The Killers Study Guide

The Killers by Ernest Hemingway

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Introduction

"The Killers," Ernest Hemingway's story about two hit men who come to a small town to kill a former prizefighter, was first published in the March 1927 issue of *Scribner's Magazine.* Hemingway was paid two hundred dollars for the story, which was the first of his mature stories to appear in an American periodical. His original title for the story was "The Matadors." Hemingway included the story in his 1927 collection *Men Without Women,* and it also appears in *The Nick Adams Stories* (1972). "The Killers" remains one of Hemingway's most anthologized stories because it is representative of Hemingway's style and the subjects that would occupy his work throughout his career. These subjects include the meaninglessness of human life, male camaraderie, and the inevitability of death, and Hemingway explores them using his signature short sentences, slang, and understatement.

Hemingway claims to have written the story in a frenzy of inspiration on May 16, 1926, before lunch. Like many of his short stories, "The Killers" features Nick Adams, a typical Hemingway hero, one in a long line of Hemingway's fictional selves. Hemingway introduced Nick Adams in his first collection of stories, *In Our Time* (1925). Nick is an adolescent in "The Killers," and critics have argued that Nick's experience with the hit men marks his initiation into adulthood and his introduction to evil and violence.

Author Biography

Ernest Hemingway is one of the most influential American writers of the twentieth century. His influence extends not only to novelists and short story writers but also to journalists, playwrights, critics, and filmmakers. Four decades after his death, biographies about him continue to appear. Born July 21, 1899, in Oak Park, Illinois, Ernest Miller Hemingway was the second child of Clarence Hemingway, a doctor, and Grace (Hall) Hemingway. Hemingway's middle-class upbringing was conventional, and after graduating in 1917 from Oak Park High School, he joined the *Kansas City Star* as a reporter. In 1918, Hemingway joined the Red Cross, driving an ambulance in Italy during the waning months of World War I. He was struck with shell fragments from an exploding mortar in July and had more than two hundred pieces of mortar removed from his leg. Over the next four years, Hemingway honed his writing skills as European correspondent for the *Toronto Star* and contributed "color pieces" (feature articles also known as "slice of life" pieces) to other publications. During this period, he also met American expatriate Gertrude Stein, a writer and wealthy art collector who held gatherings in her Paris apartment, during which artists and writers could mingle and "talk shop." Stein, along with American writers Ezra Pound and Sherwood Anderson, were indispensable to Hemingway's early career, providing him with contacts and recommending his work to various editors.

In 1925, Liveright released Hemingway's first widely distributed book, *In Our Time,* a collection of short stories featuring Nick Adams, an autobiographical character who would also appear in future Hemingway stories. His second collection, *Men Without Women* (1927), contained many of what would become Hemingway's most popular and anthologized stories, including "The Killers" and "Hills Like White Elephants." In these stories, Hemingway perfected his spare, elliptical style, using dialogue almost exclusively to develop characters and drive his plot. His early novels, however, cemented his popularity and established Hemingway as the leading voice of his generation. *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *A Farewell to Arms* (1929) both address the emotionally debilitating effects of World War I on characters that were fictional projections of Hemingway.

The quality of Hemingway's work diminished after he had established an international reputation, though he did produce two critical and popular successes with his novels *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) and *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), the latter of which helped Hemingway win the Nobel Prize in literature in 1954. While alive, Hemingway was a popular and much-admired celebrity, a man's man, who cultivated a brawling, hard-drinking, hard-loving image. In 1961, his emotional and physical health deteriorating, "Papa" Hemingway, as he had become known, committed suicide by shooting himself at his home in Ketchum, Idaho. Hemingway's father had also committed suicide. Posthumous works include *A Moveable Feast* (1964), which recounts Hemingway's years in Paris in the 1920s and a number of reissued story collections and novels pieced together by editors, including *Islands in the Stream* (1970), *The Nick Adams Stories* (1972), and *The Garden of Eden* (1986).

Plot Summary

Section 1

"The Killers" begins with two men walking into Henry's lunchroom and discussing what they want to eat. Max and Al bicker over what menu items are available with George, the counterman who had been talking with Nick Adams, the only other customer. Some confusion occurs over the correct time. The clock says 5:20, but George tells the men it is twenty minutes fast. The men finally order eggs with ham and bacon and then taunt Nick and George, sarcastically calling them "bright boys" and making fun of their small town, Summit. Al and Max order George to tell the cook, Sam, to come out of the kitchen, and then Al takes Nick and Sam back into the kitchen. They call Sam "nigger," a muchused epithet for African Americans in 1920s' America.

Max announces that they are at the lunchroom to kill Ole Andreson, a Swede who usually eats dinner there at six o'clock. It is obvious the men have been hired, as Max says they have never seen Ole before. "We're killing him for a friend. Just to oblige a friend," Max says. Al and Max continue with their banter, taunting Nick and Sam. At one point, Al says, "The nigger [Sam] and my bright boy [Nick] are amused by themselves. I got them tied up like a couple of girl friends in the convent." Referring to the two as "girl friends" is tough talk and meant to belittle the men's masculinity.

A customer comes in at a quarter past six, but George tells him that the cook is not there, and the man leaves. A few other customers come in. George makes one of them a sandwich and tells the other one that the cook is sick. At five minutes past seven, the two men leave, shotguns bulging from their overcoats.

Section 2

George watches the men leave. Nick and Sam come out from the kitchen, and Nick removes the towel that had been stuffed in his mouth. George tells Nick that he better go tell Ole Andreson that the two men are looking for him, but Sam warns him to "stay out of it." After Nick says he is going to tell Ole, Sam remarks, "Little boys always know what they want to do." This remark underscores Nick's youth and his innocence. In this section, it becomes clear that Nick has become the protagonist of the story.

Section 3

In this section, Nick visits Hirsch's rooming house, where Ole lives. Mrs. Bell, the rooming house manager, lets Nick in. Ole is lying on the bed, dressed, staring at the wall. Nick tells Ole about the two men, but Ole says, "There isn't anything I can do about it." He refuses Nick's offer to tell the police, remarking, "I'm through with all that running around." Ole speaks with a "flat" voice, meaning that he shows no emotion. Ole thanks Nick for coming.

Section 4

In this last section, Nick walks back to Henry's and tells George about Ole: "He's in his room and he won't go out." Sam opens the kitchen door, says, "I don't even listen to it," and shuts it again. Henry says that Ole "must have got mixed up in something in Chicago." Chicago was a hotbed of crime and gangster activity in the 1920s, so it is conceivable that, as George tells Nick, Ole "double-crossed somebody. That's what they kill them for." Nick is shocked at what happens and says he can't bear to think of Ole waiting in his room to get killed. He vows to "get out of this town." George's response to Nick is not to think about it, underscoring George's own ambivalent attitude towards the situation.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

This story takes place primarily within the confines of Henry's Lunch-Room. As two men enter the establishment, George, the counterman, asks them what they would like to eat. The two men are not sure what they would like and take a few minutes to look at the menu. The only other person at the counter is Nick Adams.

When one of the men orders roast pork tenderloin, George informs him that that item is only available for dinner which will not be served until 6 o'clock. According to the clock in the lunchroom, the time is 5:20. However, George tells the men that the clock is twenty minutes fast.

George then tells the man that he can serve sandwiches, steak or eggs. The man asks for chicken croquettes, but again he is told that that is a dinner item. Frustrated, the man asks for ham and eggs. This man's name is Al, and he is wearing a derby hat, buttoned up, black overcoat, a silk muffler and gloves. Al's companion, who is similarly dressed, asks for bacon and eggs.

As Al and his companion wait for their food, they speak to George and Nick in a condescending manner, referring to them as "bright boys" and making fun of the town in which they live. In the course of the conversation, we learn that the name of Al's companion is Max.

After George serves the men their food, he steps back and watches them eat, noting that neither man removes their gloves. Max, uncomfortable with being watched, lashes out at George. Returning to their food, Al asks Max if he knows the name of the young man at the other end of the counter. Max calls out to Nick and tells him to join George on the other side of the counter. Nicks asks why they want him to do this, but does not get a reply.

Next, Al asks if there is anyone in the kitchen. George replies that Sam, the Negro cook is there. When Max tells him to bring Sam into the lunchroom, George asks why. Sensing that George is suspicious of them, Al assures him they will not be hurt and asks again for Sam to join them. When Sam enters the lunchroom, Al gets off his stool and takes Nick and Sam back to the kitchen, leaving Max and George alone at the counter. When George again asks Max to explain what is going on, Max responds by asking George to tell him what he thinks is going on. George does not have an answer.

Meanwhile, Al asks the two men to move from where they are standing. Again, Max asks George to tell him what he thinks is going on. When George does not respond, Max tells him that he and Al are there to kill Ole Andreson, a man that normally comes to the diner at six o'clock for dinner.

In an attempt to get him to change the subject, Max asks George if he has seen any movies recently. Rather than answer Max's question, George asks what Ole has done to the two men that has caused them to want to kill him. Max replies that they have never met Ole; rather, they have been hired to assassinate him. Al thinks that Max is providing too much information and suggests to Max that perhaps he should keep quiet. He tells Max that he has Nick and Sam tied up in the kitchen.

Max instructs George to tell anyone that enters the lunchroom that the cook is off for the evening. Further, George is to cook whatever the person orders. As he agrees to do this, George asks what is going to happen to them. Max tells him that he really cannot predict his fate.

Shortly after this, a man enters the lunchroom for supper. When George tells him that Sam has gone out, the man decides to go to another establishment. Max compliments George on his handling of the situation and once again refers to him as a "bright boy."

By five minutes to seven, Ole still has not arrived. George tells Max that if Ole has not arrived by now, he will not be there that night. Al decides they should wait five more minutes. While they wait, another man comes in, and upon hearing that Sam is not there to cook, he abruptly leaves.

After five minutes have passed, Max suggests to Al that it is time to leave. Al wonders what they should do with George, Nick and Sam. Max tries to assure him that they do not need to harm them; Al is not totally convinced as he thinks Max as told them too much.

Even so, the two men leave the lunchroom. George goes back to the kitchen and unties Nick and Sam. While Nick is somewhat dazed, Sam is clearly shaken by the experience. George tells them why the men were there and suggests that Nick go find Ole Andreson to tell him the two men want to kill him. Sam tries to dissuade Nick from doing this, but Nick goes anyway.

