

## **Hemingway's critique of anti-Semitism: semiotic confusion in 'God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen.'**

**by Robert Paul Lamb**

HEMINGWAY'S *God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen* (1933) seems, at first glance, a scant story; consequently, it has been the subject of only three brief scholarly essays, none of which has appeared in the past two decades. Peter Hays reads the story as a modern revision of the legend of the Fisher King; Julian Smith sees it as an analeptic tale told by Jake Barnes of *The Sun Also Rises* with the narrator's identity withheld; and George Monteiro believes that its main interest lies in the light it sheds on Hemingway's attitude toward Christianity and the medical profession but faults it for having an unnecessary and insubstantial first-person narrator who is not meaningfully connected to the plot. (1)

The main problem with these readings is that either they implicitly view the story as thin and are therefore compelled to read it through a speculative (in Smith's case, a wildly speculative) inter-text, or else they are left with the important questions Monteiro raises: why tell the story through a nearly anonymous narrator?; and, what on earth can the point of the story be? The point of the story, however, is supported by these readings, for Hemingway's odd tale is all about the problems of reading a text and the consequences of misreading. Specifically, it is about semiotic confusion, a confusion caused by the failure of signifiers to point to appropriate signifieds (not merely the subtle forms of slippage that concern deconstructionists, but the sorts of wholesale aberrations that would bother most folks), and about characters who employ the wrong inter-texts or misapply sign systems in their efforts to interpret signifiers.

In *God Rest You*, an older (and wiser?) narrator recalls a scene from his earlier days in Kansas City when he had been, perhaps, a reporter, hospital worker, or ambulance driver (his occupation is never specified in the text). (2) The story engages the theme of semiotic confusion from the opening sentence in which Hemingway employs a narrative strategy of presenting a description that describes nothing: '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 sentence presents a non-map with which to locate the story by informing the reader that a present-day sense of spatial relations is unhelpful; that the one concrete image in the sentence no longer exists; and that Kansas City can best be imagined through an inter-text, Constantinople, which – even if the reader has seen it – would be of no use since the narrator does not say, aside from the dirt, how the two cities are alike. As if this were not frustrating enough, the reader is immediately told: 'You may not believe this. No one believes this; but it is true'.

Having struck a Hawthornian note in which the actual blends with the fanciful, the mundane with the uncanny, the narrator proceeds to describe a 'neutral territory' of

deserted city streets covered with snow in the early dark on Christmas Day. Through the smoke and snow, an incongruous, concrete image appears – a silver French racing car in a lighted show window with the words ‘Dans Argent’ on the hood. The narrator recalls that he ‘believed’ this to mean ‘the silver dance’ or ‘the silver dancer’ and was ‘pleased’ by his knowledge of a foreign language. Implied in his verb tense is that the narrator now knows that it means ‘in silver’; but what is more important thematically is that in the very first paragraph a signifier has been misread, because of a faulty mastery of a sign system (French), and the character who misread it assumed that he read it correctly. The paragraph concludes with the narrator walking to the city hospital on the high hill (which, given the opening sentence, may very well no longer exist) where he enters the reception room and sees the two ambulance surgeons, Doc Fischer and Doctor Wilcox.

Here, the theme of semiotic confusion is further advanced by the problematizing of cultural stereotypes. Fischer is Jewish, but has sand-blond hair and ‘gambler’s hands’; Wilcox is gentile, dark, and carries a book. The book, a medical guide, gives symptoms and treatment on any subject, and is also ‘cross-indexed so that being consulted on symptoms it gave diagnoses’. The incompetent Wilcox is sensitive about the book but cannot get along without it. Fischer, who holds Wilcox in contempt, has sarcastically suggested that future editions of the book ‘be further cross-indexed so that if consulted as to the treatments being given, it would reveal ailments and symptoms’. This would serve, he says, ‘as an aid to memory’. Wilcox’s dependence on the book reveals his inability to read the physical symptoms of the body on his own. Memory (competence within the sign system) enables Fischer to read these physical symptoms, but what if the illness is emotional and cultural rather than physical? This takes us into the heart of the tale.

