

The contentious emendation of Hemingway's A Clean, Well-lighted place

**by Ken Ryan, The Hemingway
Review, Sept 1998.**

THE combination of purposeful ambiguity with an apparent inconsistency in Hemingway's original story, published in 1933, makes it impossible positively to determine which waiter speaks a line of untagged dialogue. In 1965, Charles Scribner Jr. emended the text to remove what was perceived as a typographical error. An extensive review of the literature surrounding the controversy leads to the following conclusions:

- 1) no typographical error was made*
- 2) the inconsistency is critical to the effect sought by Hemingway*
- 3) Hemingway was proud of the original*
- 4) the emendation is not valid and should be retracted.*

FOR NEARLY FORTY years, a war of words has been waged, the battlefield being a short passage of dialogue in Hemingway's *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* originally published in Scribner's Magazine in March 1933 and reprinted in the short story collection *Winner Take Nothing* in October of the same year. The battle has revolved around an apparent inconsistency in dialogue with relation to the identities of the story's two now-famous waiters. The discrepancy seemed to go unnoticed for nearly twenty-six years, until February 1959, when articles by F. P. Kroeger and William Colburn sparked the conflict. In 1965, Charles Scribner Jr. emended the original text, thus 'correcting' the inconsistency, but with the unfortunate side-effect of interchanging the identities of the two waiters. The current situation, as noted by Warren Bennett, is 'that there are two different stories by Ernest Hemingway, both titled *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*' ('Characterization' 95).

With the 1965 emendation, the skirmish quickly escalated, pitting those who supported the emendation against those who favored the original text. The battle has been long, and both sides seem to have exhausted their ammunition. Perhaps, then, this temporary lull marks an appropriate opportunity for a review of the history of this conflict, with an eye towards its resolution. In the years since the emendation, a wealth of information and analysis has come to light, and literary responsibility demands that the entire body of evidence be tested against what I consider to be the central question of the controversy: Is the emendation valid?

It is important to recognize from the outset that two conditions must exist before any author's work can rightfully be considered for emendation:

- 1) substantial evidence that an error has in fact been made
- 2) a substantial lack of evidence that what is perceived as an error is actually a deliberate device of the artist.

Thus, the existence of a 'perceived error' is not in and of itself justification for emendation; there is yet another consideration. If the suspected error occurred as an integral part of the act of creation (as opposed to an error of reproduction), one must examine the possibility that it might actually contribute to the art, at least in the eye of the artist. After all, what is creativity if not experimentation? Experimentation implies trial and error, and the line between error and creative genius is not always clearly defined. In other words, a mistake is not always a bad thing; it is possible to have 'happy accidents' which actually contribute to the overall effect that the artist is seeking. The artist, while recognizing that his work may be perceived as flawed, sometimes prefers the 'imperfection.'

With these guidelines, and in this period of relative calm, let us turn now to the story and its rich history of interpretation. The story takes place in a Spanish cafe. It is late at night, and two waiters are talking. The subject of their conversation is the only other person in the cafe, an old man who comes in frequently and stays late, drinking. The reader does not know which waiter speaks first.

'Last week he tried to commit suicide,' one waiter said.

'Why?'

'He was in despair.'

'What about?'

'Nothing.'

'How do you know it was nothing?'

'He has plenty of money.' (1)

A soldier and a girl walk by, evoking a second conversation between the two waiters, again with no indication as to who begins.

'The guard will pick him [the soldier] up,' one waiter said.

'What does it matter if he gets what he's after?'

'He had better get off the street now. The guard will get him.'

'They went by five minutes ago.'

The old man, who is deaf, signals for another brandy. The younger waiter, clearly perturbed that the old man won't leave, marches out to the old man's table, and hastily serves him his brandy. 'You should have killed yourself last week' he says to the deaf man. The younger waiter returns to his colleague. Even here, critics have disagreed over the question of who begins the conversation:

'He's drunk now,' he said.