Nick arrives at the boarding house where Ole lives to find him lying on his bed, fully dressed. (Ole had been a heavyweight prizefighter in his younger years.)

Nick reports the evening's events to Ole. When he does not get a response, he tells Ole that George suggested Ole might want to know about what happened. Ole says that there is nothing he can do about the two men who want to kill him. He thanks Nick for coming to tell him. He also refuses Nick's offer to alert the police.

Before Nick leaves, Ole says that he has not been able to bring himself to leave his room all day. Nick asks if he can do anything to alleviate Ole's troubles, but Ole tells him that he has taken the wrong path and nothing can change the past. Ole thanks Nick again for coming and Nick leaves.

On his way out of the boarding house, Nick runs into the landlady and they discuss Ole's reluctance to leave his room. Nick returns to the lunchroom and reports what has

happened to George. Sam hears him enter, but once Nick starts to speak, he retreats to the kitchen saying that he does not want to hear what Nick has to say.

Nick tells George that he told Ole that the men were looking for him so that he could kill them. He also tells George that Ole does not intend to protect himself. The two men agree that Ole will wind up dead. The two men wonder what Ole did to get himself into so much trouble. Nick decides that he wants to leave town; knowing that Ole is sure to be killed the moment he leaves his room is too much for him to handle. George agrees that this is probably a wise thing for Nick to do.

Analysis

"The Killers" is a short story written by Ernest Hemingway in 1926. To fully understand the events that transpire within the story, it is necessary to know a little bit about this period of American history. During the 1920's, the United States was still well into the Prohibition era. Gangsters such as Max and Al were common, particularly in big cities, so the fact that they stopped into Henry's Lunch-Room for a bite to eat is not all that unusual.

The men's dress – black overcoats, derby hats and gloves – is typical of gangsters of that era. While the exact location of the lunch-room is not provided – all we know is that it is in a town called Summit – we are given to believe that is near Chicago because that is where George and Nick assume Ole got into the trouble that resulted in Max and Al's visit.

The concept of time plays a big role in this story. Time is an issue when Max and Al want to order dinner; it marks the moment at which Ole Andreson is supposed to be killed, and its passing is anticipated so that George, Nick and Sam can be freed by Max and Al. The presence of time also adds to the suspense of the story. Recall in the opening paragraphs when Max and Al first enter the lunchroom. Wanting to order something from the dinner menu, they note the time on the clock is 5:20 pm. George pointedly tells them that the clock is twenty minutes fast and so the correct time is actually five o'clock.

While this may seem like an insignificant detail, it comes into central focus later in the story as the men wait for Ole Andreson to enter the lunchroom. We are told that he normally comes at 6:00; as the time passes, the narrator notes the time on the clock at different junctures. In fact, when someone enters the lunchroom at 6:15, we assume the correct time is five minutes to six, making it perfectly reasonable to assume that Ole is entering.

While it is not clear whether George thinks Al and Max have forgotten that the clock is twenty minutes fast, he clearly is using this fact to his advantage by regularly looking at the clock and telling the men that if Ole has not arrived yet, he is not likely to. Clearly, George knows that his life and Nick and Sam's lives depend upon how he reacts and

what he does. It is also possible that George has experienced this type of thing before and so is a little more cautious in his reactions.

While time plays such a critical role, it is interesting to note that neither Max nor Al appear to be wearing watches, which is somewhat strange considering the fact that they are in the lunchroom because they know it is Ole's habit to come for dinner at six o'clock. Despite the serious circumstances under which Max and Al visit the lunchroom, a comic air surrounds them both. Their banter is a cross between good-natured ribbing and thorough impatience with each other, not unlike that of a pair of comedians. In fact, as the pair leaves the lunchroom near the end of the story, George describes them as looking like a vaudeville team.

It is possible then, that George's ability to retain his composure is also a result of his recognition of the pair as amateur killers who are still learning their craft. When Max states that Ole comes to the lunchroom every night, George replies, "sometimes he eats here" a statement that, at least to a small extent, refutes Max's assertion and undermines his authority. This however, appears to be lost on Max, providing further proof that he is not a seasoned gangster. Their leaving the lunchroom without completing their mission and without harming George, Nick and Sam is yet another indication that the two men are inexperienced gangsters.

Ironically, despite the number of gaffes the two men appear to be making, both Max and Al repeatedly refer to Nick and George as "bright boys", in a condescending manner. While these references are obviously intended to belittle George and Nick, they do not have the desired effect.

It is also interesting that the two men, who are repeatedly described as being small in stature, have been sent to kill a man who was a heavyweight prizefighter. Clearly, the two believe they can intimidate others with their menacing appearance and threatening words. On at least one level, they have succeeded; Nick's inability to be able to think about Ole waiting in his room for the certain arrival of his death is a direct result of his experience that evening in the lunchroom.

The fact that Nick finds Ole in his bed and refusing to leave his room is symbolic of life's inevitabilities. Even before Nick's arrival, Ole knows he is in danger and cannot bring himself to leave his room. The differences between the youthful hopefulness displayed by Nick and the resigned hopelessness of Ole are apparent, particularly when Nick makes numerous well-intentioned suggestions that are dismissed as futile.

Finally, the significance of Sam, the Negro cook bears some discussion. While Sam's role in the story is limited, he represents an interesting contrast to Nick's character. While Nick's youthful idealism causes him to visit Ole, Sam's maturity and experiences cause him to take a more passive role. Like George, it is likely that Sam has experienced situations like this in the past and he is more guarded in his response.

Characters

Nick Adams

Nick Adams is sitting at the lunch counter at Henry's talking to George when Al and Max walk in. Nick is a teenager, whom Al and Max refer to as "bright boy." Hemingway readers know Nick from Hemingway's short story collection *In Our Time,* which introduces Nick as a vulnerable teenager thrust into a world of violence and meanness. Nick is a typical Hemingway hero who is learning "the code." Hemingway's "code hero" is someone who is honorable, courageous, and adventurous and who exhibits grace under pressure. He distinguishes himself from others by his ability to endure and to face death with dignity. Such traits define the code hero's manhood. In short, Nick is learning the code of how to be a man, according to Hemingway's idea of what constitutes manhood. In their essay on Hemingway's story, Cleanth Brooks, Jr. and Robert Penn Warren argue, "it is the tough man . . . the disciplined man, who actually is aware of pathos or tragedy." Such a man, the two argue, "has learned that the only way to hold on to 'honor,' to individuality, to, even, the human order . . . is to live by his code." Nick is still developing the code. His experience with the killers marks his initiation into a world of brutality and random events. Critics often argue over the real protagonist of "The Killers." In his book *Hemingway's Nick Adams,* Joseph Flora claims, "Hemingway indicates that Nick is to be the central character of the story by making him the only character in the opening scene to be given a whole name." Flora also observes that this story is the last of Hemingway's stories in which Nick appears as an adolescent, and it is the only one not set in Michigan.

By the end of the story, Nick is a changed person. His discovery of the evil in human beings shocks him, and he announces that he is going to leave town after he returns from seeing Ole. Flora writes, "Even though the world is a darker place than Nick had before guessed, he is not in Andreson's frame of mind—merely waiting for the end."

Al

Al is one of the two hit men who come to Henry's to kill Ole Andreson. His face is "small and white and he had tight lips," and like Max, he wears a derby hat and a black overcoat. The narrator describes the two as "a vaudeville team." And, indeed, they often act like comics performing a routine rather than behaving as hit men. Al forces Sam and Nick to the kitchen where he binds and gags them, holding a shotgun on George. He appears as the leader of the two, telling Max at one point to "Shut up" when Max tells George they are going to kill Ole "Just to oblige a friend." The narrator describes both Al and Max as "little."

Ole Anderson

Ole Andreson is a Swede and a former heavyweight boxer who lives in Hirsch's rooming house. He usually eats at Henry's lunchroom around six in the evening but does not show up the day Al and Max come to kill him. When Nick visits him to warn him about the men, Ole is lying on his bed facing the wall. Ole thanks Nick for telling him but is resigned to his fate. He tells Nick that he has not been able to get out of bed and go outside and that he is "through with all that running around." Mrs. Bell, the house manager, calls him "a very nice man." Nick and George speculate that Ole "got mixed up with something in Chicago" and that Al and Max had come to settle a score. Martin sees an irony in Ole's largeness, when compared to Al and Max's small stature. Martin writes that Ole, unlike Nick, knows that telling the police about the men will do no good. Martin argues, "Ole knows better; he knows that his mass is relative to other things such as guns and the mob."

Mrs. Bell

Mrs. Bell runs Hirsch's rooming-house and takes Nick to Ole Andreson's room. Nick mistakes her for Mrs. Hirsch when he leaves, and she corrects him, saying that she just "looks after" the place for her. She tells Nick that Ole is "a very nice man."

George

George is the counter man at Henry's lunchroom, who waits on customers. It is unclear whether or not he is also the owner. Max keeps an eye on him as Al ties up Nick and Sam in the kitchen. George is matter-of-fact in his responses to the men and does not appear cowed by their machismo. When Max tells him they are there to kill Ole, George asks, "What are you going to kill Ole Andreson for? What did he ever do to you?" As Al and Max leave the restaurant, readers see them "pass under the arclight and cross the street" through George's eyes. George convinces Nick to warn Ole, and when Nick returns and reports that his visit was useless, George speculates that Ole is probably a target of Chicago mobsters. Nick wonders what Ole did to deserve being killed, and George answers, "Double-crossed somebody. That's what they kill them for." When Nick says, "I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get it. It's too damned awful," George responds, saying, "you better not think of it."

Max

Max is Al's partner and is dressed identically to him. He waits at the counter for two hours while Al guards Sam and Nick in the kitchen, taunting George, calling him "bright boy," and saying he "would make some girl a nice wife." Many critics claim Al and Max perform a kind of vaudeville routine and are little more than caricatures of gangsters. A typical exchange between the two occurs after Max tells George they are killing Ole for a friend in Chicago:

'You talk too damn much,' Al said.

'The nigger and my bright boy are amused by themselves. I got them tied up like a couple of girl friends in a convent.'

'I suppose you were in a convent?'

'You never know.'

'You were in a kosher convent. That's where you were.'