Fischer asks the narrator, whom he calls ‘Horace’ (this may or may not be his real name) for ‘news along the rialto’ – a jocular reference that further defamiliarizes the Kansas City street – and tells him that they had an ‘extremely interesting case’ that morning: a boy who had come in the previous day seeking ‘eunuch-hood’. The narrator, who had been present, recalls the excited, frightened, but determined sixteen-year-old who demanded to be castrated because he suffered from ‘awful lust’. When Fischer tried to tell the boy that there was nothing wrong with him and that sexual desire is ‘a natural thing,’ the boy replied that it’s ‘a sin against purity’ and ‘against our Lord and Saviour’. He also told Fischer ‘you don’t understand’. Fischer was unable to get the boy to listen to him; Wilcox called the boy ‘a goddamned fool’, used a vernacular expression to tell him to go masturbate, and threw him out. (3) Fischer now informs ‘Horace’ that they received the boy that morning ‘self-mutilated with a razor’ but not castrated because he ‘didn’t know what castrate meant’. The boy may die from loss of blood, in Fischer’s opinion because, ‘the good physician here, Doctor Wilcox, my colleague, was on call and he was unable to find this emergency listed in his book’.

In this event, the boy is a text that he and the doctors try to read but cannot because they employ inappropriate inter-texts and/or misinterpret signifiers. The boy interprets himself as impure by applying a Biblical inter-text that he has read too literally (perhaps 1 Corinthians 6: 13 – ‘The body is not meant for immorality, but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body’ or Matthew 5: 28 – ‘But I say to you that every one who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart’). In saying that Fischer does not understand, the boy insists on interpreting his body according to his own fundamentalist notions of a New Testament sign system, rather than according to less literal Christian interpretations of the New Testament or according to the contemporary secular sign system with which Fischer reads these same signifiers (perhaps a popular version of psychoanalytic theory that has filtered into American culture). In choosing a course of action, the boy again employs an inappropriate Biblical inter-text that he reads in a literal rather than figurative manner, most likely Matthew 18: 7-9, in which Jesus says: ‘. . . woe to the man by whom the temptation comes! And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away; it is better for you to enter life maimed or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.’ Similar metaphorical references to removing sinful parts are found in Matthew 5: 29-30 and Mark 9: 43-48. The boy’s final act of misreading demonstrates his ignorance not only of the way the body fits into Christian and secular sign systems, but also of the body as a biological text. He misinterprets his erection to mean that his penis is the body part causing his ‘awful lust,’ and therefore cuts off his penis instead of castrating himself. Since his desire was to cast off desire, his inability to read his body as a biological text leads to failure.

Wilcox, too, falls victim to semiotic confusion, although with less dire consequences to himself. He misreads the boy/text because he cannot find the symptoms in his book, which interprets physical signifiers rather than emotional ones. In addition, when he tells the boy to masturbate, he employs an inappropriate medical/biological sign system in assuming that mere sexual release will solve the boy’s problem. His cruelty to the boy also shows his inability to anticipate/interpret the possible alternatives the boy will take, and, once they are taken, his book does not cover the particular physical emergency. Moreover, although nominally a Christian, Wilcox fails to read the true spirit of Christianity, a fact made amply clear by his later implication that the boy’s act has somehow polluted Christmas.

Fischer’s reading is the most complex of all. He correctly reads the boy’s symptoms as signifying an emotional disturbance. However, as a Jew he is either unable or else feels unauthorized to offer a more liberal interpretation of the New Testament that will help the boy to read and act upon his physical desires in a responsible manner, or, perhaps, he does not fully realize the persuasive force that such a literal fundamentalist reading has for the boy. Therefore, all Fischer can do is employ his alternative secular

sign system in a futile effort to un-demonize the boy's symptoms. And so, the one character who genuinely cares about the boy is prevented, by his own cultural 'otherness,' from helping him.

Hemingway's treatment of Fischer's otherness – which the author approaches in his characteristically indirect fashion – is explored in the final two pages of *God Rest You and* points to the larger cultural issue in this sardonically titled Christmas tale. After Fischer implies that the boy may die due to Wilcox's incompetence, and Wilcox responds by telling his colleague to go to hell, Fischer disingenuously relents while staring down at his 'gambler's hands' that had, as the narrator silently observes, 'with his willingness to oblige and his lack of respect for Federal statutes, made him his trouble'. This odd observation by the narrator, later brought into the open when Fischer says that he had been too 'damned smart on the coast', introduces into the text Fischer's 'back story': why this able doctor finds himself buried in a relatively lowly position as a night ambulance surgeon in Kansas City. The famous Hemingwayesque 'thing left out' – omitted yet powerfully present – here as in *Hills Like White Elephants*, most likely has to do with abortions. (4)

