

**‘In Those Days The Distances Were All Very Different’
Alienation In Ernest Hemingway’s
‘God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen**

**Shannon Whitlock Levitzke
The University of Georgia**

CROWNING Ernest Hemingway’s bleak collection *Winner Take Nothing*, ‘God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen’ is the story of a tormented Kansas City youth who attempts to amputate his penis on Christmas day. Believing that his ‘awful lust’ is a ‘sin against our Lord and Saviour,’ the boy begs Drs. Fischer and Wilcox to castrate him, and when they refuse, crudely and erroneously performs the operation himself, with a razor. The story’s few contemporary reviewers focused on this admittedly shocking content, sensationalizing with their restrictive summaries the youth’s grotesque attempt to purify himself, but recent scholars have probed more deeply, exposing the story’s mythic substructure and unearthing its complex negotiation of religion, music, and ethical engagement.

Almost uniformly, though, readers have been perplexed by the opening, a one-paragraph description of Kansas City troubling for its narrative point-of-view and, more importantly, for its obscure geographical reference. Stating that ‘Kansas City was very like Constantinople’ at the time of the boy’s mutilation, the narrator, who appears to have no obvious function beyond the first paragraph, fails to justify this simile or explain how the two locales are comparable. In light of these apparent deficiencies, it is worth noting that Hemingway heavily revised this section of the text, grappling with the setting in his two earliest drafts. The substantive changes he made to the opening paragraphs reveal a striking dissimilarity between his early conceptions of Kansas City and those that were later incorporated into the text, indicating not only that Hemingway relied on the introduction to contextualize the youth’s actions, but also re-thought their cultural implications as the crafting of the story progressed. An increasing emphasis on alienation, evident in the Constantinople allusion and the reconfigurations of Kansas City’s landscape, suggests that the tragedy is not solely the result of adolescent insecurities or medical malfeasance, but is, rather, symptomatic of a more universal despair.

In October 1933, about a week before the publication of *Winner Take Nothing*, Hemingway wrote a letter to his mother-in-law, Mary Pfeiffer, accurately predicting the critical response to his work: ‘I don’t expect anybody to like the present book of stories and don’t think you have to make an effort to . . . I am trying to make, before I get through, a picture of the whole world — or as much of it as I have seen. Boiling it down always, rather than spreading it out thin. These stories are mostly about things and people that people won’t care about — or will actively dislike’. As anticipated, *Winner* was not well received on the whole, and ‘God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen,’ one of its most troubling stories, was the target of sharp criticism.

Among the handful of reviews offering more than a brief mention of the story, praise was slim and references pared down to meagre and sometimes misleading generalizations. In a November 1933 review for *Nation*, William Troy summed up ‘God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen’ as a story about a ‘sex-crazed adolescent who commits self-mutilation’. Three months later, an anonymous TLS reviewer characterized it as a ‘really terrible story in which two doctors describe a case of self-mutilation to a friend’. These reviews exemplify the standard response to what Earl Rovit has called one of the ‘bitterest [stories] in the Hemingway canon’.

Hemingway arrived in Kansas City on 15 October 1917 to begin a brief stint as a cub reporter for the *Kansas City Star*. Covering Union Station and the Kansas City General Hospital for the *Star*, he quickly familiarized himself with the area, doubtless cataloguing details that he would later incorporate into short stories including ‘God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen’ and ‘A Pursuit Race,’ both set in Kansas City. Despite this early stay, however, Hemingway almost certainly did not conceive the plot of ‘God Rest You’ before his 1931 return to Kansas City for his son Gregory’s birth. While there, the author befriended Dr Logan Clendening, a syndicated medical columnist whose ‘daily mailbag was crammed with instances of human woe’. Hemingway drew from a small batch of letters to Clendening while composing ‘One Reader Writes’ and ‘God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen,’ and probably based the latter on a piece of correspondence ‘from a youth in West Englewood, New Jersey, who had spent many years worrying about the problem of sexual desire’. The manuscripts show little reworking of the story’s events, so Hemingway seems to have solidified the plot before drafting ‘God Rest You,’ a process that Paul Smith suggests took place during summer 1932.

Before ‘God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen’ was finally published in 1933, it underwent extensive revisions directed almost entirely at the introduction. In fact, the Kansas City depicted in the Winner Take Nothing story bears little resemblance to the one Hemingway initially sketched. As Steve Paul has observed, ‘In some ways, we see more of Kansas City in those three previously unpublished [before Paul’s article] paragraphs than we ever have in Hemingway.’ The second draft of the story, worth quoting at length here, provides a snapshot of the city as Hemingway might have seen it as a young reporter:

In those days Kansas City was a strange and wonderful place and, later, The New Union Station was a wonderful building (above this scratched-out line he placed four words) the finest in America.

