

How I Would Teach “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”

From Hemingway’s “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”, I would like my students to understand the differences and similarities between the three main characters and how they relate to the themes of the story. I want my students to notice and discuss the themes of the attitudes of the youth versus the older generation, as well as the appreciation of life and also loneliness. I think that it is not an educator’s duty to reveal every mystery, but rather to help the students uncover them. This is a duty which cannot be fulfilled through lecture alone, so students will also be asked to complete multiple activities and participate in a discussion.

I would begin class by asking students to share their general thoughts on the story. I will require a reading journal from each student. The reading journal entries should be a half page to a full page in length and should be a chance for the students to reflect upon their reading and their reactions. At the beginning of each class, I would ask for a few volunteers to read their journal entry to the class. It would be a requirement to read a journal entry at least two times throughout the semester. This would help open the conversation at the beginning of each class and start motivating students to pick up on the themes of the story on their own. If it became clear that the students were not writing their journal entries consistently, I would start giving daily reading quizzes. My quiz for “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” would include the following questions:

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| 1. Where is the old man? | In a café |
| 2. What is the old man drinking? | Brandy |
| 3. What did the old man try to do last week? | Kill himself, hang himself, etc. |
| 4. How old is the old man? | 80 |
| 5. What does the young waiter have? | A wife waiting for him, or confidence |
| 6. Why is the old waiter reluctant to close up? | There may be someone who needs the café |
| 7. What does the old waiter keep repeating? | Nada |
| 8. What is the old waiter’s complaint about the bar? | It is unpolished |

After this, I would divide the class into groups of four or five. Then, I would instruct them to select the three most important characters in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” and complete character sketches on each of them. The students would be expected to list every detail of these three characters that they can recall in five minutes. I want this to be done in groups of three or four people so that each of them has a chance to participate within the group. If a group has too many members, it breaks into smaller groups that fail to interact as a whole or the quieter students are overwhelmed by the rest of the group. After five minutes have passed, I would ask each group to share their lists and I would compile them on the board. The students should have chosen to examine the old man, the old waiter, and the young waiter. They should have included details such as the old man’s suicide attempt, how much money he has (“plenty”) how old he is (around 80), his deafness, how he walks (“unsteadily but with dignity”), and why he is at the café so late (“at night it was quiet and he felt the difference”). For the young waiter and the old waiter, the students should have included details about how each one differs in their treatment of the old man- the old waiter doesn’t mind the old man being in the café late at night, while the young waiter rushes the old man and says he “should have killed [him]self last week. They should also notice the parallels between the old man and the old waiter, as well as the differences between the young waiter and the two older men.

After completing each of these activities, I would read a few passages to the class and ask them to discuss the significance of each one. First, we would start with the following passage:

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

“Why?”

“He was in despair.”

“What about?”

“Nothing.”

“How do you know it was nothing?”

“He has plenty of money.”

I would start with this passage because it is the first passage that shows what it is important to the young waiter. The young waiter believes that the old man had nothing to be in despair about because

he has plenty of money. This shows that the young waiter already has little sympathy for the old man and does not understand that there is more to life than money. After discussing this, I would ask the students to consider the following passage:

“I wouldn’t want to be that old. An old man is a nasty thing.”

“Not always. This old man is clean. He drinks without spilling. Even now, drunk. Look at him.”

“I don’t want to look at him. I wish he would go home. He has no regard for those who must work.”

This passage is important because it shows what the young waiter thinks of old age and how his perspective differs from that of the older waiter. The young waiter is rushed and has contempt for the elderly, while the older waiter is patient.

While both of those passages focus on the young waiter’s perspective, the next passages I would like to read to the class focus on the older waiter. I would start with this:

“I am of those who like to stay late at the café,” the older waiter said. “With all those who do not want to go to bed. With all those who need a light for the night.”

“I want to go home and into bed.”

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

“Hombre, there are bodegas open all night long.”

“You do not understand. This is a clean and pleasant café. It is well lighted. The light is very good and also, now, there are the shadows of the leaves.”

This passage shows how the older waiter relates to the old man. He understands the need for a clean, well-lighted place. Also, this passage is reflective of an appreciation for life. The young waiter is concerned with getting home and into bed. He has little interest in observing “the shadows of the leaves” or the light. The younger waiter lacks an appreciation for the small things in the world, while the older waiter and the old man find comfort in them. I want my students to see how old age has brought wisdom and a unique perspective to the two older characters, while youth has left the young waiter ignorant of the small joys in the world. The final passages that I would like my students to consider are reflective of the loneliness felt by the old man and the old waiter.

“What did he fear? It was not fear or dread. It was a nothing that he knew too well. It was all a nothing and a man was a nothing too. It was only that and light was all it needed and a certain cleanness and order. Some lived in it and never felt it but he knew it was all nada y pues nada y nada y pues nada. Our nada who art in nada, nada be thy name thy kingdom nada thy will be nada in nada as it is in nada. 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 fom nada; pues nada. Hail nothing full of nothing, nothing is with thee.”

“ You want another copita?” the barman asked.

“No, thank you,” said the waiter and went out. He disliked bars and bodegas. A clean, well-lighted café was a very different thing. Now, without thinking further, he would go home to his room. He would lie in bed and finally, with daylight, he would go to sleep. After all, he said to himself, it is probably only insomnia. Many must have it.”

From these passages, I want my students to get a sense of the loneliness that the old waiter feels. The “nada” over and over again leaves a strong impression of what the old waiter feels. I hope that my students would pick up on this sense of loneliness and see that the clean, well-lighted place serves as a shelter for all of the lonely people of the night.

I want my class to be free-flowing because English classes should not be rigid. There should be activities and planned discussions, but the class should go where the students take it. As an educator, it would be my duty to help guide the students and keep them on topic, but they should be capable of discussing the stories. I would not assume that I have a better interpretation of the story than they do, but I would be there to answer any questions they may have and offer my opinions on the texts. Along with my opinions, I would offer the opinions of other scholars and critics and ask all of my students to offer their own interpretations. The class would need to be open to new ideas. Interpretation can be highly subjective and some students may have different ideas. I would be responsible for helping them to understand the general themes, but also for encouraging them to offer their own interpretations. My main goal for the class would be to convey what I think are the most important themes and spark a discussion that helps the students to evaluate the themes and how they can be related to their own lives.