'He's drunk every night.'
'What did he want to kill himself for?'
'How should I know?'
'How did he do it?'
'He hung himself with a rope.'
'Who cut him down?'
'His niece.'
'Why did they do it?'
'Fear for his soul.'
'How much money has he got?'
'He's got plenty.'
'He must be eighty years old.'
'Anyway I should say he was eighty.'
'I wish he would go home. I never get to bed before three
o'clock. What kind of hour is that to go to bed?'
'He stays up because he likes it.'
'He's lonely. I'm not lonely. I have a wife waiting in bed for
me.'
'He had a wife once too.'
'A wife would be no good to him now.'
'You can't tell. He might be better with a wife.'
'His niece looks after him.'
'I know. You said she cut him down.'

At this point in the dialogue, the reader may have noticed a problem in assigning the speeches to the different waiters. With regard to this problem, Colburn notes:

One line ... we can assign to the younger waiter, because of information which is brought out later: 'He's lonely. I'm not lonely. I have a wife waiting in bed for me.' Using this line as a reference point, we can trace backwards in the story the alternate lines and discover that it is ... the older waiter who knows the details [about the suicide attempt].... Counting forward in the story from our reference line, however, we find [that it is the younger waiter who knows].... Obviously there is an inconsistency here.(241)

Colburn's analysis does seem to indicate the possible existence of an error, one which Kroeger went so far as to label 'an insoluble problem'. Before making such a judgment, we are obliged to examine the possibility that the 'perceived error' is actually a deliberate device of the artist. When the author is unable to speak for himself, it seems the assumption must be that the text reads correctly, with the onus of proof resting on those who would rewrite his story. Working from this assumption, Otto Reinert finds:

[The inconsistency] arises from Hemingway's violation of one of the unwritten rules of the art of presenting dialogue visually. The rule is that a new, indented line implies a new speaker. It is a useful rule, but it is not sacrosanct. (417-8)

Reinert suggests that Hemingway breaks this rule:

[I]t is the young waiter who speaks both 'He's drunk now' (because the pronoun reference demands it) and the next speech, 'He's drunk every night.' And ... it is the old waiter who speaks both 'He must be eighty years old' and 'Anyway I should say he was eighty.' (418)

Reinert justifies the original text, saying 'Hemingway may have violated the convention in order to suggest a reflective pause' (418) between consecutive speeches by the same speaker. In defense of Reinert's position, David Kerner notes that genuine dialogue is not

'uniformly metronomic ... [like] a tennis match'

and that Hemingway breaks convention not once, but twice, as if to 'confirm the deliberateness of the first instance'. He also offers a possible explanation for why Hemingway might have turned to such an innovation:

If a speaker pauses between consecutive speeches, why must the novelist throw in a dead expository phrase, breaking the rhythm of the dialogue, merely because [the reader has been conditioned] not to expect a certain perfectly natural irregularity?

Kerner's reasoning is particularly applicable to a writer such as Hemingway, who once told his son Gregory, 'Never use more words than you have to'.

Scott MacDonald justifies Hemingway's possible departure from the conventional with the following observation:

Literary conventions, after all, are not laws. They are assessments of what authors have done, not of what they must do. It is true that most authors have consistently indented during passages of dialogue in order to indicate that a new speaker is speaking, but this is far from saying either that all writers always adhere to this way of doing things, or that all writers should always adhere to this way of doing things.

Reinert's reading, combined with Kerner's and MacDonald's defenses, casts grave doubt upon the validity of the emendation, because it supports the hypothesis that the apparent inconsistency results from Hemingway's intentional violation of standard dialogue conventions.

Edward Stone notes that it is possible to view the dialogue as a translation from Spanish to English. Regarding the possibility that

'He must be eighty years old'

and

'Anyway I should say he was eighty'

are both spoken by the same speaker, he maintains

'this would be truer of conversational idiom in English than in Spanish'.

