



Growing Pains: The Struggles of Adulthood in Ernest Hemingway's Short Stories

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Abstract

This paper examines the theme of adulthood and its inherent struggles in Ernest Hemingway's short stories, focusing on the psychological and emotional conflicts faced by his characters. Through close readings of "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," and "Hills Like White Elephants," the study explores how Hemingway's minimalist style and sparse dialogue reflect the internal turmoil experienced during the transition from adolescence to adulthood. The analysis highlights key moments of personal realization and disillusionment, revealing how characters grapple with existential uncertainty, the inevitability of aging, and the pain of loss. By situating these stories within Hemingway's broader literary themes, the paper argues that his portrayal of adulthood is marked by a profound sense of vulnerability, ambiguity, and resilience, offering enduring insights into the complexities of the human condition.

Keywords

Ernest Hemingway, adulthood, existentialism, short stories, psychological conflict, emotional conflict, minimalism, dialogue, disillusionment, loss, aging, human condition, "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," "Hills Like White Elephants"

I. Introduction

Ernest Hemingway's fiction is renowned for its stark realism, emotional restraint, and the profound sense of existential uncertainty that permeates his narratives. Emerging from the cultural and psychological aftermath of World War I, Hemingway's writing reflects the anxieties and disillusionments of a generation that found itself unmoored from traditional certainties. His characters are often solitary figures, wrestling with the burdens of adulthood, the inevitability of aging, and the elusive search for meaning in a world that offers little comfort or clarity. The struggles of adulthood, in Hemingway's universe, are not merely external challenges but deeply internal, psychological conflicts that test the very fabric of the human spirit.

At the heart of Hemingway's exploration of adulthood lies a preoccupation with existentialist philosophical inquiry into the meaning of life, the inevitability of death, and the individual's confrontation with nothingness. His stories are populated by men and women who find themselves at critical junctures, forced to reckon with the limitations of their agency and the harsh realities of a world indifferent to their suffering. Disillusionment is a constant companion for these characters, who must navigate the transition from the innocence of youth to the sobering responsibilities and disappointments of maturity. The human condition, as Hemingway portrays it, is marked by a sense of vulnerability, ambiguity, and the ever-present threat of despair.

This paper contends that Hemingway's "short stories offer a nuanced and deeply resonant portrayal of adulthood as a period of psychological turmoil, existential uncertainty, and moments of profound disillusionment. Employing a minimalist style characterized by sparse dialogue and understated prose, Hemingway mirrors the internal struggles of his characters, allowing their silences and omissions to speak volumes about their emotional states. His stories do not provide easy answers or comforting resolutions; instead, they invite readers to inhabit the uncomfortable spaces between words, where the true weight of adulthood is most keenly felt.

Three of Hemingway's most celebrated short stories *Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, and *Hills Like White Elephants* serve as exemplary texts for examining the complexities of adulthood in his work. Each story presents characters at a crossroads, grappling with the psychological and emotional challenges that accompany the passage from youth to maturity.

In *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, Hemingway presents a stark meditation on aging, loneliness, and the search for meaning in a world that seems increasingly devoid of purpose. The story centers on two waiters- one young, one older- and an elderly customer who sits alone in a café late into the night. The older waiter, in particular, is portrayed as a man who understands the old customer's need for a refuge from the darkness and chaos outside. The café, with its cleanliness and light, becomes a symbol of order and sanctuary in an otherwise meaningless world. Through minimalist dialogue and subtle characterization, Hemingway reveals the psychological struggles of his adult characters: the young waiter's impatience and lack of empathy contrast sharply with the older waiter's quiet understanding and existential dread. The story's famous invocation of "nada"-nothingness- underscores the pervasive sense of emptiness that haunts those who have outgrown the illusions of youth.