Sam

Sam is the black cook at Henry's and, along with Nick, is tied up and gagged by Al, one of the hit men. Al and Max refer to him as "the nigger." Sam is obedient, never responding to Max or Al except in the affirmative. He also wants nothing to do with warning Ole. When Nick says he is going to warn the boxer, Sam replies, "Little boys always know what they want to do," underscoring the fact that he, Sam, sees himself as a man who has learned through experience not to become involved in other people's business, especially if it is dangerous.

Themes

Masculinity

Hemingway, known for his representations of manly men who live by a code of honor, parodies his own image of masculinity by making the hit men, Al and Max, clownish figures. The men look the part of stereotypical gangsters, wearing derby hats and tight overcoats and keeping their gloves on when they eat. They also talk tough, announcing their plans to kill Ole, using slang, answering questions with questions, and mocking the masculinity of George, Sam, and Nick. For example, Max comments about George: "Bright boy can do anything. . . . He can cook and everything. You'd make some girl a nice wife, bright boy." Al describes Sam and Nick, gagged and bound in the kitchen, as "a couple of girl friends in the convent." Al and Max are counterpoints to Nick Adams, an innocent, who believes he can do something to change the situation by telling Ole about the men. This story marks Nick's initiation into the world of men and its attendant violence, chaos, and strategies for survival.

Crime

Societies have laws to ensure a safe environment for their citizens, to maintain order, and to instill a sense of justice in the populace. The blatant flouting of laws, as in Hemingway's story, suggests not only that society has deteriorated but also that there is nothing to be done about it. Al and Max do not fear being caught and, indeed, claim to have no stake in killing Andreson, saying they are doing it "to oblige a friend." Sam's response to the events, to have nothing to do with any of it, underscores the sense of resignation informing the story. George's response is that addressing crime is someone else's responsibility and tells Nick to visit Ole. Nick's response is one of disillusionment and shock and a desire to run away from the town rather than accept its random dangers. These reactions represent a range of responses that Chicagoans had towards criminal activities in the 1920s. The sense of resignation, in large part, stems not only from Hemingway's own dark view of human nature but from the knowledge that many of the Chicago crime bosses had bought off the police, ensuring that law and order became a privilege for the few rather than a right of the many.

Chaos

Hemingway's plot is laden with irony and with characters misreading one another, suggesting that the world is not as it seems. For example, although Max and Al come to town to kill Ole Andreson and know that he eats at Henry's at six o'clock, they ask George the name of the town, and then when George tells them, Max says he never heard of it. Henry's, though referred to as a "lunchroom," is actually a made-over saloon. A similar confusion of identity occurs when Nick addresses Mrs. Bell as Mrs. Hirsch because he assumes that she is the owner of the rooming house. The men come

to a town called "Summit" to kill on a "nice fall day," compounding the irony. These glaring differences between the world as it is and the world as it seems affect Nick the most, whose own world up until that point more or less conformed to his expectations as an orderly place.

Style

Dialogue

Dialogue, the conversation between two or more characters, is a primary tool of characterization. Writers create characters through shaping their speech in ways that reflect their desires and motivations. In addition to physically describing Max and Al as stereotypical gangsters, Hemingway has them talk like gangsters as well. Their speech is peppered with insults, wisecracks, and slang, and they never answer a question directly. They speak like characters out of a Dashiell Hammett novel, in terse bursts. Hammett was popular for his detective stories and his character, Sam Spade, a wisecracking antihero. Dialogue also characterizes the other players in the story as well. For example, when Sam speaks, he makes it clear that he does not want to be involved in any way, and when Nick speaks, he expresses his youth and innocence through his incredulity.

Plot

Plot refers to the arrangement of events in a story. Hemingway tells the story largely through dialogue, as if it were a play. He uses description sparsely, to create atmosphere or to signal a change in scenes. When he describes Max, for example, he writes: "His face was small and white and he had tight lips." When the scene shifts, Hemingway describes the action, using it as a transition: "The two of them went out the door. George watched them, through the window, pass under the arc light and cross the street."

The triviality of the subjects the characters talk about undercuts the insidious nature of the act the killers are about to commit. Hemingway sums up his spare style in his book on bullfighting, *Death in the Afternoon:*

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water.

Many twentieth-century writers adopted Hemingway's spare elliptical style as their own, including Raymond Carver and Pam Houston.

Narrator

The narrator refers to the speaker through whom the author tells the story. Sometimes it is a character in the story and sometimes it is not. The kind of narrator the author uses is intimately related to the story's point of view. Hemingway uses an "effaced" narrator in "The Killers." This means that the narrator is practically invisible. An effaced narrator

does not have access to characters' thinking, which is revealed solely through their dialogue. However, in his essay "Point of View in the Nick Adams Stories," Carl Ficken points out:

Hemingway is . . . able to place Nick sufficiently forward in the account so that the meaning of the story has to do with Nick's discovery of what life is like through those killers and Ole Andreson's reaction to them.

Hemingway popularized this method of narration for short story writers and novelists in the twentieth century.

Historical Context

When Hemingway wrote "The Killers" in 1926, the United States was at the height of the Prohibition era, and criminal activity, particularly in Chicago, was rampant, with gangsters such as Al Capone and Dutch Schultz controlling the bootlegging industry and a good part of the police force as well. In 1919, Capone had come to Chicago from New York City, where he had worked for crime boss Frankie Yale. In Chicago, he worked for Yale's old mentor, John Torrio. Capone took control of Torrio's saloons, gambling houses, racetracks, and brothels when Torrio was shot by rival gang members and left Chicago. Historians estimate the income from Capone's interests from illegal activities at $100,000,000 a year between 1925 and 1930. This is the image readers had in mind in 1927 when they read that Ole Andreson "got mixed up in something in Chicago."

However, Hemingway wrote the story in Madrid, Spain. Like many American writers and artists, Hemingway became disillusioned with the values of post-World War I America and relocated to Europe. Writers such as John Dos Passos, Henry Miller, and F. Scott Fitzgerald moved to Paris, as did Hemingway for a time, and led bohemian lives, drinking heavily, having affairs, and experimenting with new subject material and style. Gertrude Stein, a controversial writer and a wealthy art collector, held salons at her house at 27 rue de Fleurus in Paris, where many artists and writers met to drink, discuss their work, and receive advice from Stein. It was Stein who coined the term "a lost generation" to refer to Hemingway and his contemporaries, describing their spiritual isolation, cynicism, and amorality. It was at one of Stein's salons in the early 1920s that she met Hemingway, who presented her with a letter of introduction from American writer Sherwood Anderson. Stein urged Hemingway to quit journalism and become a full-time writer. Other writers associated with the "lost generation" include expatriates such as Malcolm Cowley, Ezra Pound, and Archibald MacLeish.

As a result of World War I, in which Hemingway served as an ambulance driver, and the catastrophic loss of human life (tens of millions killed and wounded), many people lost faith in God, ideas of nationhood, even reality itself. Theories by intellectuals and scientists such as Sigmund Freud, Henri Bergson, Sir James George Frazer, Werner Heisenberg, and Albert Einstein presented the world as a place of uncertainty and chaos in which appearances are not what they seem. In his essay on "The Killers" for The Explicator, Quentin E. Martin argues that these new theories are useful in understanding Hemingway's story. Citing character confusion in the story, Martin claims, "'The Killers' can be seen as a concise and dramatic representation of certain aspects of Einstein's theory of relativity and Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy (or uncertainty)." Other writers consciously applied these theories to their work as well, helping to shape literary modernism. T. S. Eliot's poem *The Wasteland* (1922), for example, deploys allusion, symbol, and fragments to describe a world that had literally fallen to pieces. In her novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Virginia Woolf uses a stream-of-consciousness narrative to prioritize subjective experience over the depiction of an objective world, drawing from ideas popularized by philosopher Bergson.

Expatriates in Europe were not the only ones producing lasting literature during the time between the world wars. In America, writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Sterling Brown, James Weldon Johnson, W. E. B. DuBois, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, Countee Cullen, and Alain Locke wrote about the African-American experience, giving white America a glimpse into the lives and cultures of a historically oppressed people. Harlem, in uptown New York City, became a magnet for African-American poets, artists, writers, musicians, and playwrights. Representative literary works of the Harlem Renaissance include Johnson's 1927 poetry collection *God's Trombone: Seven Negro Folk Sermons,* one of the more popular works of the era which used the speech patterns of an old black preacher to capture the heart of the black idiom; Claude McKay's novel of working-class blacks, *Home to Harlem* (1927); and Jean Toomer's story of poor southern blacks, *Cane* (1923).

Critical Overview

"The Killers" is one of Hemingway's most anthologized and analyzed stories. The single most influential critical essay on the story was written by Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren for their short story anthology, *Understanding Fiction.* Brooks and Warren argue that the story belongs to Nick, not Ole or the gangsters, and that through his experiences with the killers, Nick discovers evil. R. S. Crane argues against some of the claims made by Brooks and Warren in his book *The Idea of the Humanities and Other Ideas Critical and Historical,* writing that Nick is only an "impersonal messenger . . . a utility character in Hemingway's rendering of an action with which Nick has nothing essential to do." In his essay "Some Questions About Hemingway's 'The Killers'" in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Edward Stone notes many of the peculiarities of the story and contends that it is Al and Max's "surrealistic appearance" that shocks Nick, not the pervasiveness of crime or Ole's response to his circumstances. For Stone, the story belongs to Ole, not Nick. Charles Owen, in "Time and the Contagion of Flight in 'The Killers,'" says that the story belongs neither to Nick or Ole but to readers, who, like Nick, retain "faith in expedients, a faith that makes him representative of a whole tradition in American culture."

More recent criticism on the story has focused on myth and literary traditions. For example, John Reardon, in his essay "Hemingway's Esthetic and Ethical Sportsmen," sees the story as one in which characters such as Nick must "measure his status as a man" against the "destructive forces" represented by the killers. In "'The Killers' as Experience," W. J. Stuckey argues that the story is a mixture of romance and realism and that with the "terrifyingly irrational" appearance of the killers, Hemingway introduces into the "tradition of realism that element of romance, danger, that the conventions of realism have banished or forced into exile."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
- Critical Essay #4

Critical Essay #1

Semansky is an instructor of English literature and composition who writes about literature and culture for various publications. In this essay, Semansky considers the idea of waiting in Hemingway's story.