But, as Kerner points out,

'even if the younger waiter does say "Anyway. I should say he was eighty", he still has the next line, "I wish he would go home," so the principle of Reinert's solution still holds'.

Returning to the English language, notice the similarity of the lines in question: 'He's drunk now' and 'He's drunk every night'; 'He must be eighty years old' and 'Anyway I should say he was eighty.' In each instance, the second utterance is little more than a reconfirmation of the first. It is also true that all four lines in question can be completely removed from the story without the loss of any important information; we already know that the man is old, and that he is frequently drunk. The similarity of the four lines in question, the fact that they provide the reader with no important new information, and the fact that they occur in a story that is consummately distilled and concise all reinforce the idea that Hemingway chose these lines carefully.

Joseph F. Gabriel, in 1961, offered a different opinion regarding the inconsistency in the long dialogue. His explanation is founded in his observations concerning the ambiguities in the first two dialogues. On first reading the first dialogue, it is impossible to know the respective identities of the two waiters. As Kerner observes

'the deliberateness of the uninformative "one waiter said" is undeniable'.

The second dialogue is equally unrevealing, using the same uninformative tag line.

A closer study of these first two dialogues reveals far deeper ambiguities. Gabriel reminds us that we have good reason to believe that the waiters may be different types:

'We are of two different kinds, the older waiter said.'

From here, Gabriel postulates:

Since the story is about ... nada ... the reasonable inference is that the two waiters differ most ... in their divergent

interpretations of this word and its English equivalent, nothing.

Gabriel then demonstrates how, in the first dialogue, the reference to 'nothing' can be logically attributed to either or both of the waiters. He utilizes the following glosses:

Y.W. 'Last week he tried to commit suicide,' one waiter said.

O.W. 'Why?'

Y.W. 'He was in despair.'

O.W. 'What about?'

Y.W. 'Nothing.' (For no reason)

O.W. 'How do you know it was nothing?'

Y.W. 'He has plenty of money.' (With plenty of money, there is no reason for despair

and:

O.W. 'Last week he tried to commit suicide,' one waiter said.

Y.W. 'Why?'

O.W. 'He was in despair.'

Y.W. 'What about?'

O.W. 'Nothing.' (Chaos, meaninglessness)

Y.W. 'How do you know it was nothing?' (Misunderstanding the older waiter's use of 'Nothing.')

O.W. 'He has plenty of money.' (Inasmuch as he has plenty of money, his despair, does not derive from any merely material want.) (Gabriel 542)

Next, Gabriel shows how the second dialogue can also be attributed to either or both of the waiters. The line 'What does it matter if he gets what he's after,' Gabriel points out, can be attributed to the younger waiter because he is preoccupied with sex; with equal validity, it can be attributed to the older waiter because

from the perspective of despair, what can it matter that the soldier might be picked up by the guard. In a virtually meaningless world ... one makes one's little meaningful moments as one can.

Further evidence points toward a purposeful blending of the identities of the two waiters. As David Lodge observes, 'the last sentence of the first paragraph presents the two waiters as a single unit of consciousness'. Noting that Hemingway

does not give any of the characters a name, William B. Bache finds that this absence implies

that these characters should be regarded not so much as identifiable persons but as symbols . . . The three characters are actually parts of an implied progression from youth through middle age to old age.

Furthermore, the line ‘An hour is the same’ can be seen as uniting all three characters into one, if it is viewed as an assertion of man’s mortal nature. An hour is the same insofar as it brings each of them one hour closer to death.

With regard to the actualization of multiple meaning, Gabriel concludes:

Clearly it can only be accounted for as part of a deliberate plan, a function of the author’s mode of execution.

Gabriel’s analysis presents strong evidence pointing toward the apparent likelihood that Hemingway’s ambiguity in the first two dialogues is indeed carefully crafted, and therefore purposeful. This observation gives rise to Gabriel’s comments with regard to the inconsistency in the long dialogue:

[I]f the word “Nothing” when spoken in the first exchange is to be a complex term ... it becomes necessary that the speaker not be identified ... [which] in turn demands that the waiter who knows [about the suicide] not be identified.... Indeed, it is only through this inconsistency that the ambiguity of the first exchange can be maintained.