The Snows of Kilimanjaro delves even more deeply into the internal conflicts of adulthood, focusing on the character of Harry, a writer facing imminent death from gangrene while on safari in Africa. As he lies dying, Harry reflects on his life, haunted by regrets over his wasted talent and the choices that have led him to this point. The story unfolds through a series of memories and hallucinations, revealing Harry's psychological struggle to come to terms with his failures and the approach of death. Hemingway's use of fragmented narrative and stream-of-consciousness techniques mirrors Harry's fractured sense of self, while the stark African landscape serves as a metaphor for the barrenness of his emotional life. Harry's relationship with his wife, Helen, is marked by a sense of distance and unspoken resentment, further emphasizing the isolation that can accompany adulthood. The story's ambiguous ending, with its vision of the snow-capped peak of Kilimanjaro, offers a fleeting glimpse of transcendence, but it is overshadowed by the inescapable reality of loss and mortality.

In *Hills Like White Elephants*, Hemingway turns his attention to the emotional complexities of adulthood through the lens of a young couple facing a life-altering decision. Set at a train station in Spain, the story is composed almost entirely of dialogue, with the central possibility of an abortion, never explicitly stated. The couple's conversation is marked by evasion, misunderstanding, and a profound inability to communicate their true feelings. The barren landscape surrounding the station, with its hills "like white elephants," serves as a powerful symbol of the choices and consequences that define adulthood. Jig, the female protagonist, is caught between the desire to preserve her relationship and the fear of sacrificing her own needs and identity. The story's unresolved conclusion leaves the characters and the readers in a state of uncertainty, reflecting the ambiguity and anxiety that so often accompany the transition to adulthood.

Across these stories, Hemingway's minimalist style functions as more than a literary technique; it is a reflection of the internal turmoil experienced by his characters. By stripping away extraneous detail and focusing on surface actions and dialogue, Hemingway forces readers to engage with the subtext of unspoken fears, regrets, and desires that drive his characters. The "iceberg theory," as it has come to be known, suggests that the most important aspects of a story are those that remain beneath the surface, hinted at but never fully revealed. In the context of adulthood, this narrative strategy captures the difficulty of articulating the complexities of emotional experience, as well as the tendency to mask vulnerability with stoicism or silence. Ultimately, Hemingway's portrayal of adulthood is marked by a tension between despair and resilience. His characters are often battered by life, but they continue to seek moments of dignity, connection, and meaning, however fleeting. Whether it is the solace of a well-lighted café, the memory of lost love, or the hope of a new beginning, these moments serve as reminders of the human capacity to endure in the face of uncertainty. In Hemingway's world, the struggles of adulthood are inescapable, but they are also the crucible in which the deepest truths of the human condition are forged.

This paper will explore these themes in greater depth, examining how Hemingway's short stories illuminate the psychological and emotional struggles of adulthood. Through close analysis of *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, and *Hills Like White Elephants*, it will argue that Hemingway's minimalist style and existential preoccupations offer a powerful commentary on the challenges and ambiguities of growing up, growing older, and finding meaning in a world that often resists understanding.

II. Adulthood as Existential Crisis

A. A Clean, Well-Lighted Place: Isolation and the Void of "Nada"

Hemingway's *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* masterfully explores the psychological landscape of adulthood through the lens of existential dread, isolation, and the search for meaning. The story's central figures old

man and the older waiter, are both haunted by a profound sense of despair that transcends material circumstances. The old man's suicide attempt is not prompted by poverty or lack of care, but by an overwhelming loneliness and a loss of purpose. Despite having money and a niece who looks after him, he is depicted as utterly alone, his deafness both literal and symbolic of his detachment from the world. The older waiter, who suffers from insomnia, recognizes in the old man a reflection of his fears about aging and insignificance. Both characters are enveloped by the emotional darkness of "nada," a term Hemingway uses to signify the existential nothingness that threatens to consume them.

The minimalist dialogue between the two waiters is a hallmark of Hemingway's style, and it serves to highlight the generational divide in their responses to despair. The younger waiter, impatient and dismissive, is eager to return to his wife and the comforts of youth, showing little empathy for the old man's plight. In contrast, the older waiter's resignation and empathy stem from his own experiences with existential anxiety. Their sparse exchanges reveal more in what is left unsaid than in what is spoken, underscoring the isolation that comes with age and the gradual erosion of hope.