Fischer's 'gambler's hands' have made him into a criminal in the legal system just as, analogously, his ethnicity and religion place him outside the social pale; and both his legal and cultural otherness have as their specific analogue his current professional marginalization. This indirectly glimpsed past event, which Hemingway has both the narrator and Fischer allude to lest the reader miss its significance, illuminates Fischer's response to the boy's mutilation, which has clearly reminded him of how he tried to prevent another kind of self-mutilation on the coast (i.e. the sorts of mutilations that frequently occurred when women attempted to self-abort or else found themselves at the mercy of incompetent abortionists). In other words, what has happened to the boy bothers Fischer for the obvious reasons why it would disturb any doctor, even Wilcox (who has been drinking when the narrator enters the hospital); he has been unable to help someone in need. But it bothers him for other reasons as well. Fischer identifies with the boy because both of them, in different ways, have fallen victim to a culture of fundamentalist Christianity. And all of this helps explain Fischer's hostility toward Wilcox, who signifies, for Fischer, the hostile cultural mainstream through whose eyes he is obliged continually to view himself as a result of the double-consciousness that he has developed for his own self-protection.

On a more abstract level, one is tempted to say that the boy's amputated penis is a telling symbol of Fischer's own situation. Just as the boy, if he lives, will continue to feel desire but possess no outlet for its release, so too will Fischer continue to desire to escape his cultural and professional marginalization, but with no chance of doing so. Nor will he have an outlet for helping many others, pregnant women in distress among them, in order to fulfil his sense of vocation. Metaphorically, Fischer is both the amputated

penis and the amputee; he has been cut off from the larger social body and he is a man who is unable to act on his desires. It is, of course, highly doubtful that Fischer himself perceives the amputated penis in these sorts of symbolic terms, but it is also clear that this incident resonates for him in a way that it does not for the other characters.

Although Fischer is aware of his own precariousness, his resentment is such that he can only feign, not feel indifference. His anger manifests itself in his constant derision of Wilcox's medical abilities. (He is clearly the source of the narrator's information on Wilcox's sorry record in medical school, information that, in the spirit of this text, may or may not be true.) He also cannot resist baiting Wilcox, but in the passive-aggressive manner of one who understands his own powerlessness. After blaming Wilcox's incompetence for the boy's critical condition (his comment about Wilcox not being able to find the emergency listed in his book), being told by Wilcox to go to hell, and disingenuously claiming that he meant no offense – 'I only meant it in the friendliest way, Doctor' – Fischer's animus takes another tack:

'Well, I wish you wouldn't ride me about it [Wilcox's medical guide],' Wilcox said. 'There isn't any need to ride me.'

'Ride you, Doctor, on the day, the very anniversary, of our Saviour's birth?'

'Our Saviour? Ain't you a Jew?' Doctor Wilcox said.

'So I am. So I am. It is always slipping my mind. I've never given it its proper importance. So good of you to remind me. Your Saviour. That's right. Your Saviour, undoubtedly your Saviour – and the ride for Palm Sunday.'

'You're too damned smart,' Doctor Wilcox said.

'An excellent diagnosis, Doctor. I was always too damned smart. Too damned smart on the coast certainly. Avoid it, Horace. You haven't much tendency but sometimes I see a gleam. But what a diagnosis – and without the book.'

'The hell with you,' Doctor Wilcox said.

Fischer's initial witticism is intended to equate Wilcox with an ass, but it backfires because he inadvertently reminds the butt of his joke that he, Wilcox, ultimately possesses the upper hand. Wilcox seizes the opportunity, in typically blunt fashion, by calling Fischer a Jew. Confronted by his marginalized state, which relegates him to a position inferior even to the incompetent Wilcox, (5) Fischer again retreats behind a mask of aggressive passivity in his exaggerated disingenuous claims that his ethnicity is so unimportant that it slips his mind. But he cannot resist repeating his joke, especially since Wilcox failed to catch it the first time around.

Yet, by returning to his 'ass' joke, Fischer fails to shift the verbal exchange to safer ground, however much he manages to infuriate the less than glib Wilcox, who replies that Fischer is too smart. Wilcox's two trademark responses ('The hell with you' and 'You're too damned smart'), each uttered twice in the story, have particular import for Fischer as expressions of cultural hostility to his ethnicity. The former implies that, as a

Jew, he has been damned to hell by the mainstream religious culture. The latter appeals to the stereotype of the ‘smart Jew’ (especially, to the mid-western mind, the smart Jew from the coast). Although Wilcox’s response may lack conscious purpose, other than to express anger, Fischer is aware of what socially constructed forces lie behind it. Without realizing it, Wilcox has accidentally read Fischer’s situation effectively. Fischer’s ‘ass’ joke may be smart, but what is the point of being smart in the wake of the boy’s tragedy? And what is the point of being smart in a world in which people are judged by their ethnicity and religion, where intelligence itself can carry negative connotations? Fischer is still smarting from his unhappy past and diminished present, all because he was, in a sense, too smart.

