

INTERROGATING THE MIRROR:  
DOUBLE-CROSSINGS IN HEMINGWAY'S "THE KILLERS"

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"Double-crossed somebody. That's what  
they kill them for."

- George

Among the early critics who commented on the discrepancies between what "is" and what "seems" in "The Killers" was Edward C. Sampson, who pointed out in 1952 that very little in the story is what it appears to be: Henry's, which serves no alcoholic beverages, is a converted tavern run by George; Al and Max order breakfast at a lunch counter whose menu features dinner; the orders are mixed up; the time on the clock is wrong; Mrs. Hirsch runs Mrs. Bell's rooming house; and so on (item 2). Here Sampson let the matter rest, and most subsequent commentators have been content to see these discrepancies as "framing" the portrait of the disillusioned Nick Adams, who by story's end finds that the world of appearances conceals a terrifying reality beyond his imagination.<sup>1</sup>

There is, however, more to the narrative poetics of "The Killers" than a handful of discrepancies, which - significant as they are - do not explain the mechanics or, for that matter, the presence of complementarity throughout the story.<sup>2</sup> "The Killers" is

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1 Robert E. Fleming presents a far more thoroughgoing discussion of the "misunderstandings and false impressions" which toolmark "The Killers" than did Sampson. Fleming also positions the story's notorious discrepancies within the context of the Nick Adams' stories as a whole (310).

2 Complementarity describes a system or systems - physical, epistemological, or otherwise - of mutually interdependent *and* irreconcilable relations. As a scientific way of knowing, it denies strictly classical notions of contradiction, either-or, and binary (or digital) oppositions. According to H.H. Pattee,

(Complementarity) requires the simultaneous articulation of two, formally incompatible, modes of description. The source of this requirement lies in the subject-object duality, or in the distinction between the image and the event, the knower and the known ... however one may choose to express this basic distinction. The essence of the concept of complementarity is not in the recognition of this subject-object distinction, which is common to almost all epistemologies, but in the apparently paradoxical articulation of the two modes of knowing. (*Italics added.*)

Pattee elaborates on what is meant by the "paradoxical articulation of... two modes of knowing":

(T)his duality of descriptive modes and their incompatibility should not be thought of as a contradiction in any sense. In fact, there is none since the two modes of perception are formally disjoint (*sic*) and contradiction can only occur within a single formal system (192-193).

In thumbnail terms, complementarity is "(a) recognition of an inescapable duality at the heart of things" (Gleick 40). This is not, however, as simple as it sounds. When the mathematician Arkady Plotnitsky refers to "the double nature of light," where "one must manage classically incompatible

designed primarily to undercut its own epistemological reliability by raising questions concerning the nature of perception at the most fundamental levels of experience. As such, it represents one of the earliest examples of metafiction in modern American letters, embodying what Patricia Waugh in *Metafiction* calls "exaggeration of the tensions and oppositions inherent in all novels: of frame and framebreak, of technique and counter-technique, of construction and deconstruction of illusion" (14). The slippery world of the story is comprised of mutually exclusive and mutually interdependent appearances, in which oppositions, doublings, and epistemological erasures are the norm. In the end, Hemingway has cut the phenomenological ground out from under virtually everyone - Al, Max, Nick, George, Sam, Mrs. Bell, Ole Andreson, and, of course, the reader, who also finds him- or herself lost in a cloud of agnostic unknowing.

At the beginning of "The Killers," George asks Max and Al, "What's yours?" (279). Interestingly, this same question also appears in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." When the weary Spanish barman asks the older waiter, "What's yours?" the waiter answers, "*Nada*" - but he smiles, suggesting that *nada* may not be a wholly negative condition after all ("What did he fear? It was not fear or dread") (382-383). In "The Killers," however, the answer to this provocative question is significantly different. To George's query Max replies, "I don't know," followed by Al's echoic "I don't know" (279). These responses pinpoint a key distinction between the worlds of the two stories. As a complementary entity, *nada* in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" represents a certainty of sorts - an ironic absolute which transcends the story's spatio-temporal settings. In "The Killers," on the other hand, nothing is transcendent, nothing is certain: the characters shuttle continually between states of knowing and not knowing, thinking and not thinking, feeling and not feeling, wanting and not wanting - even their genders are confused on more than one occasion.

The structure of "The Killers" consists of three complementary metapatterns. The multiple interconnections or fusions of the first two - which I will label *oppositions* and *doublings*, respectively - combine to create a third metapattern, to be called *double-crossings*. These three categories are themselves divided into several subsets - including cognition, affect, and appetite - all of which comprise dual or multiple systems of meaning.