You came to the Union Station from the Fifteenth Street Police Station across a long viaduct that later was the Galata Bridge 3 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 (racks) 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

There were lunch wagons too off the viaduct lit up at night and warm inside but the warmest places and the best to be in were the saloons and as you crossed the viaduct trains passed underneath and you would see ahead a cloud of smoke and steam puffing up on each side of the viaduct as an engine passed. The new Union Station was built all of marble inside and high and vaulted in different corners were drug stores and restaurants and a book store and the waiting room was back out of sight and what was in sight was great space with an information bureau in the center with a roll of white paper and an instrument that did automatic writing in purple ink. (qtd. in Paul) 4

These rough paragraphs reflect a lively, populous Kansas City containing both beauty and humanity. This is a city where people live, work, and travel. More significantly, though, it is a city where people engage one another. While the only specific humans mentioned are the ‘proprietors,’ references to the police station, pawnshops, ticket agencies, lunch wagons, drug stores, and restaurants suggest a vigorous and active citizenry, interacting as it goes about the daily business of living life.

The published story, however, omits these references, leaving readers with a much darker picture: snow falls, ‘dirt [blows] off the hills,’ smoke covers the streets, and ‘early dark’ assails the city as the narrator walks to the hospital. The automobile, represented by a single, static ‘racing motor car finished entirely in silver’ and displayed in an ‘automobile dealer’s show window’ replaces communal transportation — the moving trains ‘puffing up’ smoke as they pass beneath the viaduct. A single, general reference to the ‘buildings . . . of the town’ replaces the early description of Union Station, the ‘finest’ building in America, with its marble ceiling and various shops. The published story portrays a cold and barren place, not the Kansas City that nurtures beauty and human connections in the early sketches. Other noteworthy changes to the scene-setting occur as well. In the first rough draft, the narrator says that the streets of Kansas City ‘have died to nourish the new skyscrapers’ (qtd. in Paul). Hemingway repeated this image in a later version, writing but then crossing out a phrase about the rise of the skyscrapers. These references, part of the narrator’s recollections of an older Kansas City, suggest that the now-dead streets were livelier at the time of the youth’s self-mutilation. In the later manuscripts, however, Hemingway completely excised these reminders of a more animated town, replacing them with a more sombre picture.

These revisions have important implications. To begin with, they suggest the need to portray the city as an unwelcoming, almost joyless place, where the boy’s tragic self-mutilation is odd — newsworthy even — but not incompatible with the larger environment. The changes also broaden the scope of the story, making Kansas City more generic and representative of urban life in America as a whole. The Woolf Brothers Saloon (never mentioned by name in the earliest drafts) remains in the published story, but emphasizes alienation — the proprietors serve a free holiday dinner to those without home or family, including the narrator. Hemingway removed the names of other establishments that might mark the city’s specific identity.

Thus, the overall trend of the revisions, towards making Kansas City more generic and less specific, makes the narrator's opening assertion that 'Kansas City was a lot like Constantinople' more credible. Despite the fact that '[i]n those days the distances were all very different' and despite the physical remoteness of Constantinople, the two cities are not so far apart, are not so very different after all. The narrator's conspicuous insistence that '[n]o one believes this; but it is true' speaks to the strength of the comparison.

While even the earliest versions of 'God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen' establish the centrality of the puzzling Constantinople reference, Hemingway's conception of Constantinople as a benchmark for understanding Kansas City evolves in significant ways. Constantinople appears briefly in the story's earliest draft (a one-page fragment of the introduction), demonstrating that the reference was a necessary piece of the story from the outset. The allusion is more evocative, though, in the second manuscript, where Hemingway refers to the Pera Palace and the Galata Bridge, both famous landmarks recalling Constantinople's rich history and culture. When Nancy Comley and Robert Scholes discuss the pairing of Constantinople and Kansas City in 'God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen,' they draw on the Eastern city's storied past'. For them, Kansas City represents 'something quintessentially American, something provincial, something historically insignificant,' while Constantinople represents 'the exotic, the cultured, the significant.' Comley and Scholes conclude that 'the point of these similes must lie in their very strangeness, in what we might call their perversity'.