Recognizing the ineffectiveness of his witticism, his smartness, Fischer abandons his ‘ass’ joke and adopts a rhetorical strategy of acknowledging his own failings, of addressing Wilcox indirectly by speaking to the narrator, and of once again assailing Wilcox on the grounds of professional competence in his sarcastic comment on diagnosing without the book. In referring to the events on the coast, Fischer shifts the referent of being ‘smart’ from the hostile host culture’s anti-Semitic stereotype to a specific event, which gives it less blanket condemnatory power. By addressing Wilcox indirectly, he excludes his adversary from the verbal exchange and forces him to overhear, thus robbing him of the prerogatives of replying to direct address. And by bringing up Wilcox’s medical guide, he again puts Wilcox on the defensive by foregrounding Wilcox’s professional inadequacies rather than his own cultural marginalization.

When Wilcox replies, ‘The hell with you,’ he gives Fischer the opportunity to replay their first exchange, the one in which Fischer had responded to this imprecation by pretending that he meant no offense, and then making the ineffective ‘ass’ joke that gave Wilcox an opening to attack:

‘All in good time, Doctor,’ Doc Fischer said. ‘All in good time. If there is such a place I shall certainly visit it. I have even had a very small look into it. No more than a peek, really. I looked away almost at once. And do you know what the young man said, Horace, when the good Doctor here brought him in? He said ‘Oh, I asked you to do it. I asked you so many times to do it.’

This time, Fischer does not retreat behind a mask of disingenuous apology, but accepts Wilcox’s curse with patient reasoning. His putative agnosticism is both a proud claim of ethnicity – as a Jew he rejects the notion of an afterlife – and a calm assertion of superiority, since hell holds no particular terror for him as, ostensibly, it would for Wilcox. Hell, for Fischer, is what happens on earth and the misfortunes, of which the boy’s tragedy is the most recent, that he has had to endure. By invoking the words of the boy, who has also been victimized by the culture of Wilcox (whom Fischer insists on calling ‘the good physician’ and ‘the good doctor’ in a parodic allusion to St Luke),

Fischer goes beyond the specifics of Wilcox's incompetence and correctly signifies communal responsibility for the boy's tragedy, and communal guilt.

All of this is lost on Wilcox, who can only express the cultural code of anti-Semitism without really reading or understanding it; he follows Fischer's speech by adding, 'On Christmas Day, too', again revealing his inability to read the true spirit of Christianity. Fischer's chastening response – 'The significance of the particular day is not important' – is an admonition that the tragedy is communal and transcends such matters as specific faiths. But Wilcox can only seize the opportunity to invoke, once more, Fischer's otherness – 'Maybe not to you' – rejecting the holistic notion of a larger community that shares responsibility and guilt. Fischer may be too smart, but Wilcox is too dumb; his incompetence at medicine extends to all of his attempts to comprehend signifiers and employ sign systems. He can only express a distorted and bigoted version of Christianity that defines itself through exclusivity, not through any transcendent message of love and redemption. When Fischer comprehends this fully, when he is at last able to read Wilcox as a text and not just as an adversary, he realizes the impossibility of his situation – he is a Jew and cannot deconstruct for the Wilcoxes of the world this defining social construction – and he gives up by way of mock commentary: 'You hear him, Horace? . . . You hear him? Having discovered my vulnerable point, my Achilles tendon so to speak, the doctor pursues his advantage.' Wilcox's reply – 'You're too damned smart' – inadvertently underscores Fischer's point; the false sign system of racial chauvinism, of which anti-Semitism is a symptom, has the final word in the text, as it does in life. Once again, a Jew who has ridden an ass is sacrificed by a society in order to cover up for its own shortcomings. (6)

If *If God Rest You*, as I have attempted to show, is about semiotic confusion – the failure of signifiers to connect with proper signifieds, the faulty mastery of sign systems, the employment of inappropriate sign systems, and the triumph of a false sign system – then this answers the questions of those critics who have seen the story as scant and/or pointless. But the question of the narrator remains. What function does 'Horace' serve in the text and why is he nearly anonymous? Why did Hemingway, whose techniques of focalization and choices of perspective were invariably carefully selected and employed, choose to place this story in the hands of an 'undeveloped' narrator? Although Hemingway is clearly using one of his favorite story-construction techniques, the Conradian splitting of the reader's attention between the focalizer and the main character of the tale (as in 'Indian Camp' or 'In Another Country') – in fact, creating a double split, since the narrator views Fischer, who himself views the tormented boy – why is the focalizer/narrator in this story, as is not the case in the above examples, so obscure?