The café itself emerges as a powerful symbol clean, well-lighted refuge from the chaos and darkness of the outside world. For the old man and the older waiter, the café represents a fragile sanctuary where order, clarity, and routine can momentarily stave off the encroaching void. The interplay of light and darkness in the story is deeply symbolic: while the café's illumination offers temporary solace, it cannot ultimately dispel the existential gloom that pervades their lives. The story's conclusion, with the older waiter reciting a parody of the Lord's Prayer filled with the word "nada," encapsulates the futility of seeking lasting comfort in a world devoid of inherent meaning. In this way, Hemingway portrays adulthood as a stage marked by acute awareness of mortality, the loss of faith, and the desperate search for dignity amid despair.

B. The Snows of Kilimanjaro: Regret and Mortality

In *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, Hemingway delves into the existential crisis of adulthood through the character of Harry, a writer facing imminent death from gangrene while on safari in Africa. As Harry's physical condition deteriorates, he is forced into a painful reckoning with his past. Through a series of flashbacks, Hemingway reveals Harry's artistic failure and his reliance on the wealth of his wife, Helen. These memories are tinged with regret, as Harry confronts the reality that he has squandered his talent and compromised his integrity for comfort and security. The gangrene that consumes his leg becomes a potent metaphor for spiritual decay and the corrosive effects of unfulfilled potential.

Harry's impending death brings his existential crisis into sharp relief. The majestic, snow-capped summit of Mount Kilimanjaro, ever present in the background, symbolizes the lofty aspirations and purity he has failed to attain. As he lies dying, Harry is tormented not only by physical pain but by the knowledge that he will never realize his artistic ambitions. This confrontation with mortality strips away the illusions of adulthood, exposing the emptiness that can lurk beneath material success and social respectability.

The relationship between Harry and Helen is fraught with tension, further highlighting the emotional costs of Harry's choices. Their interactions oscillate between bitterness and tenderness, revealing the deep fractures in their marriage. Helen's devotion and optimism stand in stark contrast to Harry's cynicism and self-loathing. Despite her efforts to comfort him, Harry remains emotionally distant, using sarcasm and antagonism as shields against vulnerability. This dynamic underscores the story's central message: material comfort cannot compensate for the loss of purpose or the failure to live authentically. In the end, Harry's existential crisis is not just about dying, but about the recognition that he has not truly lived.

C. Hills Like White Elephants: Ambiguity and Lost Innocence

Hills Like White Elephants approaches the existential dilemmas of adulthood through the subtle interplay of dialogue, setting, and symbolism. The story centers on a young couple, Jig and the American, as they wait at a train station and discuss-without ever naming the possibility of an abortion. Their conversation is marked by evasion, ambiguity, and a profound inability to communicate openly about their feelings and fears. This unspoken conflict mirrors the transition to adulthood, where choices become irreversible and innocence is inevitably lost.

The landscape surrounding the station is rich with symbolic meaning. On one side lies a barren, dry plain; on the other, a fertile valley. These contrasting images represent the dichotomy between freedom and responsibility, between the carefree life the couple has known and the new reality that awaits them should they choose to have the child. Jig's observation that the hills "look like white elephants" is a coded acknowledgment of the pregnancy unwanted gift that threatens to upend their lives. The American's insistence that the operation is "simple" and "perfectly natural" belies the emotional complexity of the decision, and his repeated assurances that Jig need not go through with it if she doesn't want to only serve to heighten the sense of pressure and manipulation.

Hemingway's use of sparse dialogue and omission compels readers to read between the lines, inferring the emotional stakes from what is left unsaid. The couple's inability to reach genuine understanding or resolution reflects the uncertainty and anxiety that define the threshold of adulthood. The story's unresolved ending leaves both characters and the audience suspended in ambiguity, underscoring the existential reality that some decisions are final and that the future, once altered, cannot be reclaimed.

In these three stories, Hemingway's minimalist style and symbolic landscapes serve as mirrors for the internal crises of his characters. Adulthood, as depicted by Hemingway, is not a time of settled certainty but a period fraught with existential doubt, regret, and the search for fleeting moments of solace. Whether through the quiet despair of a late-night café, the bitter reckoning of a dying writer, or the unspoken tension of a couple at a crossroads, Hemingway reveals the profound struggles that define the passage into maturity.

