The Logic of Confusion in Hemingway's "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place"

JOSEPH F. GABRIEL

Recent criticism of Hemingway's much admired and frequently anthologized "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" has attempted to demonstrate that this story contains a damaging flaw. Indeed, two critics, F. P. Kroeger ("The Dialogue in 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,'" *College English*, Feb. 1959) and William E. Colburn ("Confusion in 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,'" *College English*, Feb. 1959), working independently of each other, appear to have arrived simultaneously at the same conclusion—that, to quote Professor Colburn, "The dialogue does not fit a logical pattern." Inasmuch as the story consists almost entirely of dialogue (principally a brief conversation between an older waiter and a younger waiter about an old man who recently attempted suicide and who is on this occasion the only customer in their care) this charge is a serious one—serious enough to warrant careful examination.

The difficulty presented by the story derives from the fact that in only a few instances does Hemingway identify the speaker. Throughout most of the dialogue the reader is faced with the task of inferring the speaker from the context. This initial difficulty is compounded, however,—turns into what Mr. Kroeger calls "an insoluble problem"—when the reader, proceeding on the natural assumption that he can assign each alternate line to one of the two waiters, attempts to trace out a consistent pattern in the dialogue. For when he works back and forth from lines which can be assigned with certainty, he finds himself involved in an apparently hopeless contradiction. The procedure and the contradiction which it makes manifest are succinctly outlined by Professor Colburn:

> 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 younger waiter who is asking about the old man's attempt at suicide and it is the older waiter who knows the details as to method and who prevented him. Counting forward in the story from our reference line, however, we find the older waiter saying, " 'I know. You said she cut him down.' " Obviously there is an inconsistency here.

In short, as Mr. Kroeger asserts, it would appear that "Hemingway, or someone, has been careless enough about the story so that at one time one main speaker seems to have information about the old man's suicide attempt which the other does not have, and at another time the situation is reversed."

This inconsistency would of itself be only a minor flaw were it not for the fact that it throws some doubt upon the first exchange, a part of the dialogue which has been seen by all previous commentators as an important key to the story because it helps establish the characterological and philosophic differences between the two waiters:

An instructor at Central Michigan University, Joseph Gabriel is completing his doctoral dissertation at the University of Pennsylvania.

"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."

Though, as Professor Colburn observes, Robert Penn Warren ("Introduction," *A Farewell to Arms*, Scribner's, 1949, p. xv), Mark Schorer (*The Story*, p. 427), Robert Heilman (*Modern Short Stories*, p. 391), and Bernard Oldsey ("Hemingway's Old Men," *Modern Fiction Studies*, Aug., 1955, p. 32) all carefully avoid explicitly assigning the lines in this initial passage, their comments make inescapable the inference that it is the younger waiter who, because he is a materialist, because he does not understand what Mr. Warren so aptly calls "the despair beyond plenty of money," must be given the word " 'Nothing' " here and that, therefore, it is he to whom one must attribute the knowledge of the old man and his suicide attempt. Inasmuch as Carlos Baker (*Hemingway: The Writer as Artist*, p. 124) and Otto Reinert ("Hemingway's Waiters Once More," *College English*, May, 1959), the two Hemingway critics who are specific in assigning the lines in the above passage, arrive at a similar reading, it is clear that these conclusions represent the prevailing interpretation of the initial dialogue.

It so happens that Professor Colburn is inclined to agree with the prevailing interpretation, Professor Kroeger is not. But the point upon which they concur —the burden of the argument presented in their papers—is that whatever the inclination of one's literary instincts in this matter, whatever the weight of critical opinion, the text does not literally support any consistent interpretation. Indeed, it is Professor Colburn's contention that this logical inconsistency in the dialogue calls into question the thematic unity of the story. For if, as part of the contradictory evidence would suggest, it is the older waiter who knows about the old man and his suicide attempt, then he would be the one to utter the word " 'Nothing' " in the first exchange, and thus he too would presumably believe that there is no reason for despair except the lack of money. But if this is the case, then both waiters are materialistic, the story no longer presents two clearly differentiated and contrasting characters, and we are faced, not only with an inconsistency in the dialogue, but an inconsistency in the whole fabric of meaning.

