Krebs fought? I should answer (a) because such specificity suits the general air of factual precision in the first paragraph, so characteristic of the openings of Hemingway stories; and (b) because (like the wartime photograph of Krebs, a corporal, and two German girls standing by the Rhine, the main subject of the second paragraph), the Marines have, for most Americans, conventional associations of glamor, exotic travel, strength, and Good triumphing—a set of associations the story will annihilate with Hemingway’s deadpan ironies. The Marines are simply one item in the considerable catalogue of war-related things with heroic and patriotic meanings for those who, like Krebs’ parents and townspeople, take the distant and conventional view of war. Such a view will be part of the story’s main business to dispel.

—JOHN D. BOYD, Holy Cross College

Anderson’s THE EGG

In Sherwood Anderson’s short story “The Egg,” the egg assumes associations beyond those of the culinary. For the father, farmer and restaurateur, eggs represent the concrete manifestation of his personal failures; for the narrator, truly the child of the father, eggs represent cosmic failure, that is, the futility of life itself.

In three successive ventures with eggs, the father experiences unqualified personal failure. His first encounter with eggs involved the chicken farm, the family’s enterprise designed to raise themselves in the world. The demise of the farm occurred not because of any lack of commitment on the part of the father (ten years of “the sweat of the father’s brow”), but because of the uncooperativeness of the egg and “the many and tragic things that can happen to a chicken” (pp. 48, 47). After admitting failure on the chicken farm, the father set out “looking for a new place from which to start on his upward journey through life” (p. 49). His quest succeeded in placing him in a restaurant in Pickleville, Ohio, and taking him from the nurturing of eggs to the serving of them. The father “worked hard,” his establishment “remained open at night” (pp. 53-54), but the restaurant’s “command—‘EAT HERE’—was . . . seldom obeyed” (p. 53). The third failure hatched from the scheme to entertain his customers, an idea doomed by his use of the egg as an uncooperative prop.

The father’s obsession with the mutant chicks represents his symbolic and vindictive attempt to assert superiority over the egg. The father attempts to keep
the five-legged chickens and two-headed roosters alive; failing at that, he pre-
serves the freakish fetal chicks in alcohol; finally, he displays these as curiosities
in his restaurant. The egg stymies the father yet again: the mutants will not stay
alive to earn the father his fortune as a carnival exhibitor; even the pickled chicks
horribly rather than amuse his customers in Pickleville.

Whereas the father’s fascination with the mutant chicks is pathological, the
son’s interest is philosophical. The son understands what his father does not. The
father saves the egg’s mistakes to assert that eggs do fail; yet in truth, the fact
that the eggs permit no imperfect image of themselves to survive to be exploited
proves to the son the “final triumph of the egg” (p. 63). The narrator cynically
compares the dreadful cycle of the chicken and the egg to the cycle of life. “They
are so much like people they mix one up in one’s judgments of life” (p. 48). The

chicken

... is born out of an egg, lives for a few weeks as a tiny fluffy
thing, ... then becomes hideously naked, eats quantities of corn and
meal, ... gets diseases, ... stands looking with stupid eyes at the
sun, becomes sick and dies. A few hens and now and then a rooster,
intended to serve God’s mysterious ends, struggle through to
maturity. The hens lay eggs out of which come other chickens, and
the dreadful cycle is thus made complete. (pp. 47-48)

The narrator emphasizes the depressing meaninglessness of the egg’s cycle
of life and by implication the cycle of human life. Such a futilitarian’s view of
life emerges if the narrator is correct in asserting “most philosophers must have
been raised on chicken farms” (p. 48). The narrator is so absorbed with his anal-
ogy that he unconsciously dehumanizes the humans closest to him. Thus, the
narrator describes his father as “bald-headed,” “long associated with . . .
chickens” (p. 50), a rooster; his mother, identified with the chickens, presented
as a henpecking wife, is a hen. The family’s departure from the farm is ironically
described as a “flight” (p. 51), a description that completes the metaphorical
association. Therefore, the narrator’s statement, “They (chickens and eggs) are
so much like people” (p. 48), takes on a double meaning, one philosophical and
one metaphorical.

Sherwood Anderson’s egg will not be cultivated; it will not stand on end; it
will not squeeze into a bottle. To Anderson and his narrator, the egg is a symbol
of the maddeningly predictable, intractable, unspeakable banality of the world.
Only expert magicians and cheats can triumph over it.

—PATRICK and BARBARA BASSETT, Stuart Hall

NOTES

  pp. 46-63.