First, the narrator is not, as critics have complained, extraneous. His misreading of the French words on the racing car offers the first clue that the story is about semiotic

confusion. Second, the friendship between Doc Fischer and the narrator (it is significant that he is 'Doc' and Wilcox is 'Doctor') immediately guides the reader's sympathies toward Fischer and alerts the reader to the fact that Fischer will be the central subject of the story, the one who, in Jamesian terms, is most capable of feeling and comprehending the story's main action. Third, the narrator serves to link the foreshadowing scenes outside with the events that take place in the hospital (much as does the narrator of 'In Another Country'). Fourth, the narrator provides the story's central character, Fischer, with a receptive audience for his recounting of the boy's story and for his mockery of Wilcox (if Wilcox alone were present, it is doubtful that Fischer would other with these sorts of verbal exchanges, lacking an appreciative audience). Fifth, although we know little of the narrator, we know only slightly more about the other characters in this parable, and to add details to the narrator would obscure the few but significant details we are given about Fischer, Wilcox, and the boy. Lastly, the narrator's subsequent confusion about how to read the story's final action (Wilcox's anti-Semitic assault on Fischer and Fischer's passive-aggressive strategies of response) as well as the entire story that has unfolded before him – a confusion evident in his (not the author's) lack of a concluding statement of comprehension or sense-making – ends the story on the same note with which it began. The only difference is that the older narrator who is recounting the story is aware now, as Fischer was then, of the difficulties of producing accurate signification from the signifiers around him. This present awareness is not something that he draws attention to, just as he does not mention that he now knows what the French words meant; but the reader is in a position to grasp that the narrator has learned something, even if it is merely a humbling sense of human and societal limitations. Like the story in which it is textualized, this lesson, I should hasten to add, is hardly a slight one.

#### NOTES

(1) *There are occasional brief mentions of the story in Hemingway scholarship, and Paul Smith devotes a chapter to it in which he reconstructs the circumstances of its creation, recounts its publication history, and offers a shrewd critique of Hays, Julian Smith, and Monteiro. Nevertheless, despite a generally positive response to the story by Hemingway scholars, the deeper significances of God Rest You have failed to engage the critics.*

(2) *Most critics identify the narrator as a reporter, presumably because Hemingway was a reporter in Kansas City. But there is no textual evidence to support such an assumption. The conflation of the author with his narrators and focalisers has long been an occupational hazard in Hemingway studies.*

(3) *God Rest You was first published in 1933 as a limited, first-edition pamphlet. In that version, Wilcox tells the boy, 'Oh go and jack off.' When the story was reissued by Scribner's later that year, as part of the collection Men Without Women, a dash*



replaced the words 'jack off' against Hemingway's wishes, and this has been the case in all subsequent re-printings. See Paul Smith.

(4) The only other possibility that suggests itself is euthanasia, but that would have fallen under the criminal code and not the federal statutes. Also, had that been Fischer's crime, it is difficult to believe that he would have avoided jail and/or the loss of his medical license. Of course, abortion would have fallen under state rather than federal statutes, but it is quite possible that Hemingway was simply unaware of this.

(5) There is even a small hint that Fischer may literally be Wilcox's subordinate. Although Fischer is clearly concerned about the boy in their first meeting, when Wilcox orders his colleague to 'Get him out of here,' and the boy replies, 'Don't touch me. I'll get out', Fischer remains uncharacteristically silent.

(6) God Rest You may have been Hemingway's attempt to apologize for his treatment of Harold Loeb – writer, founding editor of *Broom*, and former member of Hemingway's circle in early 1920s Paris—who was deeply hurt by Hemingway's nasty and anti-Semitic portrayal of him as the hapless Robert Cohn in *The Sun Also Rises*. Like Cohn, Loeb was a Jew who had misread the social codes of his circle and was subsequently excluded from the group. Perhaps Hemingway – who often felt retrospective remorse about his truculent behavior, vicious comments, and violent feelings toward people close to him, and who occasionally expressed this guilt in self-accusatory fiction (e.g., *Cat in the Rain*, *A Canary for One*, *Fathers and Sons*) – was unconsciously atoning for his insensitivity toward his former friend in his portrayal of Wilcox and Fischer.