The case for confusion in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" appears to be a solid one, and I cannot agree with Professor Reinert, who attempts to refute the charge by arguing that Hemingway simply ignored the convention whereby each new indented line implies a new speaker. Nevertheless, my purpose in this paper is to take issue with the thesis elaborated by Messrs. Kroeger and Colburn. Not that I deny the logical inconsistency of the dialogue. I am quite willing to accept this as fact. I dissent, however, from the use to which Professors Kroeger and Colburn appear to put their discovery. Thus, my intention is to redeem the story; that is, to establish, through an alternative reading, the validity of the dialogue just as we have it. What specifically I contend is that there was no error made in the dialogue, either by Scribner's or Hemingway himself; that we have here one of the most artfully contrived pieces in the Hemingway canon; and that, in short, the inconsistency in the dialogue is deliberate, an integral part of the pattern of meaning actualized in the story.

Despite the uncertainties and inconsistencies of the dialogue, the critic is not totally adrift. We have reasonably good grounds for assuming that the younger waiter and the older waiter are substantially different types: " 'We are

of two different kinds,' the older waiter said"; and indeed, if one ignores temporarily those parts of the dialogue which are in dispute, he does find sufficient evidence among those lines which can be assigned with certainty to arrive at a clear differentiation of the two waiters. But wherein do these differences lie? Since the story is about the word *nada* (a point on which all the critics agree), the reasonable inference is that the two waiters differ most importantly with respect to this word; that is, that all concomitant characterological and philosophic differences are reflected in their divergent interpretations of this word and its English equivalent, *nothing*.

It is apparent, as Carlos Baker has indicated (*Hemingway*, p. 124), that the older waiter uses the word *nada* in a special sense. For him the term represents, not a mere negativity, the absence of something, but a real constituent of the universe—the essence of life and of each life: "It was all a nothing and a man was nothing too." The most dramatic representation of this nihilism is to be found in the older waiter's ironic parody of the Lord's Prayer: "Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name." He prays; but though, on one level, his prayer is a nostalgic glance at a pattern of belief, obviously Catholicism, which once gave meaning to the whole of life, on another level, it is a denial that any system is capable of conferring order upon the chaos. And in the place of the absent God and the missing Mary, he enthrones the Nothingness which he sees all around him: "Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee."

Yet it is evident that despite the older waiter's perception of chaos, of the impossibility of adhering any longer to a value system which made belief possible, he continues to betray a religious consciousness. The prayer which he utters, though involving an inversion of religious values, is nevertheless a prayer. We recognize it as a spiritual act. And though, paradoxically, what he apotheosizes is nothingness, it is obvious that his philosophy continues thereby to include the idea of God. Indeed, though the older waiter is acutely conscious of the impossibility of belief, he cannot free himself from the tendency to think religiously. Thus, his dilemma is the most acute. A religious man who finds no system acceptable, he must bear at the same time his intense spiritual hunger and the realization of the impossibility of its fulfillment. For no reconciliation is possible. The crack in his universe is beyond repair; the gap between chaos and order, nothingness and meaning, is infinite. And it is this infinite distance which is the measure of his despair.

It is a tribute to the heroic quality of the older waiter's aspiration that he does not settle for the philosophy of nothingness to which he is driven. A religious man and therefore, by implication, one who seeks for patterns, he constructs out of the infinite *nada* something which is not *nada*. This accomplishment is symbolized in the dominant visual image in the story: the radical contrast between the minute spot of light represented by the cafe and the infinite surrounding darkness outside. The intensity of the older waiter's commitment to the cafe—" 'I am one of those who like to stay late at the cafe. . . . With all those who need a light for the night.' "—is to be traced to the fact that for him it is the single patch of meaning in the void of *nada*. Its qualities of cleanliness, order, and light stand in direct contrast to the attributes which so overwhelmingly prevail in the universe outside. But that the only order and meaning he can find is offered by a clean, well-lighted cafe is an indication of the extremity to which he is driven, as well as of the crisis of our age. Nor can we miss the irony and the pathos

inherent in so extremely limited a faith. This is brought home to us the moment we compare it with the conventional religious belief in an omniscient and omnipotent God. To the question everywhere implied in the text: In what do you believe? the older waiter can reply only with the virtually absurd, "I believe in a clean, well-lighted place."

