



Spring 2016

# Selected Nick Adams Stories: Ernest Hemingway's Sense of Place

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# Selected Nick Adams Stories: Ernest Hemingway's Sense of Place

## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how Ernest Hemingway's use of natural imagery and physical elements in several of his semi-autobiographical Nick Adams stories offer insights into his character, especially Nick Adams. It analyzes Adams's interactions with the physical world and compares these interactions with his interpersonal relationships and his own development. The short stories that this thesis examines include "Indian Camp," "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife," "Now I Lay Me," "The End of Something," "The Three Day Blow," and "Big Two-Hearted River." In these stories, Hemingway uses the natural world as a defense mechanism for Nick Adams, a character who turns to nature whenever he confronts problems or personal crises.

## **Keywords**

hemingway, nature, lost generation

## **Disciplines**

Literature in English, North America

## **Comments**

Written as an Honors Thesis for the English Department.

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GETTYSBURG COLLEGE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

SELECTED NICK ADAMS STORIES: ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S SENSE OF PLACE

BRENDAN RALEIGH  
SPRING 2016

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements  
for a degree with honors in English

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## **Abstract**

This thesis examines how Ernest Hemingway's use of natural imagery and physical elements in several of his semi-autobiographical Nick Adams stories offer insights into his character, especially Nick Adams. It analyzes Adams's interactions with the physical world and compares these interactions with his interpersonal relationships and his own development. The short stories that this thesis examines include "Indian Camp," "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife," "Now I Lay Me," "The End of Something," "The Three Day Blow," and "Big Two-Hearted River." In these stories, Hemingway uses the natural world as a defense mechanism for Nick Adams, a character who turns to nature whenever he confronts problems or personal crises.

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## Introduction

Ernest Hemingway (1891-1961) has almost become as almost as significant for exploits as an outdoorsman as for his iconic, modernistic writing. His literary legacy is inextricably entwined with his image as a big game hunter in Africa, a skier in Switzerland, and an angler in Key West, Florida. Since childhood, Hemingway cultivated a keen appreciation for and understanding of the natural world. His father kindled this passion, encouraging him to develop skills in “swimming, fishing and hunting” as the young Ernest matured in northern Michigan (Balakrishnan 1). Indeed, Clarence Hemingway “educated his boy about nature and taught him the fundamentals of scientific observation,” frequently reading natural history books to Ernest and acquainting him with the remote wilderness of the Midwest (*Hemingway on Hunting* xxvi).

Subsequently, many of Hemingway’s most well-known works prominently feature depictions of characters interacting with the physical world – from fishing in *The Old Man and the Sea* and *The Sun Also Rises* to the hunting references in “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” and “The Snows of Kilimanjaro.” Stylistically, Hemingway’s publications center nature and, more broadly, place, which “lies at the heart of Hemingway’s art, as they did in his life” (Godfrey 48). Imaginative use of the physical world propels many of his narratives; the natural world can tell stories and elicit emotions that Hemingway’s characters cannot express on their own – at least, not without violating the guiding principles behind Hemingway’s compact, modern writing style.

Hemingway’s “hunting, fishing, and exploring” experiences in northern Michigan often served as inspiration for his Nick Adams stories in particular, providing thematic instruction for the writer’s twenty-four semi-autobiographical short stories (*Hemingway on Hunting* xxvii). Just

as Hemingway found solace and comfort in nature when the world failed him, so, too, does Nick Adams. Hemingway first began writing these pieces in 1924 with “Indian Camp” and would continue to use the Nick Adams character to depict his own life experiences, as well as his own fondness for and connection to the natural world. Hemingway’s last Nick Adams story, “A Way You’ll Never Be,” was published in 1936 and was among the last short stories he ever wrote.

In these pieces, the natural settings in which Nick Adams is placed often hold as much thematic weight as the characters and their spare words. This technique is commonplace in the Hemingway canon, as many of his works are intensely descriptive and rely on setting or place to communicate emotion, rather than expressing a character’s feelings explicitly through dialogue or narration. This stylistic trademark is particularly evident in one of Hemingway’s most famous Nick Adams stories, “Big Two-Hearted River,” in which Nick Adams only utters nine words and contemplates only fifteen words as internal monologue. The rest of the 8,000-word story concerns the geography of the river and Nick’s interactions with the physical world.

Nearly all of the Nick Adams stories utilize this technique, as well, albeit to varying extents. Some, such as “Indian Camp” and “The End of Something,” utilize the natural world in a subtle, more peripheral sense. “Indian Camp,” for example, only employs natural description at the beginning and end of the story. In others, like “Now I Lay Me” and “Big Two-Hearted River,” Hemingway’s plotlines overtly hinge on natural elements and descriptions. Even in the stories with more subtle uses of nature, however, Nick Adams’s understanding of the world and himself are influenced by or reflected in his natural surroundings, just as Hemingway placed himself in natural places that were open, wide, and often untamed, such as old Key West, Idaho, and northern Michigan. As an outdoorsman, Hemingway held a unique “sensitiveness to color, to

climate, to the knowledge of physical energy under heat or cold,” and he used these sensitivities to bring out the natural world and its effects in his Nick Adams stories (Kazin 334).

Throughout these stories, Hemingway’s reflections on nature offer commentary on more than just Nick Adams and Hemingway himself. Some of the most common of these ideas include Native Americans and their associations with nature, familial and romantic life, masculinity and gender, and nature and death. In particular, Hemingway emphasizes the way in which nature’s consistency and reliability are superior to interpersonal relationships. Through his life, Nick Adams loses faith in friends, lovers, and family, but he finds security knowing that the natural world cannot abandon him, nor can he abandon the natural world.