III. Minimalism as a Reflection of Internal Turmoil

A. The Iceberg Theory

Hemingway's signature "Iceberg Theory," also known as the theory of omission, is foundational to his minimalist style. This approach posits that the most significant elements of a story lie beneath the surface, much like the bulk of an iceberg is hidden underwater. In his short stories, Hemingway deliberately understates key details, compelling readers to interpret the deeper emotional and psychological realities of his characters. For example, in *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, the old man's suicide attempt and the older waiter's insomnia are presented with minimal commentary, leaving the profound existential dread they represent to be inferred by the reader. Similarly, in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, Harry's fatal gangrene and his regret over wasted potential are not dwelt upon directly; instead, they emerge through brief allusions and fragmented memories, requiring readers to piece together the full extent of his internal crisis.

This technique is also evident in the terse, ambiguous dialogue of *Hills Like White Elephants*. The characters' exchanges are stripped to their bare essentials, with the true subject of their conversation, impending abortion, never explicitly named. Their clipped sentences and evasions externalize their unspoken fears and anxieties, forcing readers to engage actively with the subtext. In all these stories, Hemingway's minimalism is not a lack of depth, but a deliberate invitation for readers to probe the silences and omissions that reveal the characters' internal turmoil.

B. Symbolism and Setting

Hemingway's minimalist style extends to his use of setting and symbolism, which serve as external manifestations of his characters' psychological states. In *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, the contrast between the café's bright, orderly interior and the surrounding darkness is deeply symbolic. The café becomes a refuge against the chaos and meaninglessness—"nada"—that lurks outside, embodying the human need for sanctuary and order in a world that often feels indifferent or hostile.

In *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, natural imagery is central to the story's emotional resonance. The snow-capped peak of Kilimanjaro, ever distant and unattainable, represents purity, transcendence, and the artistic ideals Harry has failed to reach. The African plains, with their stark beauty and reminders of mortality, underscore the inevitability of death and the unresolved legacies that haunt the protagonist. The landscape is not merely a backdrop but a mirror of Harry's inner decay and longing for redemption.

Similarly, in *Hills Like White Elephants*, the physical setting is laden with symbolic meaning. The barren hills and fertile valley visible from the train station reflect the couple's crossroads: the choice between a life of responsibility and one of continued freedom. The "white elephants" themselves symbolize something unwanted or burdensome, hinting at the pregnancy and the weight of the decision before them. Through such understated symbolism, Hemingway's settings become active participants in the drama of internal conflict.

C. Psychological Realism

Hemingway's minimalism is also a vehicle for psychological realism, capturing the fragmented, often inarticulate nature of human thought and emotion. In *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, the use of stream of consciousness allows readers direct access to Harry's fractured psyche. His memories and regrets surface in disjointed, nonlinear flashes, reflecting his deteriorating physical state and the chaos of his inner world. This narrative technique dispenses with traditional exposition, instead immersing the reader in the subjective experience of a man facing death and reckoning with his failures.

In *Hills Like White Elephants*, psychological conflict is rendered through silence and avoidance. The couple's inability to communicate openly about the abortion is itself a form of conflict, revealing their mutual fear of the consequences of adulthood. Their pauses, evasions, and half-finished sentences express more than any direct statement could, illustrating how much of adult anxiety and pain is suffered in silence. Hemingway's minimalist dialogue thus becomes a powerful tool for conveying the complexity of internal struggles without overt dramatization.

Through his “Iceberg Theory,” symbolic settings, and psychologically realistic portrayals, Hemingway’s minimalism does not diminish the emotional impact of his stories but instead amplifies it. By leaving much unsaid and relying on implication, he invites readers to confront the depths of his characters’ internal turmoil, making the struggles of adulthood all the more resonant and universal.

IV. Confronting the Human Condition

A. Existential Uncertainty

Hemingway’s stories are deeply invested in exploring the uncertainty that lies at the heart of the human condition. In *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, the older waiter’s parody of the Lord’s Prayer—substituting “nada” for spiritual reassurance—captures a profound sense of absurdity and nihilism. This moment reveals the character’s struggle to find meaning in a world that offers no clear answers, mirroring the existential predicament faced by many of Hemingway’s protagonists. The search for solace, whether in ritual, routine, or fleeting moments of connection, is ultimately shadowed by the awareness that such meaning may be illusory or unattainable.

