resolution. He thus refuses to be a prisoner of his fears any longer and resolves instead to—not unlike actual suicide—determine the time of his death himself.

If Watts is correct in her assumption that “death is frightening and is perhaps best indicated by the celebrated Hemingway theme of *nada*” (72), the old man in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” likewise displays grace under pressure as he also willfully exposes himself to it, perhaps choosing the unknown *nada* of death over the known *nada* of life. It is that famous question the answer to which is unknowable, which makes Hamlet falter as he ponders on whether “to be or not to be”. The old man in

"A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" seems, however, to have found his personal answer to the question, having attempted suicide out of an unwillingness (not an inability) to face life's *nada*. Again, his suicide attempt is proof of the old man's free will, a rational, individual decision rather than a rash action. Watts asserts that "most of Hemingway's protagonists, even in failure, find some sort of resolution or adjustment . . . in a final act of courage" (75) and I would argue that suicide is this final act of courage for the old man in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," the Indian husband in "Indian Camp" and Ole Andreson in "The Killers." It is the resolution they choose, a resolution that, after trying other means of adjustment, such as staying at the clean, well-lighted café, really is a permanent solution instead of a temporary escape. After all, being "in opposition to forces completely beyond human power to resist except temporarily and in a very small way" (Benson 121), the only sensible solution becomes ending opposition. Only superficially is this likened to resignation, when in fact it requires as much, if not more, courage and willpower to end opposition and face the unknown as to keep fighting insuperable forces.

While Nick Adams is the unaware observer figure in both "Indian Camp" and "The Killers," this function is fulfilled by the younger waiter in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" (cf. Benson 146). As Benson points out, the young waiter "has not yet been required to face the darkness with courage or even to recognize its existence" (117), and is therefore unable to understand the old man's and older waiter's thoughts and feelings. Whereas Nick Adams's reaction to the concept of suicide or suicidal tendency in "The Killers" is one of disbelief and fear, in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" it is ridicule and lack of empathy. While the young waiter only sees an old man who should have killed himself, the older waiter points to the old man's dignity, cleanliness and drinking without spilling. As with the Indian husband and Ole

Andreson, there is an insinuation of the old man having faced enough "grim, unavoidable disasters" (Benson 143) in his time so that he has now 'earned' the moral right to conclude his life by letting go, both of (the search for) meaning and (the fight against) meaninglessness.

The characters in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," "Indian Camp," and "The Killers" are "protagonists of courage" (Benson 146) on various levels, all of them displaying external composure and calmness, strong willpower and resolve, and disregard for bodily pain—the essential features of a code hero acting gracefully under pressure. If Watts asserts that "Hemingway's protagonists choose to confront death, to struggle against death, or at least to maintain an ideal in the face of death" (68), these characters likewise fit the description. They all oppose what modern science tells us about human nature, overcoming the animalistic instinct of self-preservation in a rational, calm decision against life.

Hemingway's characters thus display an acceptance of all aspects of life and, in their rejection of it, individually shape their own fate in what is "probably the most personal act anyone can perform" (Retterstøl 1). In their own way, they cease the struggle against the inevitable, the evil to which Nick Adams is first introduced in "Indian Camp" and of which he, in "The Killers," learns that "[it] lurks behind everyday reality and is not subject to remedy" (Benson 145). Following their spiritual death, upon which they had no influence, they make themselves the agents of their own physical death, a necessary and natural successor to the former.

What is known about Hemingway's character leads me to imagine that he must have felt similarly about ending his own life. As Rovit suggests, writing was his "ultimate weapon against life" (28) and, as he ceased to (be able to) write, he ceased to live (cf. 67). It is not difficult to view this as his own personal "spiritual death" which

he decided to follow up on with the physical one shortly before his 62nd birthday. In 1950, he expressed his views on death thus: “[o]nly suckers care about saving their souls. Who the hell should care about saving his soul when it's a man's *duty* to lose it intelligently . . . It isn't hard to die . . . No more worries... It takes a pretty good man to make any sense when he's dying” (quoted in Rovit 29, emphasis mine). The emphasis on duty here communicates an image of a man who is not bound by his obligation to God or society, but rather, first and foremost, by his obligation to *himself*. It is thus that this most personal act becomes an individual's last respectful nod to himself, coupled with the assertion that, in order to create meaning, one has to be aware of non-meaning first (cf. Benson 117). Harking back to the quote above, Rovit maintains that “if any man could make sense . . . when he was dying, it would be Hemingway himself” (29).

Conclusion

Taking into consideration the autobiographical parallels in Hemingway's writing, this paper aimed to contest all too straightforward interpretations of Hemingway's supposed views on suicide. Instead, the analysis of his short fiction texts shows both a complex and subtle ambiguity, as well as a propensity for interpretation of self-inflicted death as a means of self-determination and self-assertion.

Not only does this interpretation eliminate the sentiments of irony with which Hemingway's own suicide has partly been treated by critics, but it is moreover a strong indication of the widely contested idea of “rational suicide.” Hemingway's suicidal heroes analyzed in the texts act in accordance with the concept of grace under pressure; they display composure, dignity and self-awareness in their actions

and thus do not only belie the contemporary claim that suicide equates insanity, but moreover, the (attempted) suicides of these characters suggest a re-evaluation of Hemingway's concept of masculinity and his code hero.

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