The inconsistency in the third dialogue does create an undeniable sense of unreliable narration. This troubling quality is heightened by Hemingway’s use of the plural pronoun ‘they’ to refer to the singular nouns ‘the guard’ and ‘his niece’ as well as by his use of the period to punctuate the question ‘How should I know.’ Gabriel explains such unreliability, noting how the dialogue in the story operates on two levels ...

in the conventional manner, discursively ... and ... symbolically, actually representing through its construction the kind of world ... [the older waiter] experiences.... [creating for the reader] a world where meaning is no longer guaranteed by omniscience.(545)

The third dialogue is not vexed by the same uninformative ‘one waiter said’ that plagues the first two dialogues; rather, this dialogue is introduced with the marginally more revealing ‘he said.’ Regarding this pronoun, John V. Hagopian notes

All of the critics recognize, with varying degrees of distress, that the speaker must be the young waiter who has returned from serving the old man

At least one critic disagrees: Bennett observes that ‘he’ can justifiably be attributed to either the younger waiter or ‘his colleague’.

Hagopian attacks Reinert’s analysis, rejecting the notion of anti-metronomic dialogue:

[T]his solution to the problem would be valid only if (1) by the law of parsimony, it is the simplest solution; (2) an examination of the rest of Hemingway’s fiction shows that the author often, or even occasionally, employed such a technique; and (3) the context supported ... the notion that the author violates standard conventions without explicit hints or clues to the reader. On none of these grounds can one support Reinert’s interpretation. (141)

Hagopian extends his quarrel to Gabriel, proclaiming that the reading collapses when ‘submitted to the [same] tests of validity’. On the basis of an interpretation by Martin Dolch, Hagopian suggests the dialogue be ‘tidied up’ with the following emendation

Original dialogue:

Y.W. ‘His niece looks after him.’

O.W. ‘I know. You said she cut him down.’

Hagopian’s suggested dialogue:

Y.W. ‘His niece looks after him. You said she cut him down.’

O.W. ‘I know.’

Hagopian then glosses the three dialogues, seeming to proceed from the assumption that the burden is on the text to match his interpretation. When it doesn’t, he makes the above change, claiming that the text suffers from an ‘obvious typographical error’. Just how Hagopian knows that any typographic error was made, let alone the specific one he proposes to correct, is a mystery. He gives no holograph evidence, no typescript evidence, indeed no evidence at all. Referring to Hagopian’s method of inquiry, Bennett calls it

not critical analysis ... [but rather] theological persuasion.

Astoundingly, [Charles] Scribner agreed with Hagopian and implemented his suggestion. In reaching his decision, Scribner later admitted that he relied not on manuscript evidence but rather on the advice of critics and ‘common sense’.

Regarding his criticism of Reinert and Gabriel, even by his own criteria, Hagopian’s argument fails. Let us first consider Reinert’s proposition of anti-metronomic dialogue and Hagopian’s assertion that ‘it is a technique employed nowhere else in the Hemingway canon’. With at least thirty recorded examples of Hemingway’s use of anti-metronomic dialogue, George H. Thomson notes

In the face of such evidence, Hagopian's position is demolished.

With regard to Hagopian's mandate that the solution be as simple as possible, Charles May writes

... it seems to me that assuming Hemingway has violated a typographical convention ... is 'simpler' than presuming the rather drastic measure of rewriting the text of a work

while Paul Smith simply notes that

Hagopian's principle does confuse a simpler editorial solution with a simpler interpretation.