The younger waiter has none of the heroic qualities of the older waiter and nothing of his spiritual aspiration. A thoroughgoing materialist, he offers us the image of man reduced, man stripped of every spiritual dimension. Only the physical satisfactions interest him. His vision extends only as far as his wife waiting at home in bed for him. And he knows nothing of that despair with which the older waiter is consumed. He is, as he admits, " 'all confidence,' " because he sees the universe, not as an objective lack, but as a plenitude. It is equal to his desire. Indeed, it is only money which is lacking, money with which to purchase those purely naturalistic satisfactions, which are all that he can conceive. Only money stands between him and complete fulfillment.

It will be seen that the value system embraced by the younger waiter entails an alternate concept of *nada*. To him *nada* can only signify a personal physical privation. *Nothing* refers simply to the absence of those objects capable of providing material satisfactions. And by extension he applies the term to all behavior which does not grant the sufficiency of things. Any behavior of this sort strikes him as motiveless, lacking in sufficient reason, and, therefore, grounded in nothing. But, thus, to him, the despair of a man who has plenty of money would appear absurd, and he would use the word " 'Nothing' " to signify that absurdity—that is, to mean "for no reason." Hence the prevailing interpretation of the first exchange:

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.)

This is an eminently reasonable inference. Yet, if we are to understand the story, it is vital that we see that it is not only the only hypothesis which is consistent with the facts. There are, as our analysis has attempted to make clear, at least two concepts of *nada* in the story, the *nada* which each waiter sees. And the truth is that as soon as we are able to make a precise differentiation between the two, we realize that it is equally reasonable to assign the word in question to the older waiter, except that he would use the word " 'Nothing' " to refer, not, as the younger waiter does, to any senselessness or absurdity in the old man's behavior, but to that which is his own obsessional concern, the chaos, the lack of objective meaning in the universe. And thus we arrive at an alternate reading of the initial dialogue:

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.)

It might appear that the foregoing analysis only serves to substantiate the charge of confusion in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." On the contrary, however, as I shall try to demonstrate, it helps to establish the rationale of the

story. The position taken here is that the several concepts of nothing inhere simultaneously in the word "nothing" as it is spoken in the first exchange and that therefore it is attributable to either waiter and to both waiters. Hence my operating assumption is not that this initial dialogue is in any way defective, but that it is part of an experiment in multiple meaning and that Hemingway, in making use of the range of semantic possibilities inherent in the words *nada* and *nothing*, has, in the manner of Henry James, constructed a perfect ambiguity. This is the reason I can agree neither with the proponents of the prevailing interpretation (Baker, Reinert, Colburn, etc.) nor with Professor Kroeger when he says:

> Since the story is about the word *nada*, chaos, it does not seem reasonable that in the first dialogue the young waiter would say that the old man tried to commit suicide because he was in despair. The old waiter would naturally say that he tried to commit suicide about nothing because the old waiter understands that even with money, the old man can be in despair with his knowledge that all is *nada*.

For the point is that it is not a matter of either/or; the dialogue should be read on both levels. All merely one-valued interpretations of its meaning are simplistic and therefore inadequate.

These contentions are confirmed in the analysis of other elements in the story. It is generally assumed that, in the dialogue following the one just discussed, it is the older waiter who expresses fear that the soldier and the girl will be caught (" 'He had better get off the street. The guard will get him. They went by five minutes ago.' ") and it is the younger waiter who says, " 'What does it matter if he gets what he's after.' " Thus Professor Colburn says, "No doubt most readers will agree that the older waiter should be the one . . . to be concerned that the soldier with the streetwalker will get into trouble. And most readers probably will agree that the younger waiter should be the one with the completely materialistic attitude toward life." Certainly this accords with what we already know about the two waiters. We have witnessed the importance which the younger waiter attaches to sex. Furthermore, knowing as we do the older waiter's solicitude for the old man, it seems likely that this sympathetic quality manifests itself here, too, in his concern for the welfare of the soldier.

But though this hypothesis is quite reasonable, it is equally logical to read the dialogue in the opposite fashion, attributing the " 'What does it matter if he gets what he's after' " speech to the older waiter. The older waiter is the one who, conscious of the infinite gap between chaos and order, is in the grip of despair. And 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 takes one's desperate chances, because, in fact, all chances are desperate, and one makes one's little meaningful moments as one can. It is only from the perspective of the younger waiter that such prudent considerations as are expressed in the above quotation can have any weight. Indeed, it is the materialist who is always finally the practical man, the one who is constantly absorbed in the calculus of probability, balancing possible success against possible failure. Prudence, practicality, calculation: these are the pragmatic virtues, the virtues that bring material success; and these are precisely the qualities we attribute to the younger waiter. In short, again there are two equally good ways of reading the dialogue; again we have a dialogue constructed on the pattern of ambiguity.