Obviously, “Big Two-Hearted River” exemplifies Hemingway’s use of place and observation of the physical world; however, it will not be examined as extensively as some of the lesser-known Nick Adams stories, which have not received much critical or scholarly attention. Many critics have already analyzed the content of “Two-Hearted River” extensively – more so than almost any other of Hemingway’s short stories – and concluded that Nick Adams is recovering from war-related stress, despite the fact that Hemingway never mentions war or combat in “Big Two-Hearted River” (Flora 43). But, in the story, place as symbol is in evidence, as Hemingway describes one side of the train track as desiccated and the other as fertile, reflecting Nick’s conflicted mental state. This paper will, instead, examine this story from the lens of rarer, yet textually-supported interpretation of the story that involves Nick’s personal life, rather than his out-of-text wartime trauma. The stories that this paper will examine include “Indian Camp,” “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife,” “Now I Lay Me,” “The End of Something,” “The Three Day Blow,” and “Big Two-Hearted River.”



## **“Indian Camp”**

“Indian Camp” is among Hemingway’s earliest short stories and marks the first appearance of Nick Adams, a character essential to understanding the Hemingway canon. Its utilization of nature as a narrative device is somewhat atypical of Hemingway, however, in that the natural world only rarely receives attention in the text. The central plot actions – Nick’s father’s delivering of a woman’s child and the discovery of her husband’s suicide – are, after all, an interaction solely between humans. Nick’s reaction to and involvement with these occurrences are ostensibly the focus of “Indian Camp,” rather than his involvement with nature.

Nick’s only real interactions with nature occur at the beginning and ending of the story, bookending the action of “Indian Camp,” but these interactions are nevertheless significant to his character and the story. Both of these interactions with nature are very similar, but they have telltale differences from one another. In the beginning, Nick and his father are rowed across a lake to the Indian camp by a member of the tribe; in the end, Nick’s father rows him away in the camp.

In the former incident, Nick does not notice anything relating to nature, aside from how it interacts with those around him. Hemingway writes of Nick taking note of the Indians’ “quick choppy strokes” as they row through the water and Nick feels that it is “cold on the water” (“Indian Camp” 91). At the beginning of the story, this observation is the extent of Nick’s interactions with nature: two off-handed comments that focus more on people than place or setting.

In the latter incident, Nick’s personal interactions with nature, as well as his observances of the physical world, increase noticeably. Hemingway closes the story, with a physical

description: “The sun was coming up over the hills. A bass jumped, making a circle in the water. Nick trailed his hand in the water. It felt warm in the sharp chill of the morning” (“Indian Camp” 95). This interaction is far more imagistic, impressionistic, and detail-oriented language than that of the opening scene. Additionally, this closing description ignores all of the people surrounding Nick. The only human mentioned in the closing paragraph is Nick himself – he places himself, both physically and textually, within the surrounding natural elements.

Therefore, this heightened sensibility of nature is linked to – and, perhaps, resultant of – the action of the story. Nick undergoes a transformation after he witnesses the birth of the child and the father’s suicide. He is disgusted with the visceral details of his father’s work (as evidenced by his repeatedly “looking away” during the birth and when the father’s corpse is discovered) and turns, instead, to the innocent simplicity of the natural world.

Hemingway repeatedly expresses this sentiment in his Nick Adams stories, as the character repeatedly discovers that, while people and their actions repulse, bore, or betray him, nature beckons to him, offering sanctuary, safety, and simplicity.

The last sentence of the story directly connects Nick’s relationship with nature with his understanding of himself. Hemingway writes: “In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die” (“Indian Camp” 95). Hemingway does not write this as a conclusion that Nick draws from the operation or his subsequent conversation with his father. Rather, Hemingway places the sentence directly after the natural descriptions, indicating that it is an implied result of Nick’s observations. Again, Nick finds safety in nature, using it to shield himself from the reality of death. Nick only resorts to this buffer after he has attempted to elicit a comforting response from his father, asking him

about death. When Nick only receives curt, evasive answers like “Hardly ever,” “It all depends,” and “They do sometimes,” he turns away from his father and toward nature (“Indian Camp” 95). As a doctor, Nick’s father would have a clear understanding of mortality and, therefore, be able to educate his son on the matter. Yet, instead, the father chooses to speak in vague terms, refusing to provide any sort of safety to his son, neither reassuring Nick, nor distracting and deluding him, as the natural world does. Where the father offers ambiguous and uncertain information, Nick’s observations of nature immediately grant him a clear and certain guarantee of immortality.

This relationship between mortality and nature explains the last line of the story. As Nick begins to observe the landscape, Hemingway writes, “he felt quite sure that he would never die” (“Indian Camp” 95). In spite of the horrific display of mortality that Nick witnesses in the Indian Camp, Nick’s observations of nature help him to forget the traumatic sight. Nick feels secure in nature – even more than he does in the arms of his father.

This connection is not the only way in which “Indian Camp” explores the natural world. Hemingway also uses the Indians’ relationship with nature as another method of conveyance, using background details to depict another recurring theme in the Nick Adams stories: the destruction of the physical world.

In “Indian Camp,” Hemingway treats the Native Americans as “a part of the landscape, like the hemlock forests and lakes,” as they exist solely in the background, never directly affecting the plot or, in the Indians’ case, the story’s dialogue. Both the Native Americans and the natural landscape are portrayed as the helpless victims of destruction (Hays 46). The people

of the camp are poverty-stricken and downtrodden; they live in putrid shanties, and they must make their livings off the destruction of land, primarily as “bark-peelers” (“Indian Camp” 92).

