Allusions to the New Testament and The Merchant of Venice in God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen: Hemingway's Anti-Semitism Reconsidered

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I. The Story and Its Critics

WHEN Hemingway's Winner Take Nothing was published in 1933, Louis Kronenberger (in the New York Times Book Review) objected to the new collection not on moral, aesthetic or human grounds, but on philosophical grounds, because of 'the ultimate wastefulness of showing us things without infusing them into a more spacious canvas, without providing them with transcending values' (143). God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen — 'a really terrible story,' according to the Times Literary Supplement (378) — could have served him as a particularly relevant example, for — as the Kansas City Star had it — 'Admirers of the raw stuff of the world will find this their book and Kansas City readers in that category will find special interest in a tale of self-mutilation at General Hospital under the title of God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen (140).

What to contemporary reviewers and to the untrained reader in general appears to be simply raw stuff, a naturalistic slice of life, a particularly gruesome tale, a straightforward account of an incident encountered by a Kansas City Star cub reporter, still has not failed to engage the Hemingway scholar. Not a few serious critics have been puzzled by the story's several oddities and have begun to suggest interpretations that integrate such details into a meaningful, larger whole. None has succeeded in accounting for all such details, however, and the loose ends that remain have nearly always induced scholars to call the story a failure.

Rather than concur with such dismissive views, I shall try to demonstrate that God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen is a story of challenging complexity with a well-developed allusive subtext that accounts for most of its seeming disparities. In addition to re-examining the text, I shall consider its genesis, sources, and publication history as well as its surviving manuscript versions. All of these contribute to a surprising reassessment of the story's artistry and of its significance as a biographical document shedding new light on Hemingway's alleged anti-Semitism.

II. The Story and Its Narrator

GOD Rest You Merry, Gentlemen tells the story of a 16-year-old boy who considers his sexual excitability, his 'awful lust,' as he himself calls it, a sin against purity. On Christmas Eve, therefore, he goes to the city hospital to ask to be castrated. Of the two ambulance surgeons on duty, Doc Fischer (the competent one) tries to explain to him

that what he considers to be a sin is ‘a natural thing’, whereas Doctor Wilcox (the incompetent one) gets impatient and tells the boy ‘Oh, go and [jack-off],’ followed by the rude command ‘Get him out of here’ (395).2

That night the youth mutilates himself with a razor. He is returned to the hospital, but Wilcox cannot cope with the emergency, and as a result the young man may die from loss of blood. These occurrences lead to a dispute between the two surgeons in which Doc Fischer’s dexterity in handling verbal ambiguity reveals the latent antagonism between his own Jewishness and his colleague’s professed Christianity.

Its crude subject matter notwithstanding, Hemingway’s story begins with an altogether arresting sentence: ‘In those days the distances were all very different, the dirt blew off the hills that have now been cut down, and Kansas City was very like Constantinople’. This opening sentence is the first in the long series of details that critics have worried over. Jeffrey Meyers points to its ‘far-fetched simile’, and Kenneth S. Lynn calls it a ‘puzzling first sentence.’ While he feels that the ‘reference to the trimming off of Kansas City’s hills correlates with the ghastly surgery that the sexually disturbed boy in the story performs on himself,’ Lynn goes on to ask, ‘but what purpose did it serve to say that Kansas City was ‘very like’ Constantinople? After that first sentence, the city on the Bosporus is never mentioned again. Why bother, then, to introduce the comparison?’ The next item in a list of curiosities is the narrator’s discovery in ‘an automobile dealer’s show window’ of ‘a racing motor car finished entirely in silver with Dans Argent lettered on the hood’. The narrator continues as follows: ‘This I believed to mean the silver dance or the silver dancer, and, slightly puzzled which it meant but happy in the sight of the car and pleased by my knowledge of a foreign language, I went along the street in the snow’.

When the narrator arrives in the reception room of the hospital, he is greeted by Doc Fischer as ‘Horace,’ and a little later Fischer expressly asks him ‘you don’t mind me calling you Horace, do you?’. George Monteiro has noted that ‘we are never certain that that actually is his name’, and Peter Hays speculates, ‘…if ‘Horace’ is a nickname, did Fischer take it from Horace Greeley, Horatius Flaccus, or some comic, horse-faced character?’. To Lynn, the name ‘suggests what is on [the narrator’s] mind, particularly if the second syllable is dragged out (like this: whore-ass)’.