At this point two observations are in order: that the story contains something less than fifteen hundred words and that, within this brief compass, it is possible to

cite, in addition to the inconsistency of the third dialogue and the ambivalence of the first and second dialogues, still other instances of "confusion." Thus, to produce one final example, when near the conclusion of the story the older waiter speculates upon the strange fear that has gripped him ("What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well"), the language is such that no simple logical reduction is possible. The passage is really a dialectic of contradictory implications: that what is feared is not feared; that what is not known, because known only negatively (in terms of what it is not), is known only too well; and that what is a nothing is a something, and a something of such importance that it consumes his every thought and gives decisive shape to his existence. The answer is plain enough. The actualization of multiple meaning is so pervasive an element here that obviously no attempt to explain it as the result of a single lapse in artistic control or of an error in the process of publication can possibly be successful. Clearly it can only be accounted for as part of a deliberate plan, a function of the author's mode of execution. And, indeed, careful attention to the structure of the story demonstrates the truth of a general observation about Hemingway's method made by Professor Carlos Baker—that below his purely naturalistic surfaces, Hemingway undertakes a conscious exploitation of the possibilities inherent in the symbolistic technique and makes major use of the specific devices of this style: ambiguity, irony, symbol, and paradox (*Hemingway*, pp. 289-292).

But it might be said that ambiguity is one thing, inconsistency quite another. Why should Hemingway deliberately create an inconsistency? We know that the story is an exploration of the word *nada*, that it develops by playing upon the several meanings inherent in this word and its English equivalent. But if the word "'Nothing'" when spoken in the first exchange is to be a complex term, conveying the full range of meanings and especially those contradictory ones we have already discussed, then it becomes necessary that its speaker not be identified. But this in turn demands that the waiter who knows about the old man and his suicide attempt not be identified, or at least that the reader not be able to make any consistent identification; conclusive identification would be inimical to the creation of multiple meaning. Thus such inconsistency as we find in the long dialogue is the necessary means toward a higher consistency. Indeed, it is only through this inconsistency that the ambiguity of the first exchange can be maintained.

But if it is clear enough that the inconsistency in the long dialogue guarantees the ambiguity of the initial exchange, wherein lies the ultimate necessity or justification for either ambiguity or inconsistency? This question might be answered in part by attempting to show that ambiguity is one of the fundamental norms of the symbolist, that is to say, the modern aesthetic. But this procedure would appear to be less expedient and less relevant than another. We can assign a more immediate reason for those plurisignificant structures which we find here. Though, as even a casual reading of the story demonstrates, Hemingway employs the words *nada* and *nothing* as if he were weaving a musical motif, and though he is interested in all the variations on his theme; nevertheless, it is the meaning which the older waiter attaches to these words which is the more important. Clearly it is his problem which is central, and the story is fundamentally about the kind of world which he sees. But though it has more than once been observed that the older waiter's world is ruled by chaos and that, therefore, its major constituents

are uncertainty, inconsistency, confusion, and ambiguity, it has not been observed that the constituents of his world are precisely the constituents of the dialogue—that, in short, there is a structural similarity between this world and the dialogue.

Indeed, it is the principal thesis of this paper that the dialogue in the story operates on two levels: it operates in the conventional manner, discursively conveying the essential features of the older waiter's vision; and it operates symbolically, actually representing through its construction the kind of world he experiences. Not only does the dialogue tell of the *nada* of existence, but it re-creates it by raising for the reader the very problems which confront the older waiter and the old man as they apprehend their world. The experience of the reader duplicates their experience, for the reader, too, is called upon to bear uncertainty, inconsistency, confusion, and ambiguity, as he attempts to fashion some pattern of meaning out of the chaos of the dialogue. Thus, the confusion in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" is neither a mistake nor an accident. It is deliberate. Hemingway has brilliantly actualized in the dialogue the very conditions which obtain in the world as it is perceived by modern man —a world where meaning is no longer guaranteed by omniscience.

It might be noted in passing that just as the structure of the dialogue symbolically represents the theme of chaos, so the structure of Hemingway's language symbolically portrays the older waiter's limited faith. Thus, the denial of rhetoric implies the impossibility of the elaborate system-making of traditional metaphysics. And the restricted diction, the uncomplicated grammatical patterns actualize on the purely linguistic level the values of cleanliness, order, and light to which the older waiter clings amid the massive chaos.