Rife with images of waiting, "The Killers" embodies a range of Hemingway's ideas on the human condition, from his notion of "nada" to his code of manly behavior. By foregrounding waiting, Hemingway creates suspense, develops characters, and suggests themes that lesser writers might take twice as many pages to accomplish.

Inextricably bound up with notions of time and human behavior, the act of waiting creates expectation and suspense, while providing a framework for the story's events. The first image of waiting occurs when George tells Al and Max that the dinner they want will not be available until six o'clock. But there's confusion about the time. Although the clock reads 5:20, George tells the men it is twenty minutes fast. Instead of awaiting the hour for dinner, the two men settle for egg dishes. After they eat, the men order the cook out of the kitchen, and Al takes Nick and Sam back into the kitchen. George next looks at the clock after Max has revealed that the two are there to kill Ole Andreson. When the motorman comes in for supper, it is 6:15. But readers are not told whether or not 6:15 is the actual time or the "fast" time. This confusion exacerbates the suspense, as Ole usually comes to dinner at six. A few lines later, readers are told it is 6:55, and George says, "He's not coming." Al and Max leave at 7:05.

Critics have zeroed in on the function of clock time in the story. Owen, for example, notes that "at the very moment when the suspense is the greatest," when Ole might be hauling his body through the lunchroom door, Hemingway "disrupts the time sequence." He does this in a long (for Hemingway) paragraph explaining what had happened between 6:15 and 6:55. Martin, on the other hand, sees in the discrepancies of clock time "the relativity of time," asking, "What clock have they followed and how reliable is it? The clock, like the menu, is unreliable." Such indeterminacy not only illustrates Hemingway's perception of the world as an unruly and objectively unknowable place but it also colors the varying responses that Sam, Nick, and George have toward the events.

Al and Max show their disdain for clock time, suggesting that it, like the men in the lunchroom, is merely something to manipulate for other ends. After George explains that the clock is fast, one of them says, "Oh, to hell with the clock," demonstrating impatience with the very thing that controls their purpose in the restaurant. Al and Max "kill" time waiting for Ole through performing a kind of vaudeville routine, insulting each other and the three men. Before radio was invented, vaudeville was the primary form of entertainment in America. Most cities and towns had their own vaudeville house, in which traveling entertainers would perform comedy, juggling, clowning, acrobatics, singing, mime, dancing, and music. Many of the comedy routines were improvised, as performers turned awkward situations into jokes, often at another person's expense. A popular routine for vaudevillian comedians was a sketch in which a "city slicker" meets a

"country bumpkin," and the slicker exploits the naivete of the bumpkin. Though the setting—a diner in the small town of Summit outside the big city of Chicago—of Hemingway's story provides an opportunity for such a routine, Al and Max interact very little with the three men. Mostly, they perform *for* them, treating them literally as a captive audience. Their "routine" lasts approximately an hour—about the length of a show—and then they leave.

George has a role to play as well, performing appropriately for customers who come in so that Nick and Sam remain unharmed. It is George who looks at the clock, waiting patiently for the killers to leave, knowing that other people's lives, as well as his own, depend on his actions. Like Sam, George appears used to violence and has developed a strategy for responding to and surviving it. Though Summit is outside Chicago, Hemingway suggests that George and Sam have seen big-city crime before.

Ole himself, of course, the object of the killers' waiting, waits, face turned towards the wall, resignation deep. In his belief that death will come to him and there is nothing he can do about it, the ex-boxer illustrates Hemingway's nihilism, his idea of the meaninglessness of human existence. This idea, encapsulated in the Spanish word "nada," or nothingness, crops up often in Hemingway stories and most pointedly in his short story "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." In this story, from Hemingway's collection *Winner Take Nothing* (1933), reprinted in *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (1938) and numerous anthologies, an older waiter, talking to himself as he prepares to leave the cafe, recites this prayer:

Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. Give us this nada our daily nada and nada us our nada as we nada our nadas and nada us not into nada but deliver us from nada; pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee.

Ole could just as well have been reciting the prayer himself as he waited for the killers to come get him or for the energy to leave his room and meet his death. He is not a typical Hemingway hero, not a man of action but rather one who is exhausted and "through with all that running around." Though he accepts the fact that he will die, and soon, he still cannot bring himself to face his killers. Waiting, for Ole, both embodies the idea of nada, as Ole illustrates the futility of motion, and it underscores his refusal to believe that acting will make any difference to the ultimate outcome of his life.

Nick waits for the events to cohere into some understandable whole. As an adolescent waiting to grow up, Nick also waits for some kind of explanatory sign, but none appears. Arthur Waldhorn, however, argues that Nick's encounter with Ole does signal a watershed point in Nick's development. In *A Reader's Guide to Ernest Hemingway,* Waldhorn writes:

Though he fails, Nick's short journey from the diner to the boarding house marks an important milestone in his educational progress. The diner is not Nick's first sight of the world but through Ole he has his first full glimpse of how a man lives and dies in it.

The best advice George can offer Nick is not to think about Ole waiting in his room for his death. Not thinking about it, however, is not a choice for Nick, who says he is going to leave town. Nick's decision to leave is also a decision not to accept the fact of his own inevitable death, a fact that Hemingway suggests George and Sam have accepted through their own actions.

Those who wait most are the readers of Hemingway's story. They wait, like the three men in Henry's, for Al and Max to decide what to do with them; they wait for Ole to come through the door; and they wait, like Nick, for meaning to cohere. They wait while they think about the story's implications for their own lives.

Source: Chris Semansky, Critical Essay on "The Killers," in *Short Stories for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Martina relates "The Killers" to breakthroughs in physics happening at the time of the story's creation.

"The Killers" can be seen as a concise and dramatic representation of certain aspects of Albert Einstein's theory of relativity and Werner Heisenberg's principle of indeterminacy (or uncertainty). In general and simplified terms, relativity argues that time and mass are relative, not absolute, measurements, and that therefore seemingly fixed things, such as the motion of clocks and the shape of tables, are in fact dependent on their actual motion (as through space) and the perspective of the viewer. Lincoln Barnett explains that "there is no such thing as a fixed interval of time independent of the system to which it is referred" and that "the mass of a moving body is by no means constant."

The principle of indeterminacy, introduced by Heisenberg in the same year that "The Killers" was first published (1927), asserts that it is "impossible to determine with precision both the position and the momentum of a particle;" specifically, one cannot, at the same time, determine both the location and the speed of an electron because both measurements depend on each other and involve a small, though constant, margin of error. The more accurately one determines location, the less accurately one can determine speed, and vice versa. As the British physicist Sir James Jeans explained, "the specifications of position and motion lie in two different planes of reality, which cannot be brought simultaneously into sharp focus."

The theory of relativity, the principle of indeterminacy, and other breakthroughs in modern physics made even more untenable the positivistic determinism of most nineteenth-century science. Indeed, "The Killers" appeared in the midst of a scientific revolution: Louis de Broglie's discovery of wave mechanics (1924), Erwin Schrodinger's "probability waves" (1926), Heisenberg's "uncertainty principle" (1927), and Niels Bohr's "principle of complementarity" (1928). These and other discoveries proved that it was

basically impossible to know simultaneously the precise position and the speed of a minute body and . . . that what had been taken until then to be reality was no more than a mirage.

The commonsensical Newtonian world of straight lines, fixed contours, and determinable locations and motions no longer obtained. As Alfred North Whitehead said in a 1925 lecture, "[R]egarding material, space, time, and energy, . . . the simple security of the old orthodox assumptions has vanished." In 1930, Jeans proclaimed that Heisenberg and others had shown that "nature abhors accuracy and precision above all things."

These notions of modern physics suffuse "The Killers." Yet in all the commentary on the story— by critics from Edward Sampson to Joseph Flora, who have indeed noted many of the confusing aspects of the story that I will discuss here—this connection between Hemingway and Einstein, Heisenberg, and other physicists has never been made.

These confusing aspects have thus never properly been explained or understood. (Michael Reynolds makes the same claim in his Einsteinian reading of Hemingway's 1932 story, "Homage to Switzerland.")

The relativity of time is stressed early in the story. When the killers read the menu card, they discover that it contains items that are not available because of the time of day; and when the killers and George, the counterman, refer to the clock, more confusion ensues. The clock reads twenty minutes past five o'clock, but it is really—according to George at least—only five o'clock. He says that the clock is twenty minutes fast. Why the clock is fast is unexplained, but if it is not just a faulty clock and has been purposely set ahead—as is often the case, to hasten closing time for the sake of the employees—then why does George not use that faster time, the 5:20 time, in his discussion with the killers about when the dinner items will be available? Also, several references are made later in the story to specific times (for example, "George looked up at the clock. It was a quarter past six"), but it is uncertain what time is being referred to: the actual time or the faster time. Such questions have direct bearing on the killers' plan because they know that Ole usually comes into the restaurant at six o'clock. How do they know this, when presumably they do not wear watches? What clock have they followed and how reliable is it? The clock, like the menu, is unreliable, which leads the "first man" to say, "Oh, to hell with the clock."

Many of the characters present equally puzzling, if not deceptive, fronts. The two killers' appearance is so similar that they lose any individuality at all—both are "about the same size," and they are "dressed like twins." When they walk away from the restaurant, they are described as looking "like a vaudeville team." Furthermore, they do not even resemble what they are supposed to be—killers. At one point they ask an intentionally rhetorical question: "Do we look silly?" The apparently unneeded answer is "No," for these are two cold, fearsome hit men carrying sawed-off shotguns. But the real answer is "Yes," they do look silly, with their identical dress, derby hats, tight-fitting dark overcoats, and gloves—looking indeed like a vaudeville team.

This deceptiveness of appearance holds for other characters too. Sexual identity in particular is ambiguous and uncertain. Max tells George, after watching him "cook and everything," that "you'd make some girl a nice wife, bright boy." Earlier, Max has told Nick to "go around on the other side of the counter with your boy friend." Al, too, jokes about their victims' sexual identity; he tells Max, " I got them [Nick and Sam] tied up like a couple of girl friends in the convent."