As the story progresses, the striking feature of the reported conversation between the two surgeons is Doc Fischer’s manner of speaking, which induces the narrator to remark that Fischer ‘affected a certain extravagance of speech which seemed to me to be of the utmost elegance’. Actually, Fischer’s speech is marked by ironic innuendo and oblique but pointed attacks on his colleague in the latter’s capacity both as a doctor and a Christian.

The narrator’s reaction helps to direct attention to Fischer’s speech, but apparently has not been appreciated for what it tells the reader about Horace himself. ‘When we focus on the narrator,’ Monteiro finds, ‘we soon discover that Hemingway has simply not given us enough information.’

‘The narrator has bothered other readers,’ he continues, ‘who have found his character, in so far as its lines can be determined, unnecessary to the tale’. Even the ‘extraneous’ attempt by Julian Smith to see in Horace ‘the young, still undamaged Jake

Barnes' who will fully understand what he witnesses 'only after he has himself experienced an amputation', cannot save God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen for even Smith concludes that 'on the evidence within the story, [the narrator] seems totally unnecessary, and the story seems lacking in focus.'

Seeing the person called Horace as 'the young, still undamaged Jake Barnes' points to why critics tend to go wrong in their assessment of the story. They seem inclined to measure the narrator of God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen against the narrator of the typical Hemingway or Nick Adams story and to expect the story, as so many others do, to dramatize the impact of a shocking event upon the psyche of a juvenile witness. As will emerge, 'God Rest You Merry' may well have started out as that kind of a narrative.

In its final version, however, it is totally unlike the traditional Hemingway story. Horace, as is evident throughout, is anything but intelligent and impressionable.

As the incident of the silver racing motor car in the opening paragraph demonstrates, he completely fails in his endeavor to 'read' and to 'translate' reality with any degree of accuracy. Most notably, he fails to assess all of Doc Fischer's equivocation. In complete accordance with the latter's thoroughly ironic discourse, the narrator is called Horace because, as the doctor well knows, he lacks all qualifications ever to function like Horatius Flaccus, the Roman satirist. 'Avoid [being smart], Horace,' Fischer sarcastically warns him, 'You haven't much tendency but sometimes I see a gleam'.

It is true that we are not given much information about the first-person narrator, certainly not enough to develop an interest in him as a person. But we are given more than enough information about him to know that his judgment is deficient and his reporting and evaluation of events unreliable. 'Horace' therefore functions negatively — and perhaps all the more effectively — to alert us to the actual implications of Doc Fischer's speech and to the pervasive ironic stance of the story.

Study of the composition of God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen suggests that Hemingway tried to avoid confusion of the narrator with the Hemingway or Nick Adams persona of his autobiographical fiction by deliberately deleting a reference to Horace's occupation as a reporter from the final version of his manuscript. He thus set him up as a character sui generis.

III. The Story and The New Testament

HAVING been alerted to the 'utmost elegance' of Fischer's 'extravagance of speech,' the reader will find that his words and phrases in the conversation about the free turkey dinners on Thanksgiving and Christmas at the Woolf Brothers' Saloon suggest a certain parallel between doctors and Christian ministers. The doctors are called 'confrères,' and their sharing the dinner is described formally as 'partaking' in a meal. This parallel is strengthened by Doctor Wilcox's carrying with him a conveniently cross indexed volume called The Young Doctor's Friend And Guide, a booklet 'bound in limp leather'

that fits into his coat pocket and serves him as an indispensable *vade mecum*, just as a prayer book of similar appearance will serve a minister in his quotidian routine.

After these suggestions, it emerges that Fischer's account of how the two doctors dealt with the case of the young boy and his presumed lust actually dramatizes the responses of two ministers with differing interpretations of their duties. Fischer (always informally referred to as 'Doc') is shown to be humane and understanding and fully prepared to face sexual matters, whereas Wilcox (always formally referred to as 'Doctor') cannot depart from official guidelines and does not consider sexuality a matter for his concern. The young man, significantly, may well die from loss of blood because (to quote Fischer) 'The good physician here, Doctor Wilcox, my colleague, was on call and he was unable to find this emergency listed in his book'. Fischer's reference to Wilcox as 'the good physician' would seem to point to the Good Samaritan of Luke 10: 30–37, but Wilcox — in a typical inversion of most of such references throughout the story — is the very opposite of a compassionate person and anything but generous or ready to help people in distress.

