

## Three generations walk into a bar

At the end of the first world war, a new kind of generation came into being. They would become known as the postwar generation, the lost generation. Like his fellow members of the lost generation, Ernest Hemingway had gone through the devastation of the first World War. Due to the existentialist influences of the artists around him, his writings deal with themes of nothingness and death. He also has the tendency to be direct and he avoids sugar coating his stories. He shows situations as they are, including the dialogue, on account of his history in the newspaper business<sup>1</sup>. A combination of simplicity and imagery provides for a fascinating read every time.

In his piece, *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, Hemingway utilizes characters of varying age and circumstance to convey vastly different conflicts their ages pose. He published it in 1926, in the midst of the roarin' 20s, which were filled with innocent youths and damaged elders. In his tale, the old are left with greater respect and wisdom, while the young are dreadfully unprepared for the challenges of life. The more years they have, the more they are ready to face. Yet even the old are faced with their own mountains to climb.

The oldest of the three main characters, the deaf and lonely old man, is the main topic of conversation. As he sits drinking his nightly brandy in the cafe, the waiters expose his struggles, like how "last week he attempted to commit suicide...he was in despair...about nothing." After a long life of experiencing both the joy and suffering of the world, he is tired. There is nothing more he wishes to see and he has no reason to keep living. He knows that his journey is at its end and he is only waiting for death to take him away from the imperfect world. Despite his lack of gaiety, he does not resort to cruelty or indecency. Drowsy with alcohol, "this old man is clean. He drinks without spilling." Even in his darkest hour, he is dignified.

The intermediary of the story, the older waiter, is indeed the middle ground, defending the old man while appreciating the younger waiter's speculations. His discussion with the younger waiter brings out some of his insecurities, as he tells the other waiter that he has everything--"youth, confidence, and a job"--whilst he himself has practically nothing, lacking "everything but work." He lacks confidence but maintains an appreciation for the world around him. Just as with the old man, the waiter is not content with life and stays out and about all hours of the night with the burden of his troubles. His times of hardship have given him compassion and empathy, while also making him dreadfully aware of the nothingness

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<sup>1</sup> "Hemingway's Writing Style - CliffsNotes." 2013. 13 Mar. 2014  
<<http://www.cliffsnotes.com/literature/f/for-whom-the-bell-tolls/critical-essays/hemingways-writing-style>>

of the world, for “it was a nothing that he knew too well.” He is almost as sure of the imminence of death as the old man.

Now comes the young waiter, the inexperienced, naive one. He has the gall to say to the deaf old man’s face, “You should have killed yourself last week.” He has no understanding of human compassion and has an unreasonable amount of malice towards a person that has done no wrong. The slight inconvenience the old man presents by spending so much time at the cafe is enough to push the waiter to indecency. In reality, he is afraid of what the old man represents.

The old man represents the death and despair to come for the waiter. The younger waiter believes that “an old man is a nasty thing...I don’t want to look at him...he has no regard for those who must work.” Even though the waiter supposedly has everything because he has youth and confidence, he lacks that touch of humanity due to his non-existent struggle through life. He sits in one corner being utterly selfish then turns around and accuses others of being inconsiderate. There is no forward-thinking in his mind, and that deprives him of wisdom that comes with time and age

Wandering among the minds of different generations helps in the understanding of motivations of others and why some people act the way they do. There is always a deeper cause of behavior than shallow observations can reveal. Experience matters when it comes to who a person is, and everyone has different experiences. This was especially so with the lost generation and those who followed them. A generation with hope clouded over by agony cannot be understood by one ignorant of the capacities of both creation and destruction in the world.