Ole also presents a confusing front in that his personal size does not have the expected significance. The two killers are repeatedly described as little men, yet Ole, who is so big that he cannot fit in a standard-sized bed, is helpless against them. Big Ole, relative to the power of the seemingly silly little killers, is really a small man. Nick wants to believe that a big, tough boxer such as Ole can "fix it up some way," but Ole knows better; he knows that his mass is relative to other things such as guns and the mob.

Along with the people in the story, physical settings are also presented in indeterminate ways. This lunchroom is not really a lunchroom, for it "had been made over from a

saloon into a lunchcounter." And the name of the town, Summit, is obviously ironic and unsuitable for the place where these events occur. Additionally, the murder will take place on a "nice fall day." But less-obvious confusion also involves this town. Early in the story, the killers ask George, "What do they call it [the town]?", and even after being told its name, they say they have never heard of it. But presumably they have followed or somehow traced Ole to the town; they even know where he usually eats. Would they then not know the name of the town he is in, especially if they had been informed about it? And to add to the confusion, they later insist, "We know damn well where we are." Do they or don't they?

Further confusion surrounds the physical settings. The story opens at "Henry's lunch-room"— but who is Henry? No one by that name appears in the story. The apparent owner or manager, George, is, it must be deduced, just an employee of this Henry, though his position is never made clear, like the indeterminate position of an electron. A more prominent example of the confusion of names and places occurs when Nick goes to the boarding house where Ole is staying. It is called "Hirsch's rooming-house," and when Nick talks to the landlady after seeing Ole, he assumes she is Mrs. Hirsch:

"Well, good-night, Mrs. Hirsch," Nick said.

"I'm not Mrs. Hirsch," the woman said. "She owns the place.

I just look after it for her. I'm Mrs. Bell."

George and Mrs. Bell—despite outward appearances and the assumptions of others—do not even run their own businesses. They are mere employees, as the killers are, with Mrs. Bell's name perhaps suggesting her status as an echo of something else.

In the confusion about Mrs. Bell, Nick resembles the reader, who assumes things concerning the reliability of time, locale, appearances, sexual distinctions, etc. but discovers that those "positivistic" assumptions are either incorrect or simplistic, that things are more complex and indeterminate than they seem. The story's purposeful confusion, then, is emblematic of a post-Newtonian scientist who has to discard seemingly solid, commonsensical principles and find his or her way in a mirage-world. "The new situation in the thought of today," Whitehead said in that 1925 lecture, "arises from the fact that scientific theory is outrunning common sense." Nick encounters new things in this story, from the literal newness of having a towel in his mouth to a more involved and troublesome newness. Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren famously identified the newness as the discovery of evil, but to be more precise, the discovery is really of a modernist indeterminacy that derives in part from the scientific revolution brought about by Einstein, Heisenberg, and others.

Furthermore, as time, mass, motion, and other concepts are discovered to be unfixed, relative, and indeterminate, so too are moral precepts; the ability to judge whether something is evil is part of the positivistic, determinable, Newtonian universe. The black cook's refusal to get involved is perhaps a more "real" perception of this modern world than Nick and George's decision to do the presumably right thing and warn Ole. The

cook's comment about Nick and George's decision to get involved and warn Ole is revealing: "Little boys always know what they want to do." Big boys, who have been in the complex, shifting, uncertain modern world awhile, are not always so sure.

Source: Quentin E. Martina, "Hemingway's 'The Killers,'" in *Explicator,* Vol. 52, No. 1, Fall 1993, pp. 53-57.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Monteiro identifies elements in "The Killers" that serve as a metaphor for bullfighting.

After an earlier unsuccessful attempt to write the story, Hemingway was finally able to set down *"The Killers"* on a day in which he was confined to his Madrid hotel room because the San Isidro bullfights were snowed out. He originally entitled the story "The Matadors." In some ways, it is a pity that he dropped this title, for this is a story about a killing that does not take place only because the human being marked for death does not play his part that day. If one considers it as a planned, if not quite ritualized, killing in which the "animal's" own habitual behavior (each day he comes to Henry's lunchroom at the same hour) will bring him to his death at the hands of "professional" killers whose duty is to perform this task for hire, we have license to draw certain analogies between bullfighting and the events in Summit.

The bullring has become Henry's lunchroom, the matador(s), "the killers," Max and Al. Replacing the bull is "the Swede"—the prizefighter Andreson, whose first name is, suggestively, Ole. The matador's *banderillas* served up from a case and his sword mantled in cloth have their analogue in the killers' sawed-off shotguns covered up by their tight-fitting overcoats. To say this much stretches the analogies as far as it is useful to take them. What is more interesting, however, once these broad analogies are suggested, is to see how what takes place in Henry's lunch room differs from what takes place in an arena in Madrid. It is by indirection that "The Killers" parodies the bullfight itself. Because Ole Andreson is not killed "around 6 p.m." on this particular day in Henry's lunchroom, and because Nick Adams discovers that Ole Andreson has no fight left in him (he knows his fate and is resigned to being killed if not now, then later, if not in that place, then elsewhere), the horror of his predetermined fate (even though the killing is itself deferred) gradually suffuses the story. Even if the would-be hit has turned out "sloppy" (Al's word) and the "ritual" has been aborted, the ordered killing ("ordered" both because somebody has commanded it or put in an order for it and because it is to be carried out in an "orderly" fashion) reveals that these men have gone beyond the brutes in that, unlike in the bullfight, their passion has been removed from the act of killing.

Their very competence as professionals, moreover, is impugned from the start. Al and Max are "dressed like twins"—derby hat, black overcoat buttoned across the chest, silk muffler, gloves. The overcoats are "too tight." They eat with their gloves on. In fact, "In their tight overcoats and derby hats they looked like a vaudeville team." To resume the bullfighting analogy for a moment, Al and Max, acting as a team, recall the comic bullfights thrown into an overall program of bullfighting called the "Charlots" or "Charlie Chaplins." The difference, of course, lies in the threat posed by the sawed-off shotguns loaded to kill.

The widespread acceptance of the Brooks and Warren reading of *"The Killers"* as a story characteristically pointed toward Nick Adams's reactions, has often kept readers

from seeing that this story is also about psychological and physical domination and that much of the horror the story evokes comes through the reader's recognition that something even more powerful than fear for his safety or the naked instinct for self-preservation and survival has overtaken and defeated the ex-prizefighter. Ole Andreson lies on his bed as if his affections have been sedated, as if he has been caught in a trap that he no longer tries to escape. His morale crushed, he has turned his face and body to the wall even, as figuratively, he has turned his back on life.

By failing to leave his bed, let alone his room, Andreson has chosen his place to die, whether today or some other day. A bull will often establish a *querencia,* a place in the ring, where he becomes especially dangerous because the matador must go in after the bull rather than getting the bull to charge over terrain chosen by the bullfighter. Yet without their ever laying eyes on him, let alone confronting and shooting him, Al and Max (because they merely represent the notion and idea of "the killers" who have already "killed" his will to live) have already won the contest.

Were it not for what we learn from Nick's visit to Mrs. Hirsch's boardinghouse and his discussion with Andreson, the appearance of Al and Max, professional killers, would have constituted nothing more than an ugly, if threatening, interruption in the daily doings in Henry's lunchroom. The two hours or so in which Al and Max take over the restaurant, tie-up and gag both Sam the cook and Nick the customer, and keep a gun trained on George, who runs the place, is a monstrous interlude in a day that has, until that moment, promised to be no different from any other day. And after the killers have left, it's back to business as usual. There is no indication that anyone has called the police, and while it is George who suggested that Nick go to Mrs. Hirsch's boardinghouse to warn Andreson, George seems not to have been much affected by the events in his lunchroom. Even as Nick tells him about how he cannot stand the fact that Andreson will neither fight back, nor run away from his killers, we watch George performing the same old tasks: he "reached down for a towel and wiped the counter." He is not far from the mark, probably, when to Al's question about the townspeople in Summit, "What do you do here nights?" Max answers, "They eat the dinner . . . they all come here and eat the big dinner.

Of course, by their very presence and the arrangements they make to facilitate their conduct of business, the two killers pervert the lunchroom routine on which the restaurant's customers depend. Yet the success of their plan depends to some extent on their maintaining the semblance of the usual routine in George's responses to customers that come in and to his own movements. George is their front man, whose presence and behavior, even if he cannot deliver the usual dinners at six o'clock (the cook is tied up), give him enough credibility to keep customers from suspecting that on that day something is amiss in Henry's lunchroom. And yet, to maintain the tone of their total domination (and to amuse themselves, claims Max) they work from the start to upset the routine. They ask for items from the dinner menu, even after being told that what is listed on the dinner menu will not be ready until six. When the two plates of eggs are served—one with ham, the other with bacon—Al eats Max's order and Max eats Al's. Their running conversation keeps them amused, George under control, and the overall tension from mounting up. They are so successful in this that when Andreson

fails to show up, they just walk away. They are, in Max's words, "through with it." They do no further harm. After all, they haven't even done enough damage to be charged with attempted murder, and they are sure enough of themselves to walk away with their shotguns under their coats. As they go out, they direct one last remark at George, hinting that things could have turned out much worse. "You got a lot of luck," they tell him, "you ought to play the races, bright boy."

Source: George Monteiro, "The Hit in Summit: Ernest Hemingway's 'The Killers,'" in *The Hemingway Review,* Vol. 8, No. 2, Spring 1989, pp. 40-42.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Berman explores the role vaudeville plays in the action and phiosophy of "The Killers."

Kenneth S. Lynn's biography of Hemingway states that

behind "The Killers" lay some obvious influences: Hemingway's firsthand acquaintance with petty criminals in Kansas City, his close observation of the men entering the back room in the Venice Cafe, and the steady attention he paid in the 20s to journalistic accounts, in European as well as in American newspapers, of the blood-drenched careers of Chicago hoodlums.

Behind the story also is Hemingway's acquaintance by 1926 with vaudeville and with the idea of vaudeville. The connection has long been noted: in 1959, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren mentioned the "vaudeville team" of Max and Al, and the "gag" and "dialogue" that remind the reader of their "unreal and theatrical quality." The essay is, however, only the briefest of sketches on the subject.