Specific details in Fischer's previous history also refer to the New Testament, such as the mention of 'his hands that had, with his willingness to oblige and his lack of respect for Federal statutes', gotten him into trouble 'on the coast', and his admission (in the course of his equivocation with Wilcox) that he has 'even had a small look into [hell]'.

The former (while perhaps hinting at his past as an abortionist) can also refer to the healing on the Sabbath (Luke 6: 6–11) and the violation of the Sabbath day (Luke 6: 1-5), as well as to the miraculous healings in 'Capernaum [...] upon the sea coast' (Matthew 4: 13). The latter (while possibly hinting at a short term in prison) is an unambiguous and quite deliberate reference to Christ's brief descent into hell (Matthew 12: 40), an incident familiar through the text of the Apostles' Creed and other Christian professions of faith. Along with further references to the Bible that need not be pursued in detail, such allusions help to identify Doc Fischer as a Christ figure. Wilcox, on the other hand, with his reliance on statutes and printed guidelines as well as his refusal to recognize and discuss the role of sex, is shown to be the representative of organized religion, either Catholic or Protestant (even Puritan as the reference to Thanksgiving might suggest).

Such an interpretation of the opposition between the two doctors is easily borne out by their names, which appear to have been chosen to point to their symbolic function: Fischer is a fisher of men, and the manuscript indicates that Hemingway at the last moment changed the spelling of the name by inserting a 'c' to make it look more foreign and so mark the outsider.

Wilcox, to put it bluntly, by refusing to help the boy and by ordering him 'out of here', actually causes the boy's self-mutilation involving the very organ vulgarly referred to in the doctor's name. Implicitly, Wilcox stands for the kind of religion that prefers to ignore sex or will it away. Again the manuscript seems to indicate Hemingway's intention: throughout, the name Cox is changed to Wilcox.

It is not until Fischer's reference to 'the day, the very anniversary, of our Saviour's birth' that the dogmatic Wilcox points out that Fischer is a Jew and has no right to

claim Jesus as his savior. In accordance with his previous un-dogmatic behavior, Fischer admits that he has never given this fact its proper importance. And while Wilcox seems to demand or expect a special kind of behavior on Christmas Day, Fischer (in what according to the holograph manuscript is the original ending of the story) insists that the 'significance of the particular day is not important', in other words, that good deeds need to be done each and every day.

In this final section of the story we are made aware of the significance of some of the earlier incidents. We now see that the free turkey dinner at the Woolf Brothers' Saloon (of which everyone partook, except Fischer) epitomizes Christian behavior in its contemporary corruption: good works and charity are reserved for special occasions, whereas on normal days *homo homine lupus est* — man is wolf to man. He who partakes of the Woolf Brothers' free turkey dinners on Thanksgiving and Christmas naturally has to pay for his greediness throughout the rest of the year.

IV. The Story and The Merchant of Venice

ONCE Fischer's Jewishness has been established, the reader is led to recognize that in addition to the relationship between Hemingway's story and the New Testament there is another such relationship — a far more important one — involving the same type of Jewish-Christian antagonism. The key to its discovery is Fischer's curious greeting 'What news along the rialto?' — the very phrase that causes the story's narrator to comment on the doctor's 'extravagance of speech' and thus alert the reader to its possible significance.

'What news along the rialto?' is a deliberate allusion to Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice, where the greeting is first spoken by Shylock and points to his activity as a money-lender (1.3.35). But whereas Shakespeare's Jew is characterized by his business acumen, his greed, his thirst for revenge, and his insistence on the principles of his religion, Hemingway's counterpart is the exact opposite: Fischer has never given his Jewishness 'its proper importance,' as he himself remarks. All of Shylock's negative and supposedly Jewish traits are shown to be those of Fischer's Christian antagonists rather than his own. It is Wilcox and his confrères who are smart in business affairs and wholly caught up in the pedantry of their religion. Even their vindictiveness is brought out in Fischer's final words about Wilcox (in the published ending of the story): 'Having discovered my vulnerable point, my Achilles tendon, so to speak, the doctor pursues his advantage.'