Hemingway draws a parallel between control over one’s health and control over the land. The Native Americans are only able to survive by destroying their own land and selling it to American towns, just as they are reliant on medical care from Nick’s father. This parallel is embodied in the doctor’s cutting into the Indian woman, which mirrors the deforestation that Hemingway mentions earlier on in “Indian Camp.” Both incidents are required for survival, but both also contradict traditional Native American independence. This conundrum is the implied cause of the Indian man’s suicide at the end of story.

Thus, Hemingway equates control over nature with freedom, self-reliance, and survivability. The Native Americans have lost control of their land and, as a result, their lives. As critic Amy Strong points out, the only Indian voice offered in “Indian Camp” is the screaming mother; they have no voice in the story and are, instead, purely subject to Nick’s father and, more broadly, modern American society (23). The Native Americans’ lack of autonomy is through their lack of dialogue.

Moreover, Strong points out a specific, physical parallel that embodies the relationship between the Native Americans and the natural world that surrounds them. Strong writes, Nick’s father “has cut into the woman, like the early settlers leaving a gash in the tree” (24). The woman’s Cesarean section is the tipping point in the story, as it depicts “a woman’s body under complete control of white men,” just as the surrounding lands are (22).

This view of nature in “Indian Camp” sets up an additional interpretation of Nick’s assurance that he will never die at the end of the story. Nick sees the helplessness and

dependency of the natives and realizes that, due to his access to healthcare and his superior societal standing, he will never suffer the same fate. This mirrors the fact that his relationship with nature is, due to the circumstances, stronger than the Native Americans' relationships. While the natives are forced to destroy nature for the sake of subsistence, Nick is able to approach nature in a peaceful and nondestructive way.

After Nick witnesses firsthand how little choice the Native Americans have in their lives, he realizes that, in comparison, he has far more control over his own fate. The native father, in realizing his loss of control over life and nature, chooses to take back control over life by choosing to deprive himself of it; there is nothing Nick's father or American society can do to undo his decision. Nick, on the other hand, is a part of the controlling society, one that can choose how it wants to handle life, death, and nature; therefore, death is something that he believes he can already control and, in turn, avoid. This assessment leads Nick to believe that, for him, death is from inevitable.

### **“The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife”**

Hemingway wrote “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” around the same time as “Indian Camp,” and the two stories are similar in their subject matter – namely, their focus on a young Nick Adams, his father, and Native Americans. One of its main distinctions from “Indian Camp,” however, is that Nick only appears for a brief moment at the end of the story. “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” depicts Nick’s father arguing with his Indian workers about moving logs that fell off a steamship, then passive-aggressively conversing with his wife, and finally walking into the hemlock woods with Nick to look for black squirrels. The first scene has one of the Indians, Dick Boulton, accusing Nick’s father of stealing lumber that washed ashore

near his home. The rest of the plot unfolds due to the father's frustration and anger with this accusation. In spite of the interpersonal focus on the plot, however, nature is once again indispensable to the telling of the story and the understanding of Hemingway's characters.

One of the most notable – yet ambiguous – employments of nature takes place in the final scene, in which Nick and his father walk into the hemlock woods. The father and son do so for different yet related reasons, both of which shed light on the characters' relationships with the natural world.

Nick's father initiates the walk to ease his mounting anger and frustration, since he decides to get up and leave after his wife contradicts him. Directly after she says that Nick's father is wrong about the conniving nature of the Native Americans, he responds by leaving and saying, "I think I'll go for a walk" ("The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" 103). Previously in the story, the father responds to the contentious situation with the Native Americans by cleaning and loading a shotgun – presumably preparing to hunt. In other words, his immediate, personal response to frustration is to turn toward violent sport. After his wife chastises him for his anger, though, he puts down the shotgun and opts, instead, for the more peaceful "walk." Her interruption of his plans is evident in the passage: "He sat with the gun on his knees. He was very fond of it. Then he heard his wife's voice from the darkened room." Due to his wife's feminine, pacifying influence, the father switches from a destructive approach to nature to a passive one. His approach to it, however, is variable and subject to his wife's influence. As such, the father does not appear to have an entirely pure relationship with nature; it is regulated and thereby marred by his romantic relationship with his wife.

Nick's motivation is less clear. His first appearance, after all, takes place in the final lines of the story: "[Nick's father] walked in the heat out the gate and along the path into the hemlock woods. It was cool in the woods even on such a hot day. He found Nick sitting with his back against a tree, reading" ("The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" 103). Hemingway does not give Nick a conflict or plot of his own; the story is his father's and, thus, Nick's function is to act as an intermediary between his father and nature.

When Nick's father tells Nick that his mother wants to see him inside, Nick responds, "I want to come with you," but Hemingway does not specify his reason for wanting to do so. Here, Nick has to "come to his father's rescue" (Domotor 116). His father was humiliated earlier with the Native Americans' accusations. His wife's chastisement further demeans the father and, just as in "Indian Camp," he is made to seem "inadequate, powerless, and incapacitated" (Domotor 116). As such, Nick's interest in joining him in his engagement with nature is an attempt to restore the father's masculinity and confidence; it is Nick's attempt to show his father that Nick still views him as the head of the family. Just as in "Indian Camp," Nick cannot depend on his father to be a strong, paternal role model and, instead, has to be the one guiding his father toward the restorative powers natural world.