By the mid-1920s, entertainment had become part of visual and literary art. Music hall scores echoed in the work of T. S. Eliot; the lyrics of Broadway hits were reprinted in the pages of F. Scott Fitzgerald; and revues and Follies were described in fascinating detail in the essays of Edmund Wilson. The expression "the seven lively arts," coined by Gilbert Seldes, was meant to include comics, dancers, and Krazy Kat—and to displace such bourgeois delights as grand opera. It was the fate of one of those lively arts, vaudeville, to wax and wane with modernism.

To be useful to Hemingway as a subject in 1926, two things had had to happen to vaudeville: the first was its permeation of the social world, the second its recognition by the intellectual world. We know that the first of these happened because from W. C. Fields to Eddie Cantor and even to Ed Sullivan, vaudevillians not only dominated the Palace and the Ziegfeld Follies—hence the imagination of much of New York—but also went on to radio and the movies. The second happening was a consequence of the first. A brief chronology: in 1922, vaudeville became "The Great American Art" for the *New Republic,* in which Mary Cass Canfield wrote that it need not apologize for comparisons with Robinson and Frost, Masters and Sandburg. In fact, she thought it held its own with the work of Mark Twain as a kind of artistic reaction to our native social repressiveness:

Grotesque or not, vaudeville represents a throwing away of self-consciousness, of Plymouth Rock caution, devoutly to be wished for. Here we countenance the extreme, we encourage idiosyncrasy. The dancer or comedian is, sometimes literally, egged on to develop originality; he is adored, never crucified for difference. Miss Fannie Brice and Sir Harry Lauder are examples of vaudeville performers who have been hailed, joyfully and rightfully, as vessels containing the sacred fire, and who have been encouraged into self-emphasis by their audiences . . .

Equally important was the fact of universal intellectual acceptance:

Darius Milhaud, George Auric and the others write ballets and symphonies in which may be heard the irresponsible "cancan" of ragtime. John Alden Carpenter, perhaps the most vivid talent among our own composers, will occasionally shift from cooly subtle disharmonies, illustrating poetic or lyric subjects, to write a Krazy Kat Ballet.

Vaudeville was for the intellectual world equal to other forms of artistic composition. And it seemed to gain meaning when it was compared to the modes of modernism.

Throughout 1923, Edmund Wilson produced a barrage of pieces on vaudeville ideas and personalities, and on the meaning of dance, jazz, comic scripts, and revues. He identified some of the leading comics and mimes, among them Bert Savoy, Johnny Hudgins, and Bert Williams. He speculated on the satire of vaudeville and especially on its urban modernist meanings. Wilson thought that the Ziegfeld Follies were inherently part of his and Fitzgerald's literary world:

Among those green peacocks and gilded panels, in the luxurious haze of the New Amsterdam, there is realized a glittering vision which rises straight out of the soul of New York. The Follies is such fantasy, such harlequinade as the busy well-to-do New Yorker has been able to make of his life. Expensive, punctual, stiff, it moves with the speed of an express train. It has in it something of Riverside Drive, of the Plaza, of Scott Fitzgerald's novels.

Not for the last time, Wilson thought of vaudeville as an equivalent of Dada. He was especially tuned to vaudeville's depiction of anxiety, writing of Williams as a kind of walking Freudian dream, finding Eddie Cantor and Gilda Gray to be mental incarnations of New York "in terms of entertainment." They expressed the city's "nervous intensity to the tune of harsh and complicated harmonies." He thought that Bert Savoy was an exceptionally able interpreter, through impersonation, of the styles and aspirations of upper-middle-class Manhattan life. Wilson thought, finally, that vaudeville was a modernist urban art full of reflections of current experience. He was especially tuned to its staccato delivery and to its own self-conscious sense of authorship. In Wilson's canon, Bert Savoy mattered as much as any textualized idea.

In 1924 Seldes, a friend of Wilson's and known to both Fitzgerald and Hemingway, published *The Seven Lively Arts.* This book gave intellectuals much to think about. Aside from cataloging the great and the good performers, it moved into the heady realms of modernist theory. Wilson thought that the book was chaotic, sometimes out of control, and he was right. But Seldes made some important points for the writers who came after him. He did not originate the argument that Chaplin and other comics belonged with Joyce and Eliot (Eliot himself made that point), but he argued consistently that the "lively" arts belonged with so-called higher forms of visual and textual arts. He thought that Bert Savoy belonged in the same world as Remy de Gourmont and James Joyce, and in the same sentence with Charles Dickens. Most important, at least as far as Hemingway is concerned, was the series of manifestos with which the book

subsided. Seldes provided an enormous amount of material to anyone inclined to think that conventional American values— and the writings exemplifying them—were bogus.

Seldes took certain modernist beliefs about the unwinding of respectable culture and restated them in terms of comedy, jazz, and even cartoons. For example, Ring Lardner and Mr. Dooley are "more important than James B. Cabell and Joseph Hergesheimer" because they say more about present attitudes toward the present moment. This may now be self-evident, but even Mencken, full of pieties for the groaning earnestness of realism, resisted such ideas. Seldes thought that Florenz Ziegfeld was better than David Belasco, and that the circus was better than grand opera. Edmund Wilson thought the last was an exaggeration, but Hemingway might have found the thought more than casually amusing.

It will be useful to cite the last three of Seldes's principles of art because they seem to reappear persistently in Hemingway's thought:

That there exists a "genteel tradition" about the arts which has prevented any just appreciation of the popular arts, and that these have therefore missed the corrective criticism given to the serious arts, receiving instead only abuse.

That therefore the pretentious intellectual is as much responsible as any one for what is actually absurd and vulgar in the lively arts.

That the simple practitioners and simple admirers of the lively arts being uncorrupted by the bogus preserve a sure instinct for what is artistic in America.

Perhaps the best account is Wilson's long review of 1924 in which he placed Seldes within "America's new orientation" on culture begun by Van Wyck Brooks in 1915. Wilson thought that the Seldes book had identified an important strand of modernism. The "inconsecutive" and even "pointless" comic art of vaudevillians like Joe Cook, Charlie Case, and James J. Morton could be compared to Jean Cocteau and understood as a parallel to Dada. The art of vaudeville was above all an accurate response to the postwar world and "the bewildering confusion of the modern city." The disconnected and often resentful vaudeville script (in some ways a preface to Hemingway) shows the way the world is and the way our "*own minds are beginning to work."*

Finally, in 1925, a year before the writing of "The Killers," an article appeared in *The Drama* on the subject of "The Vaudeville Philosopher" (which may be the right category for Max and Al). It decried the new sensibility of national ressentiment:

There are certain standard subjects that are used almost every night on vaudeville stages through the country. An audience, composed of many persons mentally fatigued after a day's work, learns a philosophy that embraces such precepts as: marriage is an unfortunate institution to which the majority of us resign ourselves; women are fashion-crazy, spend money heedlessly and believe that their husbands are fools; politics is all bunk. Prohibition should be prohibited . . . marital infidelity is widespread; clandestine affairs of most any sort between at least one married person and another of the

opposite sex are comical; and finally "nothing in life really matters. The main thing to do is get all the money you can and keep your mother-in-law as far off as possible."

A few years later, writing about the social mood of the mid-20s, Fitzgerald described "a widespread neurosis" and a significant change in American character. He ascribed the change to the boom, not the bust. Vaudeville seems to have picked up the various kinds of national resentments—many of them in the world of ideas.

To some extent this kind of "philosophy" had always been there because of the daily collision on stage between comic values and what Fitzgerald and others described as our "Victorian" social habit of hypocrisy. Modernism aside, before and during the Great War the national cultural audience had signified a great deal about its sensibility. For example, Willie Hammerstein's Victoria Theatre consciously changed the sentimentality of the music hall. It featured hard-edged discourse on the conflicts of domestic life. It fed off events reported by newspapers and had a symbiotic relationship with them. At the Victoria, comedy was generated out of class, marital, and racial conflict; unrepressed anger and anxieties; and current "sexual scandals . . . and suffragists." Hammerstein's Victoria had put "newsmakers" on its stage: chorus girls with very public private lives, speech-making suffragettes, and the occasional celebrities who fired shots at their lovers. This is how Joe Laurie, Jr., describes Hammerstein's pursuit of the new public consciousness: "he played the killers and near killers."

As early as 1914, the public had become accustomed to seeing the connection between social resentment and theatrical aggression. By the 20s, vaudeville had become increasingly associated with the techniques and values of modernism. Edmund Wilson and Gilbert Seldes among others emphasized the values of nontextual and impermanent arts. As Wilson put the matter two decades later, these were better than "our respectable arts." The new icons of culture—Joe Cook, Charlie Chaplain, Florenz Ziegfeld, Ring Lardner, Krazy Kat, Al Jolson, and Irving Berlin—had an important role in "the liquidation of genteel culture." Vaudeville was a concurrent form of intellectual style. Hemingway came to the subject in mid-decade with a well-defined map of "culture" and of the ways in which comic representation looked at the unrealities of real life.

When Max and Al walk into Henry's lunchroom they are in a confined, lighted, and stagy space with doors for exits and entrances. A running gag begins about not knowing what they want—the gag is at this point merely absurd. Max and Al keep asking each other questions as they go through the formalities of what vaudeville historians call "The Two-man Act." This "was usually the comedy standout of the bill" because "talking routines" had taken precedence over song, dance, acrobatics, and other forms of insurance for comedians. Hemingway follows one specific vaude tradition: "usually it was a straight man with a Hebrew comic." Max is gentile; Al, who could only have come from a kosher convent, is not. The key, however, is that they really are what they are.

Two-man acts were relentlessly ethnic, and aggressive beyond anything dreamed today. Olsen and Johnson or Smith and Dale or Weber and Fields did "The Sport and the Jew" or "Irish by Name but Coons by Birth." The scripts that remain indicate that no punch was pulled, no insult spared. As vaudeville developed, insult gave way to wit.

Slapstick was dropped: beginning with belly-laughs, the two-man act after the turn of century utilized "more rational stuff." The costume and demeanor of modern comics indicated a new sophistication, hence the displacement of red noses, checkered coats, and circus shoes by good suits, ties, and stock collars. The two-man act often wore (Hemingway noticed this) city-slicker gray derbies. The act developed "routines" that were highly verbal, demanding interpretation.

