

**Hemingway'in 'Temiz ve Aydınlık bir Yer' Öyküsünde Hiçlik ve Saçma Düşüncesi**

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**Özet**

Varoluşçuluk Heidegger, Kirkegaard, Nietzsche ve Sartre gibi filozofların yazılarında kök salmış felsefi bir akımdır. Varoluşçu düşünce filozoflar kadar edebiyat insanlarını da etkisi altına almıştır. Hemingway de yazılarında varoluşçuluğun önemli bir etkisi olan yazarlardan birisidir. Çok takdir görmüş romanlarına ek olarak kısa öykü alanında da ün yapmıştır ve adı genellikle 'savaş' kavramı ile ilişkilendirilir. Hemingway'in 'Temiz ve Aydınlık Bir Yer' başlıklı öyküsünde neredeyse bir olay örgüsü yok gibidir. Bu çalışma, adı geçen öyküyü varoluşçu düşünce çerçevesinde hiçlik ve saçma düşüncesine atıfta bulunarak incelemeyi hedeflemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Varoluşçuluk, Hemingway, Hiçlik, Saçma, Kısa Öykü.

**The Ideas of Nothingness and Absurdity in Hemingway's "A Clean Well-Lighted Place"**

**Abstract**

Existentialism is a philosophical movement rooted in the writings of Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Sartre. As well as the philosophers, existential thought was a point of interest for many men of letters. Hemingway is one of those novelists on whose writings existentialism had a great impact. In addition to his highly appreciated novels, Hemingway made a reputation in writing short stories and his name is usually associated with war. "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" is a short story written by Hemingway in which there is hardly a plot. The present study aims to investigate and interpret this short story with reference to existentialism, nihilism and the idea of the absurd.

**Keywords:** Existentialism, Hemingway, Nothingness, Absurd, Short Fiction.

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## INTRODUCTION

“A Clean Well-Lighted Place” is a short story written by Ernest Hemingway, an American novelist and short story writer participated in the First World War as an ambulance driver in Italy. The present paper explores the concept of nothingness as dealt with in this story. The concept of nothingness is closely related to existentialism, a philosophical system originated in the nineteenth century by Kierkegaard and Nietzsche and developed by Sartre and Camus. Camus does not include himself among existentialists but proposes a related concept, namely the absurd. The study will reveal how Hemingway’s short fiction is relevant to existentialism, absurdism and nihilism.

His experience of war is reflected in his well-known writings such as “A Farewell to Arms” or “For Whom the Bell Tolls”. Yet, in the beginning of the latter novel, Hemingway quotes from John Donne’s poem, arguing that it does not matter for whom the bells toll because it is the death of anyone. As “no man is an island”, every man is a part of a whole, which we can presumably call universe. Any man’s death is a reason for grief because he/she and I are involved in mankind. Hemingway touches the problem of death and connects it to the idea of fraternity.

### **Hemingway, War, Trauma and an Absurd Life**

Hemingway is a writer who is mostly associated with war. He volunteered to experience the reality of war and was appointed as an ambulance driver during the First World War in Europe, mostly in Italy. He was a war writer whose narration is deeply rooted in his own experiences of bloody, dreadful and shameful faces of the war. The end of the war was not a relief but a beginning of a new life with his new self. The new self was psychologically different from his self before the war. The influence of war can be observed in his choice of themes, settings and characters in his novels and stories.

Hemingway became a leading member of “Lost Generation”, a group of American people who experienced the devastating effects of the Great War. They are “lost” in the sense that they have suffered intellectual disillusionment and dislocation because of war traumas. His characters usually suffer from great depression and they search for a meaning in life. Some of his characters face the absurdity of life and revolt against it while some others are driven to nihilism (Özen Baykent, 2018, 2).

The impact of war and of the lives of the veterans can be detected in his writings and his philosophy is linked to existentialism, absurdity and nihilism. As a man who has encountered the reality of war, he also suffered from war trauma. When he intended to live in United States as he did before the war, felt that he did not belong to that place. His old friends and family seemed to be strangers to him and he avoided close contact with them. Just like most of the veterans of the age, he was searching for a place to belong to and for people who understand him.

The dark and miserable sides of the war lead man to question the way the world is, the desires of men and the meaning of life. One who starts questioning, will soon realize that there is no inherent meaning in life. Contrarily, life is absurd and

meaningless. Hemingway confronted the absurdity of life by writing and by creating characters and scenes that reflect the nothingness in life.