Mortality and the question of legacy are also central to Hemingway’s vision. In *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, Harry’s impending death forces him to confront the sum of his life’s choices, ambitions, and failures. His memories and regrets surface as he faces the end, underscoring the fleeting nature of human achievement and the anxiety of leaving behind an incomplete or unfulfilled legacy. Similarly, in *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago’s epic struggle with the marlin becomes a meditation on the temporary nature of triumph and the inevitability of loss. These narratives suggest that adulthood is defined by an ongoing confrontation with mortality, where every victory is tinged with the knowledge of its impermanence.

B. Loss and Disillusionment

Loss and disillusionment permeate Hemingway’s depiction of adulthood. The old man in *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* embodies the isolation that comes with aging. His deafness and solitude are not just physical conditions but symbols of a deeper erasure of identity and connection. As people grow older, Hemingway suggests, they may become invisible to the world around them, their struggles overlooked or misunderstood. Failed relationships further illustrate the emotional cost of adulthood. In *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, Harry’s contempt for Helen is rooted in his own self-loathing and disappointment, revealing how personal failures can corrode intimacy and affection. The emotional rift between the couple in *Hills Like White Elephants* is similarly marked by detachment and misunderstanding. Their inability to communicate openly about their predicament highlights the loneliness that often accompanies adult relationships, where emotional needs remain unmet and true understanding proves elusive.

C. Resilience in Adversity

Despite the pervasive sense of uncertainty and loss, Hemingway’s characters often display a quiet resilience in the face of adversity. The older waiter in *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* and Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* both exemplify a stoic endurance that is central to Hemingway’s moral vision. They persist in their routines, maintain their dignity, and seek meaning even when confronted by despair. This stoicism is not about the denial of suffering but about the courage to endure it with grace.

Hemingway’s stories frequently end on ambiguous notes, refusing to offer neat resolutions or easy answers. The open endings of his short stories suggest that the struggles of adulthood—existential doubt, loss, and the quest for meaning—are not problems to be solved but conditions to be lived with. In this way, Hemingway’s work reflects the complexity and ambiguity of the human condition, portraying adulthood as a journey marked by both suffering and resilience, where the search for meaning is ongoing and the hope for solace, however fleeting, remains a vital part of the human experience.

V. Conclusion

Hemingway’s short stories, through their minimalist style and existential undertones, offer a profound meditation on the nature of adulthood. His characters, stripped of pretense and often isolated by circumstance or choice, are forced to confront the realities of loss, mortality, and disillusionment. Whether it is the quiet despair of the old man in *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, the regret-laden introspection of Harry in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, or the unspoken tension between the couple in *Hills Like White Elephants*, Hemingway’s protagonists embody the relentless negotiation that defines adult life. Their struggles are rendered with such restraint that the silence and omissions in the narrative become as telling as the words themselves, drawing readers into the depths of their internal conflicts.

These struggles are not unique to Hemingway’s characters but are emblematic of the broader human experience. The existential uncertainty, the pain of aging, the ache of failed relationships, and the search for meaning in a world that often seems indifferent are universal themes that resonate across time and culture. Hemingway’s writing aligns closely with existentialist philosophy, suggesting that life’s meaning is not given

but must be sought, often in the face of overwhelming odds and persistent doubt. His stories do not offer easy answers or comforting illusions; instead, they invite readers to recognize the dignity and resilience required to persevere.

The enduring legacy of Hemingway's portrayal of adulthood lies in its unflinching honesty. He does not shy away from depicting the pain, ambiguity, and loneliness that can accompany maturity, but neither does he deny the possibility of grace, courage, or fleeting moments of solace. In illuminating the complexities of the human condition with such clarity and restraint, Hemingway's work remains as relevant and powerful today as when it was first written. His stories remind us that the journey through adulthood, with all its trials and uncertainties, is a shared human endeavor- one that demands both endurance and hope.

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