More important than these inverted parallels is Hemingway's similarly grotesque adaptation of the central motif of Shakespeare's play. In The Merchant of Venice it is Shylock who demands the pound of flesh; but in God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen it is Wilcox, rather than Fischer as the Jewish counterpart of Shakespeare's protagonist, who (in the light of what has been said about his name and his behavior) actually insists on having it.

Hemingway's evocation of Shakespeare's foil is indeed essential to our full appreciation of what happens in his story. Shylock, when taking his case to court, is granted his bond, but must also obey Portia's injunction:

'Take then thy bond, take thou thy pound of flesh

But in the cutting it, if thou dost shed

One drop of Christian blood, thy lands and goods

Are […] confiscate Unto the state of Venice. (4.1.302–308)

As a consequence, Antonio is spared. In 'God Rest You,' on the other hand, there is no effective intercession on behalf of the victim: Christian blood is, in fact, shed. And it is shed, not through the Jew who, unlike Shylock, tends to forget about his Jewishness, but through Wilcox, the Christian who meticulously (by reference to his guidebook) and righteously (by insisting on the significance of the particular day) maintains the tenets of his religion.

But while Wilcox actually observes the dogma of the Christian church, he deliberately sins against its spirit in that he has no mercy for the suffering patient and brusquely orders him 'out of here.' In Hemingway's story, unlike Shakespeare's play, the quality of mercy is represented solely and expressly — if finally ineffectively — by the Jew.

The curious detail of the racing motor car finished entirely in silver which figures prominently and prophetically in the opening paragraph is further testimony to Hemingway's care in setting up an inter-textual relationship between God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen and The Merchant of Venice. The silver car can be traced to the three caskets of 'gold, silver, and base lead' that Portia uses to choose the right suitor. The casket of silver does to the Prince of Aragon what the silver motor car does to Horace in Hemingway's story: proving him, in the very words of Shakespeare's play, 'a blinking idiot' (2.9.54) and a 'deliberate fool' (2.9.80). Each character is deceived by the lettering on the silver object, but each character smugly congratulates himself on his ability to read the inscription adequately.

A less conspicuous instance, finally, of a correspondence between the two works would seem to emerge from the sentence spoken by Shylock immediately before his first 'What news on the rialto?' Responding to Bassanio's invitation to dine with him, he rejoins as follows: 'I will buy with you, sell with you, talk with you, walk with you, and so following; but I will not eat with you, drink with you, nor pray with you' (1.3.30-33) — a speech that may well prefigure Fischer's deliberate isolation from the 'confrères' and the 'partakers' at the Woolf Brothers' Christmas Day turkey dinner.

Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice and the New Testament thus would seem to combine — and ingeniously to complement each other — in Hemingway's effort to transform the 'raw stuff' of experience into a highly complex story in which an incident at the Kansas City General Hospital carries the burden of an outright attack on puritanical attitudes in contemporary America.

V. The Story, Its Composition, Its Manuscript, and Its Publication

THE sources of God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen help endorse such a reading. Contrary to what contemporary reviewers and many critics have assumed, the incident of the unfortunate boy was not an actual occurrence the author came across in his work as a cub reporter for the Kansas City Star in 1917–1918. Rather, the idea developed from a letter written by a youth in West Englewood, New Jersey, to Dr. Logan Clendening, author of a newspaper column of medical advice.

Hemingway did not meet Clendening until 1931, when Hemingway and his wife Pauline briefly settled in Kansas City for the birth of their son Gregory. Even to begin with, then, except for its setting, the story did not set out merely to transcribe reality. Still, autobiographical experience, Hemingway's work for The Star, and his 1922 Constantinople assignment did play a significant role when the story was first taking shape.

In addition to the eleven-page holograph of 'God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen,' two manuscript fragments with three discarded beginnings havesurvived. These discarded beginnings themselves show considerable rewriting — new starts as well as substantial deletions and insertions — and represent the author's typical process of foreshortening along with a gradual sharpening of the story's focus.