As to Hagopian's claim that the context of the story doesn't support Reinert's or Gabriel's interpretations, consider the essential effect of Hagopian's emendation: it positively gives the information of the attempted suicide to the older waiter. Some agree with this interpretation, while many others do not. May, for example, writes:

[I]f it is indeed the young waiter who tells the old waiter about the suicide attempt, then the story is about the old waiter ... [who] arrives at his nada prayer at the end as a result of the story. This makes for a simpler, yet more pertinent reading ... than if we assume the old waiter has already realized and articulated the significance of nada.... It is the difference between seeing the story as an excuse for a pre-conceived philosophic concept or as a dramatic realization of such a concept.

Carlos Baker explicitly acknowledges that it is the young waiter who knows of the attempted suicide. In addition, in what is an implicit reference to the young waiter's use of the word 'nothing' in the first dialogue, Baker maintains that the story is about

the development ... of the young waiter's mere nothing into the old waiter's Something — a Something called Nothing which is so huge, terrible, overbearing, inevitable and omnipresent that once experienced it can never be forgotten.

In 1971, Lodge agreed with Hagopian and Scribner, declaring the implausibility of Hemingway's having deliberately violated a well-established typographical convention in a way for which there is no precedent elsewhere in his work ... for a purpose that could have been easily accomplished by other means.

As to Lodge's contention that Hemingway never uses anti-metronomic dialogue in his other works, we have already seen this to be patently incorrect. As to his assertion that the same purpose could have been easily accomplished by other

means, because he fails to elaborate what ‘other means’ he has in mind, I am at a loss to comment on whether or not they would achieve the ‘same purpose’.

Lodge does bring to the battlefield a perceptive distinction between the ambiguities in the first two dialogues and the logical inconsistency in the third. He notes how such an inconsistency

can only have the effect in narrative of radically undermining the authority of either the narrator or the characters or both.

Lodge says

There are no other equivalent inconsistencies which would confirm the radical unreliability of the narrator. He ignores or does not notice the use of the plural pronoun ‘they’ for the singular nouns ‘the guard’ and ‘his niece,’ or the unusual punctuation of the question ‘How should I know’.

While it is true that this last line functions in the story as an answer to a question, it is merely an example of a question being answered with a question. The more conventional punctuation in such a situation would be a question mark. Later, in the same article, Lodge seems to contradict his own argument when he notices that the narrator’s description in the second sentence

is interesting for the way in which its appearance of logical explanation dissolves under scrutiny.

Lodge is correct in his observation that the ambiguity of the first two dialogues and the inconsistency of the third are two different beasts. He goes one step too far, however, by suggesting that they cannot possibly be related. He states that it is not

legitimate to assimilate the inconsistency ... into the concept of literary ambiguity

but he offers no convincing argument to counter Gabriel’s suggestion that Hemingway desires that ‘the reader, in his attempt to impose order upon the chaos of inconsistency and ambiguity, [be] stripped of his dependence on the objective’.

The next major event in the conflict came when Thomson offered an alternative reading, one that made logical sense of the third dialogue without violating any conventions. Thomson’s reading proceeds from the prevalent assumption that the younger waiter opens the third dialogue. He further assumes that the dialogue proceeds metronomically with the younger waiter then speaking the line ‘Who cut him down?’

Thomson notes that the younger waiter

has no knowledge of the suicide attempt ... yet he unthinkingly assumes [emphasis added] that the old man was rescued by being cut down [emphasis added]’. The older waiter lets this cliché pass, but when the younger waiter jumps to another

conclusion, ‘His niece looks after him’ — something he cannot know ... the older waiter quietly chastises [him].... ‘I know [which is more than you do]. You said she cut him down’.

With regard to the validity of the emendation, Thomson’s reading presents an interesting wrinkle, casting doubt upon the very existence of an inconsistency, much less an error. This doubt, combined with the doubt raised by Reinert’s and Gabriel’s alternative explanations (and the failure of Hagopian and Lodge to counter them), constitutes a very strong case against the emendation. Before we reach a conclusion, however, we must return to the issue that Hagopian raised but failed to substantiate: that a typographical error resulted in the seemingly illogical inconsistency in the waiters’ dialogue.