## I. Oppositions

This metapattern features one set of complementary positives and one set of complementary negatives. The terms "positive" and "negative" do not exist independently of each other or in strictly *binary* opposition. Instead, their relationships are, in James Meriwether's illuminating phrase, "paradoxical, blurred, both oppositional and mutually supportive, [redolent] of radical difference and fundamental similarity" (105).

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systems of representation *without resolving their incompatibility*," he is also describing complementarity (italics added) (6). "The process also produces," Plotnitsky adds, "specifically as *writing*, new economies of interpretation, history, theory, of literature" (205). One such "economist" is, I wish to suggest, Ernest Hemingway.

### *Cognition*

In this category, Hemingway critiques reason as a reliable guide to the phenomenological realm of "The Killers." He accomplishes this task by foregrounding the following cognitive activities: thinking, speaking, doing and knowing. The first set of cognitions is illustrated by George's query of Al, "What's the idea?", and by Al's reply, "There isn't any idea."; typical of the second pair of positive and negative complementarities is Al's admonition to Max to "Shut up," counterbalanced by Max's command to George, "Talk to me, bright boy" (281, 283). Oppositional "doings" are exemplified by Ole Andreson's "There ain't anything to do," and George's "that's good thing to do" (288, 289). Finally, the complementary status of knowing(s) is revealed in Nick's line, "I know it..." and Mrs. Bell's reply, "You'd never know it" (288).

### *Affect*

In this subset may be found three mutually exclusive, yet interdependent, complementarities: liking, feeling, and wanting. The first complementarity emerges when Max tells Al, "I like him [George]," and is counterbalanced by Al's reply to Max, "I don't like it" (Max's banter with George) (284, 285). Feeling is also rendered as a subset of positives (Max's "I got to keep bright boy amused, haven't I?") and negatives (Mrs. Bell's "I'm sorry [Ole] don't feel well.") (283, 288). Wanting comprises the third affective oppositional entity: "Everything we want's the dinner, eh?" (Max to George), as opposed to Sam's "I don't want any more of that" (280, 285).

### *Sense(s)*

The world according to three of the five senses - seeing, hearing, and touch - is also delineated in "The Killers" through a series of complementary oppositions. "Nick looked at the big man lying on the bed," is countered by "[Ole] Andreson did not look at Nick"; Al's reply to Max, "I can hear you all right," opposes Sam's "I don't even listen to it"; and the physically (and morally) insulated Al and Max eat "with their gloves on," while Nick "had never had a towel in his mouth before" (281, 283, 286, 287, 288).

### *Appetite*

In addition to the ontological oppositions outlined above, "The Killers" features a series of complementarities represented by the physical appetites, namely eating, drinking, and sexuality (as defined by a series of gender-donfusions). Like their cognitive activities, Al's and Max's eating habits also appear to be agnostic: "I don't know..." (Max to Al) "I don't know what I want to eat" (Al to Max) (279). When they finally decide, they are stymied in their attempts to order dinner at a lunch counter that appears to serve only breakfast. And when Al wants something alcoholic to drink, he is again met with opposition in the form of George's nonalcoholic bevo, ginger ale and silver beer. The sexuality of predominantly male characters of the story is also inverted, as when Sam and Nick are described by Al as being tied up "like a couple of girl friends in a convent" (284).

## II Doublings

The second complementary metapattern in "The Killers" consists of doublings which, like the oppositions, inform the story's narration and dialogue from the very beginning. This counterbalancing of mutually exclusive and mutually identical phrases, words, and objects undermines the capacity of each individual metapattern to interpret fully the meaning(s) of appearances in the story.

Hemingway's predilection for what Frank O'Connor has called "elegant repetitions" (Benson 88) is well-documented. In chiding critics for over-simplistic assessments of this technique, Jackson J. Benson insists that, especially in Hemingway's short stories, repetition "is used in a number of different ways and often used subtly." Among the results of Hemingway's use of repetition, Benson adds, is a prose which offers the reader a "key to a complex of sensation - emotion" (284, 286). Because Hemingway's critique of the appetites is exclusively oppositional, this "complex" is classified into just three of the four above-mentioned subsets: cognition, affect, and sense(s).

### *Cognition*

Hemingway articulates the processes of thinking, speaking, doing and knowing in patterns of repetition as well: Max goads George, "What do you think...? What do you think...?"; Al chides Max, "You talk too much... You talk too much"; Ole Andreson doubles and re-doubles his despairing, "There ain't anything to do"; Max and Al echo each others "You never know" (282, 284, 285, 287-88).