Yet Constantinople's exoticism is notably diminished when the drafts of 'God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen' are juxtaposed with the published story. The draft in JFK Folder 427 connects the Pera Palace to Union Station, emphasizing their similar physical structures and, with a reference to Constantinople as the stopping point for the famous Orient Express, endowing the newly built Union Station with historical significance by comparison. When Hemingway excised references to the Pera Palace and Galata Bridge during the revision process, he made the Constantinople reference more obscure and left readers with a bare geographical comparison. Only the dry, dusty hills — which appear in every draft — remain in the final version to provide an explicit correlation between Kansas City and Constantinople.

Hemingway understood how readily readers would associate Constantinople with exoticism. While covering the Greco-Turkish War for the *Toronto Star* in 1922, he wrote a number of articles undermining stereotypical portrayals of the city. In one such piece, 'Constantinople, Dirty White, Not Glistening and Sinister,' he writes that while based on popular representations, the city 'ought to have been white and glistening and sinister'; in reality, it 'doesn't look like the movies. It does not look like the pictures, or the paintings, or anything'. The article captures the city's diversity but also its confusion, congestion, and physical deterioration, noting that the houses are 'dry as tinder, the color of old weather-beaten fence rails' and that the minarets 'look like dirty, white candles sticking up for no apparent reason'. Hemingway also calls attention to the uninviting landscape, the 'dusty, rubbish-strewn hillside of Pera' that later manifests

itself in Kansas City. Further exposing how Western literature has romanticized ‘Old Constan,’ the writer acknowledges that ‘there may be a happy medium between the East of Pierre Loti’s stories and the East of everyday life,’ but quickly tempers the concession, wryly noting that ‘it could only be found by a man who always looked with his eyes half-shut, didn’t care what he ate, and was immune to the bites of insects’.

Calling Kansas City a ‘strange and wonderful place’ in early drafts, Hemingway later removed the marker, perhaps too suggestive of Constantinople’s picturesque foreignness for his purposes. Instead, he established the comparison via the prosaic, using only dusty hills to unite the two locales. The barren physical topography, then, signifies the emotional climate, not only uniting cities as distant as Kansas City and Constantinople, but suggesting that the impoverishment of modernity’s urban waste land underlies the tragedy in ‘God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen.’ The story’s waste land imagery has received a great deal of attention, but few scholars have yet to articulate the setting’s importance or note how Hemingway’s changes in manuscript reveal the allusion’s ultimate role in ‘God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen.’

In early and influential assessments of the story, Peter Hays argues that it is a retelling of the Fisher King myth. Although there are various versions of the legend, many include a sexually wounded king whose injuries are reflected in the infertility of his land. Hays notes that Hemingway probably read about the legend in Jessie Weston’s *From Ritual To Romance*, and goes on to comment that in ‘God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen,’ ‘the roles in the tale of a fisher king wounded in the genitals, and healed by a young, pure knight, have been divided and reassigned: it is the young innocent who is wounded, and it is the fis(c)her who is the healer’. Even if Hemingway had not read Weston’s book, he would have been familiar with the use of the Fisher King myth in T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, a poem introduced to him by Ezra Pound. Hays, who employs Frederick Hoffman’s phrase ‘landscape as assailant’ to help clarify the characters’ interactions, explains the function of the waste land in Hemingway’s story: ‘The prevailing landscape . . . suggests fear and loss as consequences of the disappearance of a vitally confident and passionately felt trust Persons do not recognize each other, since they are not aware of the commitment necessary to spiritual relationship’. Thus the physical barrenness of the hills mirrors the emotional desolation of the characters.

In his *Reader’s Guide to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, Paul Smith extends the Fisher King comparison, implying that the youth’s decision to mutilate himself is a result of the land’s sterility rather than its cause, as is the case with the mythic king. He notes, ‘Doc Fischer’s suggestion that . . . The Young Doctor’s Friend And Guide might also be cross-indexed in reverse from treatments to symptoms . . . is not an offhand remark’. Smith’s claim links the story’s setting with its action, suggesting an alternative cause for the youth’s guilt and the doctors’ ineptness. To understand why the boy wants to be castrated, the doctors need to know what ails him. While the boy does attempt to explain, the doctors fail to comprehend the seriousness and intensity of his underlying motivation. Furthermore, they fail to treat him successfully. As the on-call doctor, Wilcox is responsible for his patient’s probable death. Wilson’s medical

incompetence is indicated not only by the early revelation that he has ‘no business being a physician’, but also by his reliance on an indexed reference book, *The Young Doctor’s Friend And Guide*, that understandably contains no description of the boy’s malady. Wilson’s [sic] desire for a cross-indexed manual giving primacy to treatments also indicates his unwillingness to identify the core problems of his patients; suggesting that the youth ‘go and — [masturbate],’ he endeavors to alleviate physical discomfort but disregards the deeper ailment.