### **Existentialism, Nihilism and the Absurdity**

Hemingway's philosophy is rooted in the movement of existentialism and the idea of nihilism. The discussion about concept of nothingness as an ontological category dates back to Plato who regards the term as something that contrasts with form (as non-being). In *Being and Time* and in *What is Metaphysics*, Heidegger argues suggests that the nothing appears in Angst. "... it is prior to, and forms the basis of, logical negation." (Inwood, 2005) Human existence arises from nothing and peaks in the nothingness of death. The meaning of human existence will arise in the anticipation of death. Trying to find what man is, one can start with the supposition that man exists. *Dasein* is Heidegger's choice of a concept he uses to refer to human beings and to Being. *Dasein* is thrown into this world. It cannot choose to be born. Heidegger says in *Being and Time*: "The essence of *Dasein* lies in its existence." It is *Dasein*'s being in this world. "*Dasein*'s way of Being involves the capacity to choose among several possible ways of Being. (...) Heidegger marks this special character by saying that *Dasein* alone of all entities, exists or has existence." (Inwood, 2019, 25) *Dasein* consists wholly in its possibility. Being in this world requires being with others and having unlimited freedom in which *Dasein* will create itself. Existence is an ongoing process during which it transcends its limits and realizes itself. Being thrown into the world is also a being towards death.

Existentialism is a philosophical movement rooted in the writings of Heidegger, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche and Sartre. The prominent existentialist Sartre points the core of the movement with the famous slogan: "existence is prior to essence". Existentialism presupposes that there is no given meaning in life. It is the responsibility of individuals to give meaning to their own lives. This can be achieved by overcoming the feelings of angst and despair. The individuals are responsible for creating their own value systems rather than being imposed on that of the others'. This is where the human freedom begins. If they manage to create and live with their own value systems they are going to be existential successes (Özen Baykent, 2018, 21, 2).

Human beings are born and condemned to be free. The freedom of man is limited in the sense that he has no chance but to choose. Decision making or choosing one thing or the other is the hardest responsibility man must shoulder. Each man is responsible for creating or inventing 'man', a responsibility that he must fulfil. This is a determined goal and in achieving his goal he will be responsible for his choices. This is the most difficult idea that a man confronts. Decision of a goal is necessary in order to revolt against the angst and despair that life inflicts. Throughout the process of determining a goal and living to achieve it, one will be given a number of choices.

Life will provide us with choices and it is vital to prefer one over the other. The choices that we make will create man and will make us what we are. However, life does not always provide us with perfect options. Camus uses the term *absurd* to claim that everything we can experience in the world is contrary to all reason. He argues that humans expect order and rationality in their lives. However, what they face is

inconsistency and irrationality. This suggests a mismatch between reality and expectation. People might be in search of a given meaning in life, something which they cannot find. This is when man questions the worth of living. Camus does not suggest suicide. Contrarily, the absurd man is the one who confronts the absurdness in life, accepts it and rebels against it. "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy" (Camus,1991). Camus` absurd man accepts the absurdness of life, yet he also knows that he can struggle for creating a meaning in life, a goal which he can never achieve.

The idea of nothingness can be understood with reference to existential nihilism of the twentieth century that centres on the idea that life is meaningless. The presupposition that the world does not offer you an inherent meaning or purpose. Such a supposition makes us conclude that all actions are senseless and empty. Moar argues that "our desire to make the world fit with the conventional views we hold" can best be depicted in Camus` *The Outsider* (Moar, 2019, 78). For instance, we try to find a ground for the social and cultural traditions that we believe in and stick to. However, such an effort is mostly in vain, a condition which disappoints us and puts us in despair.

## **Discussion**

If we come to the main point of this study, Hemingway`s short story in question hardly has a plot. "Nothing" really happens in the story. It is as if in a world of nothingness no action could take place. When we look at the theme of the story, it is nothing or nothingness. When we confront a meaningless world in which nothing exists one can refuse the old values imposed on oneself and avoid the nothingness. However facing the nothingness of this world and meaningless life is a hard task and one can drift into angst, despair and suicide.

However, literally it is a story of character in which three characters are revealed, two of which are waiters in a bar and the third is a frequenter in that bar. The characters short and simple conversations reveal a lot about their attitudes towards life. The frequent customer in the bar is described as an old and lonely man who drinks heavily until the bar is closed. The focus of his narration is on his old age, wealth and loneliness. Initially in the story, it looks as if the old man will appear as the protagonist of the story. Later, the readers understand that the narration centres on the elder waiter. In the characterisation of the older waiter, Hemingway emphasizes patience and understanding. However, the younger waiter is impatient and is described as having a happy marriage.