In spite of his benevolent motivation, however, Nick only further taints the depiction of his father and his appreciation for nature. For the second time in the same scene, a family member is able to manipulate the father's approach to nature – first the wife, then the son. Nick's language is carefully chosen to prevent this: "I want to go with you" ("The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" 103). In this phrasing, the walk is still the father's; Nick is merely going along with him. However, Nick subsequently dictates the scope and extent of the walk. When Nick

suggests, “I know where there's black squirrels, Daddy,” the father immediately goes along with his son’s suggestion (“The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” 103). Though the father is the impetus behind the outing, his appreciation for nature is clearly not as honed or specific as Nick’s. Nick has specific goals for the outing, while the father is willing to go anywhere with any goal in mind. Though, traditionally, the father would be the head of the household, nature rules Hemingway’s world, and, in the end, “the doctor follows the leader into the woods his child knows better than he” (Strychacz 60). He does, however, defy his wife in the end, placing himself above her in the hierarchy of power. This final act explains the fact that she is in bed for the whole story (and thus the farthest of nature), as she ends up being able to control the least amount of power among all of the characters.

The contrast in motivation emphasizes the contrast between Nick and his father as lovers of nature, overall. Nick’s love is more pure, being based on his own understanding of nature’s rehabilitative power, as well as his appreciation of specific aspects of nature, such as the black squirrels. The father knows that nature has a calming effect on him, but his relationship is not as personal, passionate, or peaceable. In fact, when left to decide for himself, Nick’s father’s first approach to nature is destructive, as evidenced by his earlier intentions to hunt and profit by selling the washed-up lumber. While Hemingway does not condemn hunting as an example of a poor connection with nature, the father’s relationship is so connected to selfish and greed-motivated destruction, which evidences his inferior relationship with nature.

The variation between Nick’s relationship with nature and his father’s is further evidenced by each of these characters’ first appearances in the story. Hemingway’s introduction of Nick’s father immediately involves the destruction of forestry for selfish gain. The first two



lines featuring the father are “Dick Boulton came from the Indian camp to cut up logs for Nick's father” and “Nick's father [...] hired the Indians to come down from the camp and cut the logs up” (“The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife” 99). As shown in these instances, the doctor is not even involved with the lumber himself; he has hired the Indians to cut and move them. Money has distanced the doctor from nature and obstructed his connection with it, even when that connection is purely destructive and greed-based.

Nick, on the other hand, is engaged with nature on a personal level as soon as he is introduced. Hemingway introduces Adams when “[the father] found Nick sitting with his back against a tree, reading” (“The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife” 103). This image hints at the extent of Nick's love for the natural world, as it depicts him performing a typically indoor activity, reading, outdoors, while he is leaning his back against a tree, the definitive symbol of nature. His first appearance also follows the most naturalistic and descriptive passage in the story, in which Hemingway describes the path to the woods and the unusual coolness of the forest. The father, for the first time in the story, notices these details as they lead him up to his son's first appearance. Nick himself is surrounded by nature, both physically and in terms of in-text descriptions; his father cannot help but be influenced by Nick's remarkable attachment to nature.

Due to this differentiation between father and son, Nick is portrayed as the most “in-control” in the Adams family. He defies his mother when his father will not, he chooses the parameters of his father's walk, and he is the one with the power to restore the family to its rightful, traditional order. Nick rejects the feminine indoors (and obedience to his mother) in favor of the masculine outdoors (and his autonomy, as well as his father's). Just as in “Indian Camp,” control is equated with one's relationship with nature. Nick, as the character with the

best relationship with nature, is also the freest and most empowered; he is able to defy, decide, and bestow power. The father, while able to experience a “brief triumph of muted defiance as he and Nick go off into the woods together” in the end, still appears to be a weak and easily-commanded member of the family.

“The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” is also similar to “Indian Camp” in that its plot hinges on the Adams’ interactions with Native Americans. In this story, the Native Americans take on a role of power over Nick’s father. The roles are reversed when Dick Boulton asserts that Nick’s father does not own the washed-up lumber and accuses him of asking his workers to cut stolen wood. Boulton deprives the father of power and ownership over the wood and, in doing so, deprives the father of power in their relationship. This dynamic is made indelibly clear by the close of the conversation, wherein Nick’s father says, “If you call me Doc once again, I’ll knock your eye teeth down your throat” (“The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” 103). Boulton simply replies, “Oh, no, you won’t, Doc,” causing the doctor to turn and return to his cottage. Neither has control over the lumber, which represents land and nature as a whole, yet Boulton gains control over the doctor and the conversation. Boulton does not appear to have the relationship with nature that would give him complete control in Hemingway’s universe; however, he does have the power to point out others’ deficiencies, thereby gaining some power for himself.

Here, the Native Americans have the last word, whereas, in “Indian Camp,” not a single Native American speaks. This technique addresses the differences in portrayal. The Indians in “Indian Camp” are victims who have no control over their lives and are forced to destroy nature to survive. Boulton and his men, on the other hand, essentially take control over the lumber when they accuse the doctor of stealing; whether they cut it, report Adams for stealing it, leave it be, or

take it for themselves once the doctor leaves, the choice is theirs. The Native Americans of “Indian Camp” have no such choice; the only choice they can make is suicide.

