Hemingway’s Iceberg Theory:  
The Theory of Omission

“If a writer of prose knows enough of 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 ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water.”

-- Ernest Hemingway, Death in the Afternoon

As readers, we often assume that everything that the writer was thinking about his story made its way into the text. For Hemingway though, and for some writers, *what is left out is often more important than what is included*. Like an iceberg, which has only a small part visible above water, the main conflicts, motivations, thoughts, and philosophies are hidden beneath the surface of the story. The hard facts float above the water, while the supporting structure, complete with symbolism, operates out-of-sight.

In reading Hemingway’s short stories, one must think deeply about what is missing, because most certainly, these are the most important.

I like to think of reading Hemingway like searching for a key to unlock the story. The stories are like puzzles that need to be figured out and sometimes even a single key can help to unlock them. Our powers of using textual evidence to figure out stories are taken to the extreme.

“Cat in the Rain”

1. **Silently** read the story once through.
2. **As a group,** discuss first impressions and observations and take notes.
3. **Silently** reread the story and **annotate** for imagery that may relate to pregnancy, sex, and fertility. Think creatively!
4. **As a group,** respond to the following (everyone take notes):
   a. Using evidence but elaborating, characterize how the husband treats the wife.
   b. Using evidence but elaborating, describe how the wife views the hotel owner.
   c. Contrast the husband with the hotel owner in terms of what they each might mean to the wife.
   d. Using evidence but elaborating, characterize the wife.
      i. What does she *REALLY* want? Where are there textual hints for this?
      ii. What’s going on in the “I want” section?
   e. What the hell happens at the end? Is it even the same cat? Thinking symbolically, who did she really want the “cat” from? Does this represent a fulfillment or a shattering of her true wishes?
“A Clean, Well-Lighted Place”

1. **Silently** read the story once through.
2. **In groups**, find the pieces of dialogue that are clearly distinguished by the narrator as belonging to one of the two waiters. Work your way backwards and forwards from these and mark in the left margin a “Y” for dialogue belonging to the young water and an “O” for speech belonging to the old waiter.
   a. HINT: Waiter-speech mostly alternates *except* on the 1st pg when one goes to the old man.
   b. It is also ok to put a question mark for parts on the first page of which you are uncertain.
   c. Use evidence from what the waiters know about the old man to figure out the first bit.
3. **Silently** reread the story now that you have the waiters distinguished.
   a. **Annotate** as you read in the margins with your own comments about how the waiters are different. Note specifically about how each views the following things/ideas, then each of you fill out the following chart but work together as a group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Young Waiter</th>
<th>Old Waiter</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>the old man</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>loneliness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the cafe &amp; its importance</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>confidence</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>money</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>death</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

4. On a separate sheet of paper, work together to answer the following questions:
   a. Characterize each waiter in terms of how he lives his life and how he views meaning or meaninglessness / nothingness (*nada*) in the world.
   b. When the old waiter says the old man was in despair over “nothing,” what does he mean?
   c. What is philosophically happening on the last page when the old waiter says the Lord’s Prayer but replaces “Father [God],” “Heaven,” etc. with *nada* or “nothingness”? What is he showing about his philosophies of the world and of the human condition?