### *Affect*

The affective states of liking, wanting, and feeling are also rendered in patterns of doublings. Max tells Al, "Bright boy is nice... He's nice boy"; Sam insists, "I don't want any more of that... I don't want any more of that"; and Max tells George, "You don't have to laugh... You don't have to laugh at all, see?" (284, 285, 281).

### *Sense(s)*

Doublings of visual appearances include *persons* (Al and Max, "dressed like twins"); *menu items* (bacon and eggs, ham and eggs, liver and bacon); *objects* (Ole Andreson's two pillows); *action* (the brief appearances of two other people in the lunchroom); and *settings* (the two arc-lights Nick passes under on the way to Hirsch's). Visual perceptions are doubled too, as in "Max looked into the mirror... Max watched the mirror," or "Ole Andreson looked at the wall.. He looked at the wall" (282, 287). A twofold phenomenology of sounds also obtains: "Listen" (Al to George); "Listen" (George to Nick) (282, 286). As for tactile sensations, Nick's aforementioned close encounter with the towel in his mouth is also balanced by Sam's nervously feeling "the corners of his mouth with his thumbs" (286).

## III Double-crossings

Having schematized each metapattern, we may now turn to the structural relationship between the metapatterns. This relationship is a complex one and cannot be interpreted solely as an overarching system of binary oppositions. It is not a simple case of one, then the other, then one, then the other. At the center of the story's world

of appearances is the *fusion* of doublings and oppositions. Because they double and invert at the same time, mirrors - including, of course, the one in Henry's that Max gazes into and speaks into - also embody complementarity. This diadic principle of mirroring comprises the third metapattern of "The Killers."

Consider Al's bantering remark "You never know," in response to Max's joke, "I suppose you were in a convent." Shockingly, this retort is doubled *and* countered by Max's sinister "You never know," spoken a few moments later in reply to George's question, "What are you going to do with us afterwards?" (284). In like manner, Sam's "I don't like it" (having a towel stuffed in his mouth so he can't talk) is coupled with Al's "I don't like it" (referring to Max's habit of talking too much) (285, 286). Another fusing of metapatterns occurs when Max tells George that they are killing Ole "just to oblige a friend," a remark that takes on even more frightening implications when George tells Max, "Your friend, Ole Andreson, isn't going to come" (284, 285). In assigning the same sobriquet "friend" to Ole's arch enemy *and* to Ole himself, Hemingway alerts the reader to what a stricken Nick Adams will soon discover: Ole Andreson's death will, in essence, be a suicide.

Yet another complementary fusion is provided by the aforementioned contrary pair of "doings": "There ain't anything to do" (Ole) and "That's a good thing to do" (George) (287, 289). Oppositional in terms of what the words *say*, the statements are, in terms of what they *mean*, identical twins as well. Ole's remark springs from his refusal to confront the extreme horror of his situation and do something about it; George's remark is directed at Nick's own response to Ole's predicament ("I can't stand to think about him...") (289). The "good thing to do" has, in fact, already been "done" by Ole, who also experiences extreme difficulty in thinking about it ("I can't make up my mind...") (288).

Consider too the epistemological riddle, "What was it?" first uttered by Sam on entering the lunchroom from the kitchen (282). Later, on seeing Nick enter his room at Hirsch's, Ole also asks, "What was it?" (287). In putting the same words of a man whose life will be spared into the mouth of one whose life is essentially over, Hemingway emphasizes Ole's terrible isolation from his fellow beings. In this instance, the indefinite pronoun "it" does complementary double duty by signifying two utterly opposing human situations.

Of particular interest is the conjoining of dialogue near story's end which reveals the essence of Nick's ontological dilemma. This occurs when Nick recalls George's earlier remark, "You better go see Ole Andreson" by telling Ole, "I better go back and see George" (286, 288). The former statement is grounded in optimism (there is still time to warn Ole of his predicament), and latter in pessimism (Ole, it turns out, is indifferent to his predicament). Why, then, is it so important for Nick to "go back" to Henry's to see George? Once again complementarity provides the answer. Because Nick is still anguishing at story's end between the two cognitive positions ("It's too damned awful..."), George offers him the story's ultimate agnostic advice: "Well, you better not think about it" (289). This, of course, from the "bright boy" who is described by Max earlier in the story as "a thinker" (281).

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