The straight man had the most status—he was sane in a world of eccentrics—and he had some pretensions to ideas, education, and even style. Both Max and Al like to play the straight man, and they alternate in the role. When they first enter, the dialogue is unfocused because they are free-wheeling, ad-libbing on the clock and menu. But they are strangely aggressive and bring into the story attitudes that the story itself does not account for. Some of these attitudes are (so to speak) professional, but others have to do with the genre. All straight men know that the world is composed largely of fools who must be suffered.

Here are two parallel scripts for an opening gag. The first is from Hemingway:

"This is a hot town," said the other. "What do they call it?"

"Summit."

"Ever hear of it?" Al asked his friend.

"No," said the friend.

"What do you do here nights?" Al asked.

"They eat the dinner," his friend said. "They all come here and eat the big dinner."

The second passage suggests that Hemingway borrowed liberally from vaudeville lore. Scripts that were older than he was provided him with one of his central themes: urban sophistication poised against rural idiocy. A "well-dressed" man (he is in fact an actor) from the big city meets one of the local rubes:

"What's the name of this town?"

[. . .]

"Centertown."

"Where is the theatre?"

"I don't know," says the native.

Then the actor looks at him as though he were an idiot.

Hemingway has appropriated the rube's line about not knowing much; he will reverse it, make it into a problem of philosophy. He has exaggerated the free-floating resentment and aggression of comedy, making that the essence of his story.

Max and Al don't like bright boys—the phrase is repeated more than any other in the story. In one of the two-man acts, "The Sport and the Jew," the straight man says to Cohen (whose name has a certain resonance in Hemingway), "You're a pretty smart fellow." He means the opposite. Al and Max are gangsters, satirists, philosophers, and vaudes, but they are above all ironists (Donaldson). Almost everything they say means its opposite. And one of the great resentments in their dialogue is intellectual. The dialogue is economical to a degree— minimalist—conveying the meaning not only of statement but also of predisposition.

Max and Al enter the text with attitudes about a number of things. As professionals, they have ideas about the job, but as comedians they have ideas about life. Their problem is not really Ole Andreson but the yokels they have to deal with—after all, these people have been cluttering up the vaudeville stage past living memory. There is no reason to expect them to behave correctly now.

The repetition of one phrase tells us about scripts and other realities:

"You're a pretty bright boy, aren't you?"

"Sure," said George.

"Well, you're not," said the other little man. "Is he, Al?"

"He's dumb," said Al. He turned back to Nick.

"What's your name?"

"Adams."

"Another bright boy," Al said. "Ain't he a bright boy, Max?"

"The town's full of bright boys," Max said.

The vaude tradition pits knowledge against ignorance, so that it should not be surprising that at this point the story becomes comic epistemology. As always, the straight man is right—these hicks are dumb enough to believe that the facts of their daily lives correspond to a larger order, that there is a relationship between what they believe and the *actual* context for any belief. This point is large enough to be the story itself, and I will return to it in detail. Here we should sense a kind of intellectual pace: beginning with the usual resentments of comic dialogue, we are now moving swiftly to a series of revelations that validate them.

Max catches George looking at him—or perhaps not looking at him—and begins to deliver his philosophical punch lines. They seem at first to be, in the phrase of Edmund

Wilson, "pointless"—but pointlessness has a special meaning in the mid-20s. It illuminates "the way the world is beginning to seem." That goes substantially beyond the fact that the two-man shows had for a long time in their subversive way "ridiculed middle-class ideals of conduct" (Snyder 138). This one will ridicule middle-class confidence in a grounded moral world:

"What are you looking it [sic]?" Max looked at George.

"Nothing."

"The hell you were. You were looking at me."

"Maybe the boy meant it for a joke, Max," Al said. George laughed.

"*You* don't have to laugh," Max said to him. "You don't have to laugh at all, see?"

"All right," said George.

"So he thinks it's all right." Max turned to Al. "He thinks it's all right. That's a good one."

"Oh, he's a thinker," Al said. They went on eating.

The fundamental breach of decorum is for the rube to laugh—after all, he is the joke, not the audience for it. A more serious violation: George is guilty of thinking that anything in the world is "all right." And of wanting "to know what it's all about." He is guilty of being an American after the age of idealism.

There is a splendid remark in Henry F. May's history of thought about the prewar years: progressive idealists were destined to disappear as an intellectual force because "two things seemed to bother them in the world of Fitzgerald, Hemingway, and Faulkner: real frivolity and real pessimism." They never understood Hemingway, but he certainly understood them. They represented to him the imposition of morality and politics on criticism and literature. The world he understood was tragic, not idealistic. It can to some extent be understood through its opposites. For example, in "The Killers" we see a world of small-town loyalties and, in some ways, even of heroism. More important, as a brief, sharp, and deeply philosophical passage shows, it is a world understood through certainties:

"What's the idea?" Nick asked.

"There isn't any idea."

This might indicate a philosophical problem in any system, and it has to be understood within and opposed to an American tradition of thought. American idealism and the public philosophy had the deepest concern for grounding action on logical belief. Recent American philosophy had become known for certain kinds of essays on the order of personal and social life: "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" (Charles Sanders Peirce); "Loyalty to Loyalty, Truth, and Reality" (Josiah Royce); and "The Moral Philosopher and

the Moral Life" (William James). There was, one hoped, or should be such an order. In the last of these social statements, we see what George and Nick wish to believe: "ordinary men . . . imagine an abstract moral order in which the objective truth resides."

Nick, George, and Sam are ordinary men with an a priori sense of objective truth. They have never examined their own premises because daily life rarely makes one do that. But this story forces them not only to become conscious of their beliefs but also to change those beliefs. It forces them to change their idea of logic, which is in some ways a harder task than changing ideas about morality. Much of Hemingway's best work is built around questions that force issues. In this story, the questions are of two kinds, tactical and epistemological, both verging on the metaphysical. The tactical questions are about time and the menu, about obeying irrational orders, about going to the movies. There are more than 50 such tactical questions in this story. But they edge into questions of a different order of magnitude, about the nature of things social and universal, about awareness of reality, about the fully human condition. The literature of the first quarter of the century was famous for such questions. Here are some of them as phrased by Josiah Royce: "What do we live for? What is our duty? What is the true ideal of life? What is the true difference between right and wrong? What is the true good which we all need?" Not only are these answerable questions in Royce, *but answering them is itself a moral activity.* The opposite is true in Hemingway, who warns us here and elsewhere that these questions are so difficult—so unreal—that we ought not to think about them. Or, as Sam the cook says in a parable of another sort of wisdom, "You better not have anything to do with it at all." Sam, who is underrated, is intellectually ahead of Nick and George.

Nick and George begin to understand that the two kinds of questions imply each other. When they separately ask "what's the idea?" they mean the idea for doing as they are told; but the reader, a party to the dialogue, will understand that the idea refers more to Plato than to Ole Andreson. The idea referred to is the idea of meaning in action, and also of meaning in life. That there should be no "idea" for moving behind the counter is an intellectual irritant, but if there is no "idea" for doing or explaining anything or coping with fate, then the problem is much larger. It undercuts the basis for their lives. But their lives have been both moral and unreflective, which is why Max and Al are so contemptuous of bright boys who are thinkers.

Max and Al, themselves far more intelligent than they appear, know that one kind of question implies the other. To want to know something implies that something is to be known, that a given course of action has a universal consequence, that all parties look at the issue in more or less the same way—although William James, wryly brilliant and in a Hobbesian mood, understood

what the words *good, bad,* and *obligation* severally mean. They mean no absolute natures, independent of personal support. They are objects of feeling and desire which have no foothold or anchorage in Being, apart from the existence of actually living minds.

It would be a safe bet that Max and Al know this "idea."

One of the great passages in the story moves with stunning clarity from one form of the same question to its metaphysical shadow:

"Well, bright boy," Max said, looking into the mirror,

"why don't you say something?"

"What's it all about?"

"Hey, Al," Max called, "bright boy wants to know what it's all about."

"Why don't you tell him?" Al's voice came from the kitchen.

"What do you think it's all about?"

"I don't know."

By the time this part of the dialogue finishes, Nick realizes that the here and now may not be related to any universal. That particular problem is part of a much larger problem about intelligibility. In 1925, a short time before this story appeared, John Dewey had suggested in an essay on "Nature, Ends and Histories" that the historically naive mind began "with a ready-made list of good things or perfections which it was the business of nature to accomplish." And so it is for what James called the mind of the ordinary American who expects to see in the world the order he has so confidently but wrongly imposed on it. But not for those like Max and Al—messengers from modernism—who know that decision, action, and consequence are relative. Perhaps there is no meaning in life, no morality for causation, no guiding universal. As to the last, reality being purely situational, *there are certain things you never know at the time.*

As Dewey put the matter, it would be deeply confused to think that expectations matched actualities. It would be splendid if the American social order reflected a good and moral universe—but rather a lot of hard work remained to make the world what one hoped it was. One might fail, at that. Also in 1925, in "Existence, Ideas and Consciousness," Dewey argued that "events which brutely occur and brutely affect us" must be converted into meaning, must have "probable consequences." Otherwise, "philosophy finds itself in a hopeless impasse." Wilson seems to have been purposive and contextual in choosing to state outcomes in terms of their "pointlessness." Max and Al may not have been reading either John Dewey or Edmund Wilson, but Hemingway knows about that impasse.

Certain phrases in the story become magnified through repetition and allusion: there is a continual echoing of "what it's all about" and "what's the idea." Readers are intended to recognize that the tactical can become the metaphysical, intended, I think, to move from what to why. Let us start with a very small and limited why, the reason for Max and Al's taking bloody murder very much in stride but being offended by ignorance. Is there something visibly characteristic of American life in the provinces that engages them in a way that their work does not? They find a laughable disparity between mind and

material reality. They suggest that Nick and George may be bright—but that they remain boys. Like most straight men, they are adults in a world of children.

Max and Al refer to a subject later mentioned by Walter Lippmann in *A Preface to Morals* about one persistent aspect of our national character: Americans simply did not want to be aware of the way things actually were; they preferred, in fact, to remain deluded about what "the idea" was for anything. Lippmann thought that Americans generally failed to explain the facts of their lives. We wanted to see an orderly moral world, so we invented one. We ascribed "everything which happens" to "the duty of the universe" toward us. But the idea that "the universe is full of purposes utterly unknown" seems utterly unknown to Americans. A phenomenon like, let us say, the advent of Max and Al to the town of Summit is a kind of philosophical demonstration that accepted ideas have no authority. Yet, in the terms used by Lippmann, what Max and Al represent "*is in the nature of things.*" Lippmann was to conclude that few Americans could bear to analyze their experience because that would mean the acquisition of a sense of evil (emphasis added). If "The Killers" had a moral, that would be it.