But we need to carry our analysis one step further if we are to understand fully the necessity behind Hemingway's method of construction here. We have already observed that the story is about the word *nada*, that it emerges out of the contrast of two wholly different concepts of nothing. What we need to recognize, however, is that this preoccupation with the *nada* of existence establishes a crucial connection between the story and the most important philosophic movement of our time—existentialism. Indeed, it can be said that this story is about the word *nada* in the same way that the phenomenological ontologies of Heidegger and Sartre are about the concept of nothingness. It is no accident, for example, that Sartre's major work bears the title *Being and Nothingness*. But it is only with the realization that "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" is itself an existentialist document that we are likely to understand the way in which it actualizes still another concept of nothing, one which has been the special concern of existentialist literature. And, in turn, it is only when we possess this knowledge that we can understand the total relationship between theme and structure in the story.

The humanistic wing of the existentialist movement has really been conducting an examination of the consequences of living in a world where, as Nietzsche put it, "God is dead" (See Walter Kaufmann, "The Death of God and the Revaluation," *Nietzsche*, pp. 80-100). This is the subject to which Sartre addresses himself (See Hazel E. Barnes, "Translator's Introduction," *Being and Nothingness*, p. xxix), and this, as we have seen, is the condition in which the older waiter and the old man find themselves. But if Nietzsche's assertion truly defines the modern predicament, then it follows that man alone now has the responsibility for actualizing being and creating values. As the existentialists have realized, however, this total freedom which thus devolves upon man is

ambivalent. It is felt as a burden, a dreadful freedom. Man, in the words of Sartre, is "condemned to be free" (*Being and Nothingness*, p. 439). For inasmuch as man's existence is no longer grounded in the noncontingent, that is, in God, man is stripped entirely of his dependence upon the objective, and neither an objective guarantee of meaning nor an objective justification for behavior is possible. Man is thus faced with the necessity for assuming the contingency of all of his projects and even of his own existence. But to perceive every being essentially as pure contingency is to assert, not only that every being is suspended in nothingness —in the chaos which the older waiter discerns—but that nothingness is itself contained in every being. In short, the metaphysics which the older waiter embraces, his metaphysics of chaos, entails an ontology, that is, says something about the very nature of being. And what is said has been succinctly summed up by Sartre himself: "Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being—like a worm." (*Being and Nothingness*, p. 21).

Here we have a clue to that mysterious fear or dread which the older waiter feels is not fear or dread in the usual sense: "What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well." This dread comes not from the fear of any particular object, but is rather the consequence of the older waiter's perception, however dim, of pure contingency, of that nothingness which in part defines human nature. It is thus an existential anguish which the older waiter feels, a psychological concomitant of the existential ontology. To quote Hazel Barnes, the translator of *Being and Nothingness*, this anguish is "The reflective apprehension of the Self as freedom, the realization that nothingness slips in between my Self and my Past and Future so that nothing guarantees the validity of the values I choose. Fear is of something in the world, anguish is anguish before myself (as in Kierkegaard)" (*Being and Nothingness*, p. 628). Thus, in addition to the two major meanings already assigned to the word *nada* in the story, there is a third: nothingness is synonymous with man's radical subjectivity, with his total freedom. Indeed, man may be defined as that being who is forced to renounce the idea of finding a guarantee for his existence outside of himself. (See Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman, p. 14).

It is this third meaning of nothingness which partially escapes the older waiter. He is, after all, no philosopher. And he does not fully understand what he feels. In the end he wonders whether it isn't only insomnia from which he suffers. Nevertheless, despite the limitations in the older waiter's understanding of his predicament, Hemingway manages with consummate skill to incorporate this third meaning of nothing into the texture of the story. As its creator, the God behind its world, he refuses to guarantee the meanings which it actualizes. The dialogue is so constructed that the reader, in his attempt to impose order upon the chaos of inconsistency and ambiguity, is stripped of his dependence upon the objective. In so far as the dialogue fails to conform to the norms of logic, the reader himself is, like the older waiter, plunged into the existentialist predicament and made to confront the absurd. In his attempt to make sense out of the story, the reader too is forced to assume contingency, is forced to deal with values and meanings which cannot be given objective justification, and is even brought finally to a recognition of his own radical subjectivity.