The manuscripts show Hemingway toying with various explanations for the boy’s anxiety and abandoning references that would trivialize or explain away his suffering. The story clearly articulates Doctor Wilcox’s deficiencies, but Doc Fischer, the more adept physician, is also unable to save the boy, suggesting that ‘*God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen*’ is not just a tale of professional ineptitude. The fundamental failure of both doctors is their inability to communicate with their patient. When the ‘excited and frightened’ boy comes in to the hospital asking to be castrated, the doctors refuse his request — Fischer with sympathy and Wilcox with disdain. In an early version of the story, Hemingway’s description of the boy included a phrase about his eyes, hinting that he might be psychologically unstable rather than merely scared. The line was later crossed out, and, as a result, the youth appears to be misguided in his piety and devotion to purity, not understanding that his condition isn’t sinful. Moreover, he lacks a paradigm that would reconcile his physical state with his religious beliefs. In another rough, deleted passage, Hemingway included a short line that sheds light on the narrator’s identity and offers an alternative context for the events. Doc Fischer tells Horace that the boy will be an additional adolescent to include in his writing. The line offers a potential occupation for the narrator, indicating that he is a writer, and perhaps a reporter. It also minimizes the boy’s individual suffering, as Fischer implies that the anxiety is merely a by-product of puberty. Hemingway’s decision to excise both lines shifts the frame of reference and suggests that the boy’s state is culturally induced, that his trauma reflects widespread emotional sterility.

The boy speaks directly to the doctors and thus is not physically isolated from them, but the spatial proximity between the parties belies the emotional distance. Doc Fischer tries to explain to the youth that his ‘awful lust’ is ‘a natural thing . . . the way [he] [is] supposed to be,’ but the boy responds by saying, ‘Oh, you don’t understand’ and then tells him, ‘No. I won’t listen. You can’t make me listen’. Later, when Doctor Wilcox crudely tells him, ‘Oh, go and—,’ the boy replies, ‘When you talk like that I don’t hear you’. Each party, powerless to ‘hear,’ ‘listen’ to, and ‘understand’ the other, is tragically hindered by linguistic failure. Offering an extensive discussion of this failure, or what he calls ‘semiotic confusion,’ Robert Lamb asserts, ‘Hemingway’s odd tale is all about the problems of reading a text and the consequences of misreading. Specifically, it is about . . . the failure of signifiers to point to the appropriate signifieds . . . and about characters who employ the wrong inter-texts or misapply sign systems in their efforts to interpret signifiers’. Misunderstandings are present throughout the entire story: the narrator misreads ‘*Dans Argent*,’ the youth misinterprets both his sexuality and the tenets of

Christianity, and Doc Fischer cannot communicate with Doctor Wilcox or the boy because of his 'cultural 'otherness'.

Rather than attribute the problem to the failings of individual characters, Hemingway shows that such detachment was not uncommon. The story begins with a definitive declaration about the nature of space ('In those days the distances were all very different') and grammatically connects it to specific geographic locales ('Kansas City was very like Constantinople'), suggesting, on one level, a physical connection between the cities mentioned. The mileage between Kansas City and Constantinople has obviously remained unchanged from the time of the boy's tragedy, though, so the opening line also functions metaphorically as a commentary on the state of humanity, on the way people communicated with one another when the events took place. This emphasis on interaction has led Peter Hays to argue that in 'God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen' the 'setting is not important; the human relations are'. The two need not be exclusive of one another, however. While the Kansas City-Constantinople pairing is admittedly unusual, it also encompasses East and West, youth and historicity. Given Hemingway's reworking of the introduction and knowledge of both places, it is likely that the cities serve as points of reference that indicate the distressing extent of modern despondency.

Establishing the initial comparison between the two cities, the narrator furthers the motif of isolation through his position as an observer. When he comes into the hospital reception room after his free turkey at Woolf's, Doc Fischer asks if he can call him 'Horace,' and the use of a nickname blurs his identity, distancing him from the other characters and from the action. His unclear role has been the subject of much speculation, with some scholars arguing that the first-person narration is a structural weakness. Finding fault with the 'nested narrative structure' of the piece, for example, George Monteiro claims that the second remove added by the narrator creates a sense of disconnection. Importantly, though, it is the very distance created by the narrator that ultimately unites the opening description with the subsequent action.