Evil has many forms. Hemingway's dialogue quickly enters the realm of moral imponderables. Movies, which are entertainment, are in fact explanations. Andreson is going to be killed as part of a professional, hence moral, obligation. Fate is circumstance:

"All right," George said, "What are you going to do with us afterward?"

"That'll depend," Max said. "That's one of those things you never know at the time."

Rather small and colorless words carry burdens too large to assess: *do, afterward,* and *depend mean* decisions made as Joseph Conrad imagined them, with one's feet not touching the earth. They do not refer themselves to any "idea:" certainly not to justice or meaning, but only to circumstance. Max says that he likes George, and he probably does. But Al may yet blow his head off. Why has all this been revealed? "We got to keep amused, haven't we?" The dialogue keeps circling back to the premises of the two-man act, which has more to say here than the hoarded sum of western moral thought.

We recall that throughout Hemingway's lifetime, beginning with William James and continuing with John Dewey, there had been a great, selfconscious, and enormously effective attempt to ground the life of democracy precisely in those western moral meanings. That was clear to Mencken, who understood that James had defined the meaning of American moral life in a "long and glorious" philosophical reign over the reading audience. And Dewey was to be described by Henry Commager in *The American Mind* as the arbiter of national, ethics: "for a generation no issue was clarified until Dewey had spoken." One silent conclusion of this story is that moral explanations of the kind they had so richly provided for America had failed. That is why such explanation is either absent or ineffective, and why the premises of idealism and pragmatism are so intensely ridiculed. Outside the story, for its readers, there is the enormous moral authority of those who have defined for us the nature of social life—but inside the story they are invisible. The rather large sequence of ideas that George

and Nick address—on the meaning of logical action, on universal meaning itself, on the relationship of value to act—have been silently negated. Max and Al replace philosophy. As Edmund Wilson had stated a very short time before, the art of the "pointless" is central to the cultural moment.

Both Wilson and Hemingway developed this idea as a conscious part of the not-especially loyal philosophical opposition. They understood that the relationship of reality to idea was that of perception to composition. They knew what they opposed: Dewey "insisted that the world was a world of meaning, not just a world of flatly unintelligible cause and effect connections." It is impossible to understand "The Killers" without reference to that (supposed) fact. However, when we posit order or nonpointlessness in the world, "it is we who are doing all the intellectual work." Max and Al know this; George and Sam and Nick must become painfully educated.

There are few other works of fiction in which meanings are so impacted. A single word implies heroism, as when George, who is asked if Ole Andreson eats here, simply says "sometimes" and risks his own life. The word *afterward* means the difference between life and death. "They're all right" is nothing less than a special dispensation: it means that George and Nick and Sam will all stay alive because Max knows that they have become realists. George gets the exit line, a rube who has become a straight man: "you better not think about it."

The last line of the story may not be Heidegger, but it is definitely philosophy. It ought to be read against an important passage about American provincial life in Royce, in which we are told that "all of us first learned about what we ought to do, about what our ideal should be, and in general about the moral law" from "our teachers, our parents, our playmates, society, custom, or perhaps some church." But belief does not matter because of its source alone. It remains for us to validate it: "What reason can I give why my duty is my duty?" What makes us human is not what is handed down but the way the mind works under pressure to "furnish the only valid reason for you to know what is right and good." That is what Nick and George and Sam are asked to deny, and what Max and Al conclude they will deny.

In the single best-known statement of recent American philosophy, *Pragmatism,* William James had referred to a notorious crime involving murder and suicide. He understood plainly that this was both a philosophical and a religious issue. James cited the reaction of a drastically empiricist mind that saw in this crime "one of the elemental stupendous facts of this modern word" that "cannot be glozed over or minimized away by all the treatises on God, and Love, and Being, helplessly existing in their monumental vacuity." Such crimes or existential facts, James writes, constitute a "dilemma" for the American mind, whose sense of the verities of daily life is based on intangibles and unprovables.

The governing "idea" of the town of Summit is typical of small towns in the mid-20s, and was evident in the best-known of them all: the assumption that "the world is good, God is good, and His spirit wherein men are to live is love's spirit" becomes embodied in "an elaborate system of beliefs, prohibitions, and group-sanctioned conduct." But even

inside *Middletown* we are always aware that some of the beliefs of this system are impossible to accept literally, "without lying to yourself."

From this dilemma came James's famous statement about American tough-mindedness, a quality that seems to me to describe Hemingway's philosophical stance. The tough-minded were empirical, and in rejecting any systems they rejected not only explanation but also the "idea" of explanation. It may have been only fitting that in 1926 Hemingway too should turn to murder as a philosophical test. James knew that all theories, empiricism among them, and all stances, tough-mindedness among them, were what he called remedies for the world of facts. I believe that Hemingway understood that, but his fiction needed what it found in radical empiricism, which is disguised here as vaudeville philosophy. Or rather, it takes on the appropriate form of vaudeville philosophy.

Source: Ron Berman, "Vaudeville Philosophers: 'The Killers,'" in *Twentieth Century Literature: A Scholarly and Critical Journal,* Vol. 45, No. 1, Spring 1981, pp. 79-93.

Adaptations

Director Robert Siodmak's 1946 film *The Killers* is the first adaptation of Hemingway's story for the screen. It stars Burt Lancaster, Ava Gardner, and Edmond O'Brien and is available at most video stores and many libraries.

Director Donald Siegel's 1964 film *The Killers* also adapts Hemingway's story. Siegel's version stars Lee Marvin, Clu Gulager, John Cassavetes, Angie Dickinson, and Ronald Reagan and is available at most video stores and many libraries.

Topics for Further Study

In groups, research the history of crime in Chicago in the 1920s, paying particular attention to Al Capone and Dutch Schultz. Report your findings to your class, and then discuss any contemporary parallels. For example, is there a city like Chicago today with individuals like Capone or Schultz controlling illegal industries?

At the end of "The Killers," Nick says he is going to leave town. In two pages, write where he goes and what he does next. Try to use Hemingway's own spare style.

Read other stories about Nick Adams in Hemingway's collection *The Nick Adams Stories,* and then discuss how his character in "The Killers" is similar to and different from his portrayal in other stories.

Film historians claim that film noir emerged from the gangster films of the 1920s and 1930s. In class, view the 1931 gangster film, *Public Enemy,* starring James Cagney, and then view the 1946 adaptation of "The Killers," starring Burt Lancaster. After researching film noir, discuss how Hemingway's film illustrates or departs from elements of the gangster movie or film noir.

Hemingway's story is constructed like a play. Divide the class into four groups, assigning each group one "scene" of the play, using the divisions in the plot summary. Have each group perform one of the scenes for the class. Afterwards, discuss choices each group made in staging and performing.

In pairs, write a short dialogue in which a student tries to convince her teacher she deserves a better grade. Use the short, conversational style that Hemingway uses in "The Killers," and then perform the dialogue for your class.

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Al Capone runs a murderous gang in Chicago, trafficking in alcohol and illegal gambling houses.

Today: Organized crime is still widespread, but it is also more diffuse and less concentrated in particular cities. Authorities believe they have largely destroyed the "Mafia" when they put New York City crime boss John Gotti behind bars for life in 1992.

1920s: The life expectancy for American males is 53.6 years and for females 54.6 years.

Today: The life expectancy for American males is 73.1 years and for females 79.1 years.

1920s: A crime wave sweeps the United States, as Prohibition helps spawn the bootlegging industry and increases in prostitution and gambling activities.

Today: Alcohol is legally sold throughout the United States, and legal gambling, in the form of state lotteries and casinos, is widespread.

What Do I Read Next?

Raymond Carver is just one modern writer who was influenced by Hemingway's style. Carver's collection of stories *Cathedral* (1983) was nominated for the National Book Critics Circle Award and was runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize.

Hemingway chronicles the life of Nick Adams, who appears in "The Killers," in his story collections *In Our Time* (1925) and the posthumous *The Nick Adams Stories (1972).*

The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway was published by Scribner's in 1987. This volume contains all of Hemingway's stories, including some previously unpublished pieces. The foreword is written by Hemingway's three sons.

Critics often call Pam Houston a kind of modernday Hemingway. Her story collection *Cowboys Are My Weakness* (1992) describes her female narrator's adventures in the wilderness, including whitewater rafting, hunting, and mountain climbing.

Maxwell Perkins was Hemingway's editor for years. *The Only Thing That Counts: The Ernest Hemingway/Maxwell Perkins Correspondence 1925-1947,* edited by Matthew Joseph Bruccoli, collects letters the two men wrote to each other. Perkins was also F. Scott Fitzgerald's editor.

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1933), Gertrude Stein discusses her friendship with Hemingway, as well as with a number of Hemingway's cohorts, including Sherwood Anderson and Maxwell Perkins.

Further Study

Baker, Carlos, *Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story,* Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969.

Baker's authorized biography is heavily detailed and well documented and remains one of the best biographies of Hemingway written.

De Falco, Joseph, *The Hero in Hemingway's Short Stories,* University of Pittsburgh Press, 1963.

De Falco provides readings examining the psychological dynamics of Hemingway's short stories.

Griffin, Peter, *Along with Youth: Hemingway, the Early Years,* Oxford University Press, 1985.

Griffin's study, which contains a foreword by Hemingway's son, Jack Hemingway, includes previously withheld materials, including letters and stories, to document Hemingway's life through the 1920s.

Hemingway, Mary Welsh, *How It Was,* Ballantine, 1977.

Mary Welsh was Hemingway's fourth and final wife. This book is a diary-driven account of her time with him.

Wagner, Linda Welshimer, *Ernest Hemingway: Five Decades of Criticism,* Michigan State University Press, 1974.

This volume collects essays on Hemingway's novels and stories and contains George Plimpton's 1958 *Paris Review* interview with Hemingway in which the writer discusses his craft.

Young, Philip, *Ernest Hemingway,* Pennsylvania State University Press, 1966.

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BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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