The Indians cannot claim the lumber for themselves, but they can challenge the father’s possession of it, thereby turning his own society’s regulations on possession against him through the “White and McNally” marks on the logs. Since they cannot possess the wood and do not express a desire to steal it for themselves, the Native Americans’ sole objective in this action is to denigrate the doctor. They gain nothing from bringing up the fact that cutting the wood would be stealing; as Boulton says, “It don't make any difference to me” whether it is stolen or not (“The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” 103). In fact, by calling it stolen, they only increase the odds that they would not earn the money that Nick’s father offers. Therefore, they likely bring up the lumber’s stolen status as an illustration of Hemingway’s nature-power dynamic. Since they cannot raise themselves up socially, they can still gain a social advantage over the doctor by pushing him down the social ladder – here, to the status of a criminal and thief.

The argument between Dick Boulton and Nick’s father also invokes the historical, racial conflict over land between whites and Native Americans. Boulton’s accusations of theft are laced with something larger and more significant than a mere personal accusation: “The recognition that the land is stolen as well as the logs deepens the significance of the doctor's shame – it becomes his culture's shame too – and begins to explain why he fails to protect the integrity of his space” (Strychacz 250). The battleground on which the men stage their argument – the lumber and the surrounding forested land – serves to echo this unspoken racial tension. The irony of this dynamic, however, arises out of the fact that Boulton, a Native American, is using

American property law to deprive a white doctor of natural resources. It is a reversal of the historical scenario, a fact of which the smug, smirking Dick Boulton is very much aware.

There is also significance in the specific type of forest into which Nick and his father walk, as the last scene depicts Nick and his father walking “into the hemlock woods” (“The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” 103). The hemlock’s associations with death and suicide indicate that some sort of death occurs in these final moments of “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife.” And Nick, in trying to save his father by leading him into nature, actually leads him toward death by depriving him of control, which, as previously discussed, results in the death.

This figurative death, however, is set up to take place within nature. It is also depicted in a far less brutal way than the Native American’s death in “Indian Camp,” which describes the way in which the “throat had been cut from ear to ear” and how “The blood had flowed down into a pool where his body sagged the bunk,” all of which takes place within a rundown shanty (“Indian Camp” 94). In “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife,” the father’s walk into death is narrated alongside descriptions of cool winds on a hot day. Though he has lost control of his family, there is still some semblance of a pure love for nature in Nick’s father. And, as he walks into the hemlocks, not as a profit-seeker, but as an explorer and an observer, Hemingway reminds “not that we are conquerors of nature, but rather that we can be lovers. That the primordial forest does still exist and can offer us sustenance and safety, that death must be embraced daily” (Williams 11). In Hemingway’s canon, engagement with nature often leads to a “conversation of death” and a confrontation with mortality (Williams 11). For Nick Adams and Ernest Hemingway, nature is more than just the stage on which their lives unfold; rather, nature

is “related to the polar experiences of heightened life and death” (Gajdusek 179). The natural world speaks of life and death to its listeners.

“The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” and “Indian Camp” are thematically very similar; Hemingway uses natural elements in both to develop the same ideas. However, in terms of which characters bring out these themes in which way, the two are almost exact opposites. In “Indian Camp,” the doctor embarks on a “mercy mission,” ostensibly to help the Native Americans (Strychacz 55). There are, however, shades of a more arrogant, patronizing “white savior” complex in the father’s actions and dialogue, in which the father believes he plays the role “of the Great White Father” to the Native Americans (Strychacz 55). Rather than expressing concern for the mother after her cesarean section, Nick’s father immediately resorts to bragging about his success, saying to his brother, “That’s one for the medical journal, George [...] Doing a Caesarian with a jack-knife and sewing it up with nine-foot, tapered gut leaders” (“Indian Camp” 94). It is apparent that his concern is more for his own reputation and gratification than his patient. In “Indian Camp” the Adams men are able to express their control over their own lives, the lives of the Native Americans, and the natural world. Nick and his father are in-control; they are the colonizers and the conquerors.

In “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife,” however, the Native Americans are the ones exhibiting control over Nick’s father and over nature. While the Indians do not act as “Great White Fathers” in this story, they do act as more outwardly malevolent antagonists, deliberately using property law to deprive the doctor of natural resources. The racial conflict, while expressed differently and over a separate issue, is still there and is still fought on the battleground of nature.

Both stories also end with humiliated, powerless fathers deliberately walking toward and engaging with death – literally for the Native American father and figuratively for the hemlock forest-bound doctor. Both stories assert that, without a strong connection to nature, the only real choice available to a person, aside from a life of inhibition and dependence, is death.

The fact that the roles are reversed serves to express another one of Hemingway's recurring themes: people are not consistent, while nature is. In these two stories, at least, Nick is the only person who is consistently in control of his life – a result of his unshakeable attachment to the natural world.

The preference of a constant, dependable world over people is core to the love of nature that Nick and Ernest Hemingway share. Hemingway expresses this sentiment in more outward terms in the war story “Now I Lay Me.”

### **“Now I Lay Me”**

Hemingway's “Now I Lay Me” is one of the earliest stories that depicts Nick Adams at war – a fateful and decisive time for both the character and the author himself. This piece explores the activity of Nick's mind as he struggles to go to sleep in a warzone, as memories of getting “blown-up” haunt him. Hemingway writes a large part of “Now I Lay Me” in a stream-of-consciousness style as Nick's mind wanders from thought to thought through the night. Despite the chaos of the war and the suggestions of his bunkmate John, Nick's focus repeatedly returns to and attempts to find solace in his memories of nature, employing “the trick of remembering the trout-streams and fishing them to make it through the night during the war in Italy” (Clark 80).