Hemingway's progression towards allusive density readily emerges in a survey of the story's stages of composition. One discarded beginning features an autobiographical first-person narrator who recalls that when he was in Constantinople it always seemed like Kansas City, the bare dusty hills behind the Pera Palace like the bare, brown, dusty hills above the new Union Station. Even before rejecting this particular opening in toto, Hemingway edited out the first person, but retained the reference to the similarity between Kansas City and Constantinople. Clearly the author began to work quite early toward the reduced first-person narrator and the mention of Constantinople in the published version.

A possible reason why Hemingway retained the comparison between the two cities while eliminating the autobiographical narrator emerges from another discarded beginning of the story, preserved in Folder 426: All of the distances are changed in Kansas City now and many streets have died to nourish the new skyscrapers and it no longer seems as much like Constantinople since they have cut down the hills, although the organization is the same.

He goes on (in a crossed-out phrase which for copyright reasons is not available for direct quotation) to call Kansas City the first Western City as one heads out in that direction. This holds — so the argument goes in the much-emended syntax of the original sentence — even though the inhabitants 'still speak the purest American, with no local accent or provincial turns.' The emphasis here is on the difference rather than the similarity between the two cities. With no narrator present whose autobiographical experience might explain the negative comparison, the mention of Constantinople seems all the more curious. Still, the somewhat involved logic of the sentence obviously hints at geographic or even geopolitical location as a new basis for comparison.

In writing about the two cities, accidentally linked by his work as a reporter in both places and sharing certain features of topography, Hemingway seems to have decided that their cultural and historical similarities, rather than their autobiographical connection, could be used to best purpose in the story. The comparison between Kansas City and Constantinople in the final version of God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen suggests the role of each metropolis as a Gateway, an historic portal to either the West or the East. More importantly, when seen in terms of the critical thrust of the story and its bitter satire, the comparison suggests that in each city Christianity functions as the official religion of the state.

Another example from the story's original beginning points to the same impulse to transform an autobiographical account, nostalgically evoking the locale of Hemingway's early newspaper days, into a highly allusive text. In the one-page fragment in Folder 426, Hemingway's narrator remarks that although the food is good and he has many friends there, Kansas City seems dull to him now. In an unfinished sentence he astutely blames this dullness on the coming of the motor car, which changed people's perceptions of their surroundings (and may be the reason why, in the story's published version, 'in those days the distances were all very different'). The only car remaining in the final version is the silver racing car discussed earlier.

Hemingway's process of foreshortening and redefinition can also be seen in yet another false start of God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen with yet another comparison of Kansas City to Constantinople: You came to the Union Station from the Fifteenth Street Police Station across a long viaduct that later was the Galata Bridge and on the viaduct were the pawnshops with shotguns and banjos and field glasses in the windows and many kinds of watches and all sorts of jewelry and fur coats on forms on the sidewalk and the proprietors always outside the door to make a sale. Even in the coldest weather when some of them would be inside you could not look in a window without bringing the proprietor out. Between the pawnshops were the cut-rate ticket agencies with long lists of destinations and their prices: Tulsa, today $2.00, Tucson, Arizona $5.40, Fort Worth, $3.50, and places further away.... (Folder 427, quoted from Paul).

The description goes on to include the lunch wagons and the saloons and the new Union Station with drugstores, restaurants, a book store, the waiting room and an information bureau in the center. All of these details — carefully balanced and successful in evoking a winter's day with its particular mood — are replaced in the final version of 'God Rest You.' The published story retains and highlights only those details that help to make up the allusive subtext with its critical thrust. The narrator's walk does not start at the police station any longer; instead, it begins at the Woolf Brothers' Saloon. The automobile dealer's show window with its prominent display is the only sight to interest him as he makes his way up the high hill to the city hospital where he encounters Doc Fischer and Doctor Wilcox. The motor car no longer serves to explain and to illustrate changes in the life of the city; its new function is largely defined by the foil of Shakespeare's play.