When Hagopian proclaimed the existence of a typographical error, he was voicing pure speculation, since there was no manuscript or typescript evidence available for inspection. Now there are both. Hemingway’s original pencil manuscript was discovered in 1975, and, in 1987, College and Research Libraries News announced that the University of Delaware had acquired ‘the only recorded copies’ of a draft of *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*.

Much has been written about these two documents. Hans-Joachim Kann, Warren Bennett, Paul Smith, and David Kerner have studied the texts and each other’s arguments in excruciating detail. In the light of their work, one thing becomes evident: because the suspected error appears in the original holograph, the Delaware typescript, the magazine story, and the short story collections, and because Hemingway did not see fit to change it in his lifetime, the inconsistency in the long dialogue must be considered Hemingway’s responsibility, not the responsibility of some errant typist or typesetter.

Much of the debate concerning the manuscript has focused on speculation concerning at what point and for what reason Hemingway wrote the sentence, ‘You said she cut him down’. I submit that no matter when he wrote it, and regardless of his reason, the more important point is that the inconsistency appears on the original holograph. This does not prove that no error was made; it merely classifies the ‘possible error’ by type: an error of production, not an error of reproduction. There is no reason to believe that a typographical error is responsible for the inconsistency. Because the inconsistency in the long dialogue occurred as an integral part of the creative process, we are obliged to consider whether or not Hemingway may have perceived the ‘error’ as actually strengthening the story. Hemingway himself once gave the inconsistency his direct and open endorsement. In 1956, Judson Jerome wrote to Hemingway specifically inquiring about the inconsistency. Hemingway responded that he had just reread the story, and it ‘continued to make perfect sense to him’. It can also be argued that Hemingway gave his tacit approval of the original text when he said, ‘I guess the story that tops them all for leave-out was ‘*A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*.’ I left everything out of that one.... May be my favorite story’.

The debate since the 1965 emendation has revolved around which of the two waiters knows about the old man's attempted suicide. The assumption has been that a 'truthful' answer to this question would determine the validity of the emendation. Ironically, one result of this scholarly debate has been to suggest that the question of which waiter knows about the suicide attempt may be irrelevant to the emendation's validity; for if Hemingway perceived the inconsistency in the third dialogue as improving the story, then there can be no justification for 'correcting' it.

Those still intent on seeing *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* published in its emended form have a responsibility to consider whether what they perceive as an error — and others perceive as creative genius — may have been seen by Hemingway as contributing to the story's effect. Given the weight of the evidence, it seems entirely plausible that even if Hemingway did lose track 'of which waiter is saying what', as Sheridan Baker suggests, he may well have considered the confusing dialogue to be a 'happy accident.' Hemingway may have liked the way the confusion clouds the identities of the two waiters, despite the difficulty it presents to the reader.

After twenty-six years of silence, six years of skirmishing, an emendation, and more than thirty years of sometimes vicious critical warfare, we find ourselves in an ironic position not unlike that of the older waiter — a man, as suggested by Robert Penn Warren

who hungers for the certainties and meaningfulness of a religious faith but who cannot find in his world a ground for that faith.

We find ourselves hungering for a certainty in Hemingway's text, but no such certainties are forthcoming. The inconsistencies and ambiguities of the story create within the reader a discomfort not unlike that which plagues the older waiter.

Whether by accident or design, whether skilfully or instinctively, Hemingway places the reader not only in the position occupied by the older waiter, but indeed by every thoughtful person. Clarence Darrow once said

I do not pretend to know where many ignorant men are sure — that is all that agnosticism means.

Just as no one can have certain knowledge of the existence or non-existence of God, neither can the reader of the original text of *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* know with certainty whether or not a new line of dialogue indicates a change in speakers; belief in either option represents an act of faith. The corruption of Hemingway's original text does more than simply impose a clarification of the identities of the two waiters; it serves to deprive all readers of the opportunity to decide for themselves what, if anything, they believe.