



## A Day's Wait: A Psycho Analytic Study of the Juvenile Mind

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**Abstract:** Ernest Hemingway, the great American Short story writer and novelist has presented the indefatigable human nature in all his works. In 'A Day's Wait', he presents the plight of a small boy who has to fight against imaginary fear due to some of the wrong information perceived by him at a tender age. It is said that imaginary fears are more fatal than the real ones. The readers sympathize with the little boy who undergoes great mental pain and sees imminent death. This story is also a wonderful example of the father-son relationship. This research paper aims at analyzing the need of communication, in absence of which the boy's life would have been in jeopardy.

**Keywords:** Mental agony, irrelevant information, lack of communication.

Ernest Hemingway's contribution to American literature is par excellence. His writings had lasting influence on the 20th century fiction. Hemingway's restless and adventurous life gets reflected in almost all his works. Though his creative writings restrict to a very limited number of themes but his presentation and literary style has gained him a permanent place among the forefront writers of the world literature. His literary output consists of ten novels, ten short story collections and five non-fictional works. He was awarded the noble prize in literature for his 'The Old Man and the Sea' in 1954. Almost all his great works fall under the category of American classics. Hemingway's creative genius has been rightly praised:

Ernest Hemingway...is a significant name in the modern American fiction. The spare, agile style of his novels and short stories has greatly influenced the development of modern prose. (Sasikumar 3)

Hemingway's short story 'A Day's Wait' is the story of a small boy who suffers a great mental agony because of his own misunderstanding. It is rightly said, 'A little knowledge is dangerous'. People rely upon insufficient facts, misleading information and pre-conceived or irrelevant fears which result into untold miseries. The story presents the plight of a very small child who imagines death hovering before his eyes and in his mind due to some of the wrong information perceived by him at a tender age. It has been rightly observed:

It is a bare, simple story, told in a bare style, without any elaboration and ornamentation...in this bare, simple narrative, the boy's anxiety, fear and dread of death are brought out vividly. The anxiety is based on a simple confusion between the two scales used for measuring temperature, the Fahrenheit scale used in America and the Celsius scale used in Europe (including France). The narrative technique and the style are typical of Ernest Hemingway- simple, direct and straightforward. (Chakravarthi)

The narrative of the story encompasses a tragic outcome of misconception of Schatz, a nine-year-old boy, who becomes feverish one winter night and his temperature has risen to one hundred and two. The family physician leaves after examining him and giving necessary instructions to his father:

Downstairs, the doctor left three different medicines in different colored capsules with instructions for giving them. One was to bring down the fever, another purgative, and the third to overcome an acid condition. The germs of influenza can only exist in an acid condition, he explained. He seemed to know all about influenza and said there was nothing to worry about if the fever did not go above one hundred and four degrees. This was a light epidemic of flu and there was no danger if you avoided pneumonia. (Fantasy 29)

The boy overhears the conversation between the father and the doctor. The physician tells that the boy's temperature is 102 degrees which the boy misunderstands to Celsius and perceives a wrong concept in his mind that he can't survive with such a high temperature. The loving and caring father does everything that he can do to keep the boy in a cheerful mood. But Schatz seems to be indifferent to everything happening around him. His father goes out for shooting without even a faint idea that an unknown fear has entangled his dear son. Schatz does not sleep and asks his father to leave him alone, if it bothered him to stay with him. Poor father tried to divert Schatz's attention from his sickness but with little result.

On his return from shooting, Schatz's father found no improvement or sign of a recovery in the health of his son. He gave a prescribed dose of medicine but Schatz hesitated to take it saying "Do you think it will do any good?" (Fantasy 31) This was a big surprise for the anxious father and yet grave shock was there in store for him. He failed to understand what led the young chap to such baseless suspicion. After a while, Schatz troubled his father with this straightforward question:



"About what time do you think I'm going to die?" he asked.  
"What?"  
"About how long will it be before I die?"  
"You aren't going to die. What's the matter with you?"  
"Oh, yes, I am. I heard him say a hundred and two."  
"People don't die with a fever of one hundred and two. That's a silly way to talk."  
"I know they do. At school in France the boys told me you can't live with forty-four degrees. I've got a hundred and two."  
He had been waiting to die all day, ever since nine o'clock in the morning. (Fantasy 31)

The above conversation with father and the son shows how much agony he might have undergone. It was not a serious illness at all and having a little higher than normal temperature cannot claim one's life. It was certainly a groundless fear and proper treatment accompanied with rest was surely to help him gain his health risk. Schatz's father assured him that nothing uneven was going to happen. On being asked, the small boy revealed that he was told that people can't live forty four degrees whereas his temperatures for exceeded it. And hence there was no chance of survival.

Now the father realizes what prevented his son from behaving in a normal way. He explains the difference between two types of thermometers by giving an example of miles and kilometers. He tells Schatz that it is ninety eight degree normal temperature on the thermometer used by the doctor whereas another different kind of thermometer would have thirty seven as normal. Figures obviously differ on different kinds of thermometers. He gives a very matching example of miles and kilometers. The same distance can be shown in two different ways by using different units of measurement. The father explains in the following manner:

"You poor Schatz," I said. "Poor old Schatz. It's like miles and kilometres. You aren't going to die. That's a different thermometer. On that thermometer thirty-seven is normal. On this kind it's ninety-eight."  
"Are you sure?"  
"Absolutely," I said. "It's like miles and kilometers. You know, like how many kilometers we make when we do seventy miles in the car?"  
"Oh," he said. (Fantasy 31-32)

Schatz is greatly relieved. His limited knowledge frightened him to a great deal. Had he not told his father about what was going into his mind; his condition would certainly have worsened and perhaps have lost his precious life. Ignorance is bliss. It may be good to have some knowledge about one's diseases and treatment being given. But wrong information or one's own judgment proves to be a great hindrance. There is a hidden Schatz in all which jumps to quick false conclusions inviting unnecessary troubles. Hemingway rightly conveys his readers that misconception sometimes becomes fatal for one. It has been rightly commented:

The narrator...and through him the reader, learns something about the dynamics of misunderstanding. And Hemingway uses these easier lessons to show us something harder about the need to reconcile opposites, the (deadly) danger of unbridged schism, and the father hero engaged in healing task of establishing vital connections. (Gajdusek)

Before the clouds of misunderstanding are dispersed, Schatz cannot free himself the fear of oncoming death. He awaits the arrival of death anxiously. Life becomes dull and uninteresting for him. It is an accepted fact that death is only certainty in this uncertain world. But waiting for it is all the more excruciating experience.

This great story aims at addressing the establishment of the affectionate behavior in society. The unnecessary and the imaginative fears leave none, be it a child. It is very much important to observe the behavior of the child and it should not be taken lightly. Had Schatz not properly been counseled, it would have wrecked havoc in his life. Schatz, a victim of misunderstanding, deserves the reader's sympathy for his predicament and in the end, they, too, along with him, heave a sigh of relief. O. Henry has performed a yeoman's service by bringing to the forefront the mental traumatic condition of a child who undergoes great mental conflict and at last rescued from it by proper counseling. It is not the duty of only the psychologist and counselors to rub balm on the tortured souls. Each family must have a family member, like Schatz's father who takes genuine interest in the well being of their family members.

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