Hemingway not only deleted the reference to the first-person narrator's past in Constantinople, but also made other revisions divesting Horace of all autobiographical traits. Deleting the reference to the Fifteenth Street police station, where Hemingway frequently began his rounds as a cub reporter, seems intended to deprive the narrator

of his identity as a newspaper reporter or a fledgling writer. Even when preparing the final draft of the story, the author was careful to excise Doc Fischer's remark that the incident of the unfortunate boy is not suited for Horace to write about (Folder 428, p.10). God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen, with the critical thrust of its allusive subtext, calls for a narrator who constantly misreads and misjudges reality. It is understandable, therefore, that Hemingway would want to avoid all autobiographical identification or correlation. Horace thus is not the impressionable observer and intelligent commentator that more typical Hemingway stories may have taught the reader to expect.

The most effective if least spectacular instance of Hemingway's rewriting concerns the tone of the story's 'puzzling' opening sentence. Again, the author works towards successfully adapting a foil of particular relevance. The rejected openings help one recognize and appreciate the final achievement.

The initial attempt, 'All of the distances are changed in Kansas City now...'(Folder 426), is replaced by 'In those days Kansas City was a strange and wonderful place' (Folder 427). After this was deleted, the opening read 'There were bare dusty hills above the new Union Station...? (Folder427). Then Hemingway returned to the second version, before settling on his definitive solution: 'In those days the distances were all very different, the dirt blew off the hills that now have been cut down, and Kansas City was very like Constantinople.' The sequence shows Hemingway moving towards a sentence that combines the formulaic opening of the Biblical Christmas story — '*Indiebus illis...,'* according to the Vulgate; 'In those days...,' according to the King James Version — with deliberate alliteration, carefully chosen words, and fine cadences. By quietly evoking a foil that will grow in significance as the story moves along, the sentence, in both wording and tone, points to the legendary quality of what follows and, together with the quotation in the title, introduces the author's own contemporary version of the Christmas story.

VI. The Story and the Case of Hemingway's Anti-Semitism

THE sheer number of references to, and correspondences with, both the New Testament and The Merchant of Venice contradicts Louis Kronenberger's early opinion that Hemingway had failed to infuse things 'into a more spacious canvas' and provide them 'with transcending values.' Rather, the author's procedure in writing 'God Rest You Merry, Gentleman' was to fashion a deliberately allusive text and rigorously subject all factual detail to the controlling purpose of satirizing Middle America and its puritanical attitudes. The New Testament and Shakespeare's play offered convenient foils that helped him to organize and shape his material, while his satirical stance demanded that he subvert their patterns and messages.

Hemingway successfully draws on both foils to make Fischer, the Jewish doctor, a transcendent figure who serves to criticize contemporary religious attitudes from the perspective of an enlightened Other. Though the author must have taken delight in the fanciful perversion that resulted as he worked out correspondences between the time-honored foils and his modern materials, playfulness and ingenuity were not ends in

themselves. Hemingway's description of Doc Fischer as 'thin, sand-blond, with a thin mouth, amused eyes and gambler's hands', for instance, breaks up a traditional stereotype. In fact, as the story progresses and the Jewish doctor is set up as its true moral center, the portrait of his perspicacity and humanity might be viewed as an attempt on Hemingway's part to atone for his former anti-Semitism.

In his ingenious reading of God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen as a text about semiotic confusion, about the constant misreading of sign systems by all its characters, Robert Paul Lamb concentrates on Doc Fischer as the victim of Wilcox's anti-Semitic assault and also finds Hemingway's story to be a critique of anti-Semitism. Lamb speculates about the author's motivation in writing it, suggesting that it 'may have been Hemingway's attempt to apologize for his treatment of Harold Loeb…,' and concluding that perhaps the author 'was unconsciously atoning for his insensitivity toward his former friend in his portrayal of Wilcox and Fischer'. However, the facts surrounding the composition and publication of the story indicate that Hemingway's atonement was deliberate rather than unconscious.

As a Jew, Captain Louis Henry Cohn, compiler of an early Hemingway bibliography and a book collector with his own small press — House of Books — may have been aware of this. In April 1933, he persuaded Hemingway to allow House of Books to print a limited edition of 'God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen.' Cohn's endeavor to promote the story via this deluxe printing of 300 copies remained an ineffective gesture, however. In October of the same year God Rest You was published in Winner Take Nothing, and the collection seems to have impeded rather than furthered recognition of the story's purposes ever since.