

Review of Winner Take Nothing

by John Chamberlain,
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ERNEST HEMINGWAY is beginning to make Frank E. Campbell look pretty unenterprising in a mortuary way. This latest collection of Hemingway short stories, *Winner Take Nothing* is one of the grisliest books ever published. Statistical method, applied to the subject matter, would result in a table very like that kept in the recording room of Bellevue Hospital. Death, dishonored old age, fatty degeneration of the personality, disease of the more loathsome variety, injury such as that sustained by the hero of *The Sun Also Rises*, perversion, shell shock, poisonous complacency and vanity, lust, fever, *A Natural History of the Dead*, and a common or garden variety of shooting among gamblers — such are the subjects of Mr. Hemingway's undertaker's garland.

The stories, as a result, ring hollow. But this need not necessarily be urged against Hemingway, for he believes, as much as T. S. Eliot ever did, that we are the hollow men, we are the stuffed men, leaning together with headpieces filled with straw. If Hemingway couldn't make a story ring hollow, he would fail aesthetically. The effect he aims at is emptiness, and to say he achieves emptiness is to praise his artistry.

Three of the stories in the collection are up to the Hemingway standard. *Wine of Wyoming*, one of those seemingly artless, wandering narratives of men in search of something to drink, turns on its ability to evoke the sentiment of contrition in the reader as a parallel to similar sentiments in the story. *Fathers and Sons*, in which Nick Adams of *In Our Time* learns about sex, but not from what his father blunderingly tells him, belongs in a gallery with *Hills Like White Elephants*, *The Killers*, the story of the Caporetto retreat from *A Farewell to Arms*, and the fishing trip in *The Sun Also Rises*. *After the Storm*, which is more imaginative than anything Hemingway has hitherto written, is another story that should be three-starred by Edward J. O'Brien, when he reads the short-story honor roll for the year. The remaining bits, however, are, by and large, trivial exercises in *Grand Guignol*. *God Rest You Merry, Gentlemen* is a popular Pullman car joke dressed up with grisly fittings; *The Sea Change* tries to repeat, rather inadequately, the oblique rendition of the unmentionable which made *Hills Like White Elephants* so memorable a story.

The trouble with some of the pieces here is that emotions are not sufficiently personalized. The old man and the waiter in *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* remain mysteries to the reader, who is supposed to feel both with and for two people whom he doesn't know. It can't be done. *The Mother of a Queen*, which makes vanity and stupidity

as horrifying as Lardner was in the habit of doing, is something better. But generally, we see Hemingway straining as he has not strained before to wring some genuine emotion out of his material.

He has evidently reached a point in writing where the sterile, the hollow, the desiccated emotions of the post-war generation cannot make him feel disgusted; he is simply weary of contemplation. He feels sorry for himself, but he has lost something of the old urgency which impelled him to tell the world about it in good prose.

Why should Hemingway, who delights in fishing, in hunting, in horseplay, and who is filled with what used to be called animal spirits, be continually attracted by the mortuary parlor when he lifts up his pen? The preoccupation with death comes as a natural heritage from war experiences, but the danger of repeating the patterns is that they may become a mannerism — Hemingway may go on writing of death, death, death, but no longer in a way that quickens your sympathies. It is one thing to say that in the midst of life we are in death, which is a frightening notion, but to say, lugubriously, we are not even in the midst of life, but have been dead from the beginning, is not so effective. To point a value, one must have a sense of scale; only comparison with life can make death a shivery thing.

One wishes that Hemingway would indulge his Tristram Shandy side more, one wishes he would cultivate the old lady who wandered so amusingly into Death in the Afternoon, one wishes he would open up with the burlesque, such as he amuses himself with when a member of the National Geographic Society meets an American in Switzerland who looks as if he might read The National Geographic Magazine. For Hemingway can play all the notes when he wishes.