Due to the story's focus on the path of Nick's brain, "Now I Lay Me" offers many of the most concrete and indisputable summations of Nick's character, such as the following passage from the opening of the piece:

I tried never to think about it, but it had started to go since, in the nights, just at the moment of going off to sleep, and I could only stop it by a very great effort. [...] I had different ways of occupying myself while I lay awake. I would think of a trout stream I had fished along when I was a boy and fish its whole length very carefully in my mind, fishing very carefully under all the logs, all the turns of the bank, the deep holes and the clear shallow stretches, sometimes catching trout and sometimes losing them. (363)

Nick's description of his fishing outings continues on for four extensive and intensely descriptive paragraphs. Nick recalls specific details of his youthful adventures as a child, such as "the stream [that] ran through an open meadow," the texture of "the dry grass," and "all the turns of the bank, the deep holes and the clear shallow stretches" ("Now I Lay Me" 364).

Nick's memories of the physical world take priority over his other memories; religion, family, and people are all forgotten, while he remembers nature vividly. He recalls that, "Some nights, though, I could not remember my prayers, even" and can only remember one memory of his mother and father ("Now I Lay Me" 366). The most notable instance of this takes place near the story's close, as Nick's roommate suggests that Nick consider getting married. Subsequently, Hemingway narrates the process of Nick's mind as it progresses from thinking about women to nature:

I had a new thing to think about and I lay in the dark with my eyes open and thought of all the girls I had ever known and what kind of wives they would make. It was a very interesting thing to think about and for a while it killed off trout fishing and interfered with my prayers. Finally, though, I went back to trout fishing, because I found that I could remember all the streams and there was always something new about them, while the girls, after I had thought about them a few times, blurred and I could not call them into my mind and finally they all blurred and all became rather the same and I gave up thinking about them almost altogether. (371)

This quote embodies the perspective on interpersonal relationships that Nick and Hemingway share: nature is distinct and interesting, while people are dull and ordinary. This passage is uncharacteristically forward in explaining Nick's thoughts and his reasons for having these thoughts.

In the same vein, Nick's mind turns only to nature when it seeks safety – never his father or mother or any person. Nick makes some passing references to his parents, recalling a “house designed and built by my mother” and remembers his father burning things in the yard. However, he remembers sensory details – smells, sights, and sounds – not the people involved with them: “I remember the snakes burning in the fire in the back yard. But there were no people in that, only things. I could not remember who burned the things even” (“Now I Lay Me” 365). Nick only has one memory of his mother and one of his father; Nick remembers his mother cleaning the house and he remembers a specific time that he carried a gun and a newspaper for



his father. Even these memories are vague in regards to the people involved, indicating that Nick's parents no longer play a crucial role in his life, nor do any other people.

Nick's conversation with his bunkmate also supports this idea, not through any specifics of the dialogue, but through its objective and its failure to achieve that objective. The two soldiers begin conversing to help each other get to sleep, yet Nick remains does not feel any more inclined to sleep by the end of their conversation. I listened to him snore for a long time and then I stopped listening to him snore and listened to the silk-worms eating," which then leads Nick to begin thinking momentarily about girls, then, finally, return to fishing.

This echoes the same ideas that Hemingway expresses in "Indian Camp" and "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife." When faced with death and mortality, Nick's natural response is to numb himself with simple, clean thoughts of the natural world. In "Now I Lay Me," Nick's wartime fear brings out this idea, as this setting magnifies his need to seek such comfort, as his experience being "blown up" forces him to face the possibility of his own death.

### **"The End of Something"**

Hemingway's "The End of Something" tells the story of a teenaged Nick Adams's break-up with his girlfriend, Marjorie. The pair row out to a lake by Horton's Bay, an abandoned lumbering town, where Nick tells her, "It isn't fun any more," signifying his wish to end their relationship ("The End of Something" 110). This is all of the reasoning that Nick gives as to why he wants to break-up with Marjorie. Hemingway does not describe a specific incident that influences Nick's decision, nor does he provide any information regarding the nature or events of their relationship. "It isn't fun any more," despite its vagueness, is the closest thing the writer gives to a justification for the break-up.

The story's narrator describes Nick's feelings, as shown in the sentence "He was afraid to look at Marjorie," and describes only what Nick's senses are able to pick up. Though the narrator is capable of describing Nick's thoughts and emotions, Hemingway never gives any indication of Nick's feelings toward Marjorie or their relationship, aside from Nick's sparse and emotionally stiff dialogue. Thus, it is left to the narrator's descriptions of the lake and the "swampy meadow by the shore of the bay" to reflect what is transpiring in Nick's mind, as well as Nick and Marjorie's relationship. As in many of Hemingway's stories, "Place, rather than character, frames the narrative" and place reflects the narrative, giving the reader an understanding of the plot and the emotion before Hemingway mentions either (Godfrey 51).

Since "The End of Something" is told from Nick's perspective, the desolation of the landscape partially serves to show Nick's state of mind. From the beginning, he knows that the relationship is nearing its end well before his climactic "It isn't fun any more" line, and this is shown through the early descriptions of the deserted Horton's Bay. The abandoned qualities of the landscape initially represent the emptiness Nick feels in his relationship with Marjorie. Just as Nick uses Marjorie until she is no longer fun to him, "the loggers [...] used the forest until it can no longer provide them with anything they can exploit for profit" (Tyler 61).