Horace's primary function is to recount the episode of the youth, and the narrative layers stylistically convey the emotional disconnect between the characters. Unable to save the youth, the doctors are reduced to discussing him and 'Horace' to writing about him. And as a mere spectator who does not act, the narrator perpetuates the isolation experienced by the other characters. Although physically present when the boy originally comes in asking to be castrated, he does not participate in the discussion or attempt to persuade the boy to abandon his pursuit of religious purity. Instead, he functions as a 'witness' (P. Smith 250), simply stating, 'I had been there when he came in' (CSS 299). As such, he is both literally present and figuratively absent, able to see but not to act.

And because he tells the story with retrospective distance, he can reflect on it unobtrusively, exposing his own naïveté. '[The story] is not only a retelling of an earlier event, but a recollection in which the narrator in the present sees the event in a much different light than he did in his earlier years,' says Rick Moss, challenging most of the dominant criticism by affirming the centrality of the narrator. The narrator's

mistranslation of ‘Dans Argent’ and Fischer’s teasing assertion that Horace does not have ‘much tendency’ towards intelligence reveal that he was, at the time of the story’s actions, a bit ignorant. That he tells the story and draws attention to his inadequacies at all, though, suggests that he realizes his previous failures and that he takes some responsibility for his inaction.

The narrator’s distance is echoed in the plot as well. It is noteworthy that the event most central to the work occurs when the other characters are absent. Although the boy comes to the hospital asking for a castration and returns after he has mutilated himself, neither the doctors nor the narrator is present when he amputates his penis. Furthermore, the narrator hears about the episode from Doc Fischer and Doctor Wilcox, shifting the focus of the story from the boy to the physicians and their attempts to reconcile their professional remissness. Wilcox is only vaguely troubled by the case and is more concerned about his colleague ‘rid[ing]’ him than he is about the boy’s probable death.

Fischer, on the other hand, the doctor who treated the youth with sympathy and compassion, is clearly troubled by the occurrence. He jokes with ‘Horace’ and tells him, ‘We’ve had an extremely interesting case,’ but by the end of the story he seems both serious and thoughtful. After Wilcox’s taunt, ‘The hell with you,’ he responds, ‘All in good time, Doctor. 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’ (CSS 301). While his ‘small look’ into hell could signify any number of troubling experiences, he qualifies his statement by an immediate reference to the boy, suggesting that his ‘peek’ was occasioned by the guilt he felt after the boy’s reminder that he ‘asked [him] so many times to do it.’ Furthermore, the three sentences in which Fischer sees and reacts to hell are missing from all manuscript versions. The addition of the passage increases the severity of the event, turning it from a mere topic of reception room conversation into a tragic failure of humanity.

While Doc Fischer’s personal ‘hell’ is a manifestation of his professional guilt, the youth’s torment is both physical and epistemological. Like Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, the boy feels ‘trapped biologically’, unable to stop ‘the way [he] get[s],’ but he is also terrified by the implications of his condition. Fischer tells him, ‘It’s a natural thing’ and reminds him that ‘what [he] complain[s] of is no sinful state but the means of consummating a sacrament’. Despite Fischer’s various explanations, the boy simply cannot accept his inability to curb the changes taking place within his body. His lack of control and the apparent irony of the title and date seem to lend themselves to a straightforward naturalistic reading. As the two doctors recall the events, Doctor Wilcox, disturbed by the marring of a holiday, even laments the boy’s choice to mutilate himself on Christmas day. Doc Fischer, however, concludes, ‘The significance of the particular day is not important’. Wilcox sees this as an opportunity to insult Fischer on the basis of his Judaism, but his affront is clearly just a reflection of his personal immaturity and

feelings of professional inadequacy. Fischer's revelation, then, gives weight to an otherwise ironic event, suggesting that it is of great import.

Wirt Williams argues that the hospital in 'God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen' is a 'metaphor for the world' and that Hemingway, in this piece, 'views the human situation as virtually hopeless'. And the story does offer a bleak view, if we are to accept the geographical scaffolding, of the entire world, or 'as much of it as [Hemingway] ha[d] seen' while traveling between Kansas City and Constantinople. That the boy's panic is rooted in a misguided moralism is less significant than the revelation that the characters are all walled off by private barriers that prohibit true communication, incapacitated by the great 'distances' that leave them isolated from one another. The story ends with a boy who will probably die of blood loss, two guilt-ridden doctors, and a narrator who could do nothing more than stand idly by. Although each doctor has a different handicap — Wilcox lacks basic sympathy and Fischer professional persuasiveness — they are both unsuccessful in the end, failing as doctors treating a patient and as men trying to relate. The ultimate tragedy in 'God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen,' then, is not only that the doctors cannot save the youth from self-mutilation, but, more broadly, that the fundamental impossibility of human connection leaves one human unable to save another.