'Last week he tried to commit suicide,' one  
'Why?'  
'He was in despair'  
'What about?'  
'Nothing.'  
'How do you know it was nothing?'  
'He has plenty of money.' (Hemingway, 1933)

As seen in the dialogue between the two waiters about the old man, the reason of the old man's suicide was despair. The cause of his despair is described as 'nothing'. The old man's wealth could not have stopped him from committing a suicide. The reason of his despair is nothing because he is described as an existential failure. He failed to set a goal in his life. Thus he has nothing to struggle for. There is nothing that moves him and encourages him to take an action. He has confronted the meaningless life, yet cannot understand the fact that he is the one to put meaning into it. It is the act of struggling that keeps us happy and alive. The wealth or any other material thing cannot prevent his drift into nihilism. He accepted that life is irrational, meaningless and purposeless and that he will live with it until death. For an old, rich man to try to commit suicide over the despair of confronting nothingness is beyond the young waiter's understanding.

'He hung himself with a rope.'  
'Who cut him down?'  
'His niece.'  
'Why did they do it?'  
'Fear for his soul.' (Hemingway, 1933)

The old customer is lonely but taken care by his niece who saved his life. She was the one who witnessed the event and cut the rope to save him. The old customer is a representative of those who confronted the absurdity of life and could not cope with it.

The younger waiter in his speech with the older colleague argues:

'He is lonely. I'm not lonely. I have a wife waiting in bed for me.' (Hemingway, 1933)

Once again, here, appears the focus on the loneliness of man. The young waiter does not feel an empathy with the old man. He is either a man who has confronted the absurdity in life, yet rebels against it or someone who does not question life at all and just let it flow.

'You have youth, confidence, and a job,' the older waiter said. 'You have everything.'  
'And what do you lack?'  
'Everything but work.'  
'You have everything that I have.'  
'No. I have never had confidence and I am not young.' (Hemingway, 1933)

The conversation between the younger and older waiter reveals that the young waiter is happy with what he has and does not ask for more. The older waiter thinks that he lacks some of the qualities the younger has. He seems to believe that if he had them, he would be happy too.

'We are of two different kinds,' the older waiter said. He was now dressed to go home. 'It is not only a question of youth and confidence although those things are very beautiful. Each night I am reluctant to close up because there may be someone who needs the café.' (Hemingway, 1933)

To the end of the story the reader understand that the older waiter is the protagonist of the story. He admits that he empathizes with the old customer and others like him. Thus, his different attitude is not due to his old age or lack of confidence. The climax of the story reveals what makes the difference. Until the climax the reader is not given the reason why the elder waiter understands the old customer. The climax

suggests that the old customer is like a mirror image of the old waiter, both lost in life and are in despair.

'What did he fear? It was not a fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was a nothing too. It was only that and the light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it all was *nada*. (...) our *nada* who art in *nada*, *nada* be thy name thy kingdom *nada* thy will be *nada* in *nada* as it is in *nada*.' (Hemingway, 1933)

The emphasis on and the repetition of the word *nada*/nothing throughout the story and especially in the climax, reveals that the protagonist the protagonist of the story has either lost his way to achieve his goal or has not goal at all. He is old, lonely and desperate just like the old customer and describes his life in which there is nothing but work. We have previously pointed that in existentialism, the people who manage to create and live with their value systems are existential successes. However, the ones who do not are failures. The failures can easily drift into nihilism. The two elderly men in the story seem to be failures because they live in nothingness. They have accepted that life is in vain and that they have to suffer in this meaningless world until death.

The title of the story "A clean well-lighted place" is described as somewhere that the two characters in the story strive for. It represents a life with a determined goal. Not only the achievement of the goal, but also the process during which one struggles to achieve it, will reveal the meaning of life. The idea existentialism appears here when the two elderly men have not yet decided a goal and have no motive in life. Clean and bright place represents a life in which man has confronted the absurdity in life and revolts against it. Unfortunately, Hemingway's characters fail to find their lives' goals and do not know what to struggle for. Gür (2019, 2) discusses the concept of the absence of a burrow proposed by Heidegger. It is the lack of belonging to somewhere and modern man feels as is being devoid of a home. The absence of a burrow brings the absence of a destination as a goal. When the destination of one's life is missing, one stands in the current condition.

### Conclusion

Hemingway's writings are usually filled with characters in despair, grief or alienation. The characters in "A Clean Well-Lighted Place" seem to be lost in life. They are like representatives of Lost Generation, the group Hemingway himself is a member of. The protagonist of the story can empathize with the old customer because he know how lost men are suffering and lost their ways in life because they have no specified goal or reason for themselves. When they realise the world does not offer them any sense or reason, they cannot decide what to do. Confrontation with nothingness gives way to emotional anguish. He may end up with nausea when facing this purposeless. He might get up and struggle with the absurdity in life by setting his own purpose and goal.

The description of life as nothingness is a common theme in Hemingway's fiction. The idea of nothingness is overwhelming and depressing for the characters in this story. They are in search of a place in which there is "cleanness and light". The older waiter and the old customer seeks for a purpose and prefers to be in clean and well-

lighted cafes among people. Sitting for many hours in such places with other people around is how they try to struggle with despair.

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