Afterward, the "one-story bunk houses, the eating-house, the company store, the mill offices" all disappear; nearly all of the man-made constructions are torn down and all that is left is the lake and the forest and the foundation of the mill ("The End of Something" 108). Nick and Marjorie's relationship presumably disintegrated in a similar pattern: piece-by-piece until Nick (representing the lumber mill) discovered the futility of his efforts and gave up. The opening image of "The schooner [moving] out of the bay toward the open lake" even furthers this

parallel, as it directly mirrors Marjorie's rowing out to the lake at the end of "The End of Something." Though Nick and Marjorie's relationship was "once-thriving like Horton's Bay," time has taken its toll on both, leaving the pair's bond on the verge of perishing when the story begins (Grebstein 158).

The sense of loss described in the landscape at the beginning of the story also mirrors the sense of loss that Nick feels when he has broken-up with Marjorie. Hemingway describes the way in which "the big mill itself stood deserted in the acres of sawdust that covered the swampy meadow by the shore of the bay" and "nothing of the mill [was] left except the broken white limestone of its foundations" that emerges from the "swampy second growth" of the marsh ("The End of Something" 108). The area is written largely in terms of absence, describing the landscape as it relates to what *was*, rather than just what remains when Nick and Marjorie arrive. Nick and the lumber mill are all that remains of their respective relationships. As the short story ends, the Nick, like the mill, is separated from his human connection and is in the process of being absorbed back into nature. The early descriptions of the "destruction of Michigan's white pine wilderness parallels the interpersonal losses" of the story's characters (Wagner-Martin 158).

While Nick ultimately realizes the need to break-up with Marjorie, it nonetheless taxed him emotionally and left him in what is essentially a state of paralysis. It is clear from his actions (or lack thereof) that, like the ruins of the lumber mill, Nick too ends up fragmented and damaged. Following the break-up, Nick lays down on the shore until his friend approaches him, at which point he only responds with vague, often monosyllabic answers, like "Yes" and "There wasn't any scene" ("The End of Something" 111).

The repetition and static description following Marjorie's departure is desolate and empty, as Hemingway repeatedly uses the word "lay" to emphasize this tone and to depict Nick's crippled emotional state. Hemingway writes, "Nick went back and lay down with his face in the blanket by the fire. He could hear Marjorie rowing on the water. He lay there for a long time. He lay there while he heard Bill come into the clearing walking through the woods" ("The End of Something" 111). Nick is described as "lying, his face on the blanket" directly after Bill approaches, as well. His emotional state has caught up with the landscape. After Marjorie departs, aside from dismissing Bill, Nick does nothing but lay on the shore – just as the mill can do nothing but "stand deserted" once the relationship has been severed.

Once Bill leaves Nick in the last sentence of the story, all that remains is what is "natural." Nick has made himself alone with the lake and the shore, as appears to be his natural state. He constantly gravitates toward solitude and, throughout the Nick Adams stories, it is clearly what suits him most. When acting solely for his own comfort and happiness, Nick's existence is one free of human intervention or interaction. When Bill approaches and tries to discuss Marjorie with Nick in a conciliatory manner, Nick is once again terse and dismissive. "Oh, go away, Bill! Go away for a while" Even Marjorie, who Nick claims has an equal understanding of fishing and a similar connection to nature, cannot break this pattern. It is ingrained in Nick and it is his nature.

Nick's destruction of his relationships exemplifies what Nick Adams discusses in "Now I Lay Me." While Nick is at war, he is able to vividly recall natural details about rivers and landscapes, but he cannot do the same for the girls like Marjorie. As he lays awake at night, he thinks, "the girls, after I had thought about them a few times, blurred and I could not call them

into my mind and finally they all blurred and all became rather the same” (“Now I Lay Me” 371). In “The End of Something,” we see the beginning of this blurring, as Marjorie has become boring to Nick and is therefore fated to be forgotten. The moon, the lake, and the shore, however, all remain.

Nick initially hesitates to break-up with her, refusing to tell her what is bothering him as they are fishing, indicating that he does care about her feelings. His response to Marjorie’s question, “Isn't love any fun?” also reinforces the idea that Nick cares for her (“The End of Something” 110-111). He responds with only the word “No,” not denying love, but saying that he finds no value or fun in it.

Nature helps Nick overcome his hesitance, however. In this regard, the natural world does not serve its typically conciliatory function, nor a function as ostensibly positive as most of the other Nick Adams stories. Rather, through the rising moon, it serves to push Nick toward acceptance of and confrontation with the truth regarding his relationship with Marjorie.

In fact, the tracing of the moon parallels with the build-up to Nick’s breaking-up with Marjorie. The moon is first mentioned when Nick and Marjorie are ashore: “‘There's going to be a moon tonight,’ said Nick. He looked across the bay to the hills that were beginning to sharpen against the sky. Beyond the hills he knew the moon was coming up” (“The End of Something” 110). Nick went to Horton’s Bay to break-up with Marjorie and, just before this sentence, his dissatisfaction with her is clear; he ignores all of her questions that are not related to fishing and he does not want to eat the food she has packed. However, until the mention of the moon, he is unable to state his dissatisfaction directly. When Nick knows that the moon is coming up, he

begins to start working toward the “It isn’t fun any more line” by telling her that “she knows everything” and that “that’s the trouble.”

The moon is mentioned again soon after, when Marjorie says “There comes the moon” and the two “sat on the blanket without touching each other and watched the moon rise.” This next mention of the moon is paired with a physical indication of the pair’s emotional distance. When Marjorie asks what is bothering him, “Nick [looks] on at the moon, coming up over the hills” and finally responds, “It isn’t fun any more.” Hemingway’s dialogue is usually free of gestures or descriptions of what a speaker is doing as they talk, so these descriptions stand out in “The End of Something.” Nick has known, from the beginning, why he went to Horton’s Bay with Marjorie, but only now is he capable of telling her.

The moon is last mentioned as shining down on Marjorie as she rows away from Nick; it has played an integral part in facilitating Nick’s break-up. Given its placement in the text, the moon appears to have given Nick the courage to act on his own well-being. As he states multiple times, he is not enjoying his relationship with Marjorie, but, for the first half of the story, he cannot bring himself to break-up with her because Hemingway implies that he *does* love her on some level. The natural world intervenes, however, and inspires Nick.

It is clear from the ending scenes that the results are atypical of Nick’s usually-beneficial interactions with nature. A fishing trip and a period of moon-watching have left Nick motionless and miserable. Nevertheless, the moon has guided Nick toward his own happiness, rather than allowing him to be miserable for the sake of another person.

In “The End of Something,” the natural world is working toward Nick’s long-term benefit. Nick’s repeated line about “any of it” not being “fun any more” indicates that Nick’s

break-up with Marjorie was necessary for him to grow closer with nature. Nick implies that he no longer enjoys fishing due to Marjorie's presence. As the two fish, their actions are constantly interrupted with dialogue – usually from Marjorie. Nick and Marjorie are capable and compatible partners, but Nick simply does not enjoy fishing with her. This is consistent with Nick's preference for nature over personal interaction.

The imagery of the lumber mill at the beginning of the story reinforces this idea. As previously mentioned, the remnants of the lumber mill are being absorbed back into “swampy second growth” of the marsh. As the moon guides Nick toward his break-up with Marjorie, he too is on his way to becoming more absorbed in nature via abandonment. Even the fish facilitate Nick's confrontation, as they refuse to “strike,” forcing the conversation to turn from fishing to Nick and Marjorie's relationship.

### **“The Three-Day Blow”**

The narrative of “The Three-Day Blow” links directly to “The End of Something,” as it consists almost entirely of drunken dialogue between Nick and Bill and, near the end of the story, the two discuss Nick's break-up with Marjorie. Despite the chronological relationship between the stories, however, “The Three-Day Blow” portrays an additional – and seemingly contradictory – aspect to Nick Adams's relationship with the natural world. Though “The End of Something” depicts Nick drawing closer to a solitary and unsocial appreciation for nature, “The Three Day Blow” uses fishing and hunting as homosocial activities. “The Three Day Blow” qualifies the statement of “The End of Something” by establishing the importance of gender in one's relationship with nature.

While Nick and Bill are drinking, their discussions of men all relate to the outdoors and typically-masculine activities: baseball, fishing, and hunting. Fishing, specifically, is directly linked with masculinity and manhood through the dialogue. When they discuss G.K. Chesterton, Bill wonders if the writer would “like to go fishing.” Nick responds in the affirmative, justifying his answer by saying, “He must be about the best guy there is” (“The Three Day Blow” 119). Soon after, the two boys retract their admiration of baseball in favor of fishing: “[Fishing] is better than baseball,” Bill said. “There isn’t any comparison,” said Nick. “How did we ever get talking about baseball?” (“The Three Day Blow” 121). The boys then agree that baseball is a game for “louts,” and refer to each other as “gentlemen.”

Both Nick and Bill clearly enjoy baseball, but they decide that it is associated with a brand of masculinity with which they would rather not be associated. Baseball, the least natural of the activities they discuss, is eventually deemed a sport for the brutish and uncouth. It is an expression of uncultivated or impure masculinities. Fishing and hunting, on the other hand, are still thought to be pure expressions, as Nick and Bill go out to hunt at the end of the story and plan to fish with their fathers the following day.

“The Three Day Blow” seems to contradict “The End of Something” by having Nick look forward to outdoor activities with other people. The two stories are not incompatible, however, as both push Nick away from Marjorie and femininity and toward nature and masculinity. In “The Three Day Blow,” Bill even vocalizes this idea, saying ““If you’d gone on that way [with Marjorie] we wouldn’t be here now,” Bill said. [...] “Probably we wouldn’t even be going fishing tomorrow” (“The Three Day Blow” 123). The narrator of the story regards Bill’s statement as “true.” Even though the previous story establishes Marjorie as an avid and skilled



fisherwoman, Bill and the narrator acknowledge her as a distraction from nature and homosocial bonding.

In this way, “The Three Day Blow” is similar to “The Doctor and Doctor’s Wife.” Both stories depict Nick’s growing association of masculinity and nature. Just as the final scene of “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” depicts Nick choosing manhood and nature over femininity and the indoors, this story forces Nick to engage with a similar, but more difficult scenario. While in “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife,” there is little temptation to succumb to the feminine aspects of life, the remnants of Nick’s affinity for Marjorie “The Three Day Blow,” albeit one that he overcomes, as well.

The end of the story reinforces the recurring theme of nature pushing Nick away from human relationships. And, once again, Marjorie is the victim of this force. When discussing the motivation for their break-up, Nick recalls a natural feeling and influence behind his actions, saying, “I couldn’t help it. Just like when the three-day blows come now and rip all the leaves off the trees” (“The Three Day Blow” 123). In the last few paragraphs of the story, Hemingway directly describes nature’s effect on Nick’s feelings for Marjorie: “Outside now the Marge business was no longer so tragic. It was not even very important. The wind blew everything like that away, as well as, “None of it was important now. The wind blew it out of his head” (“The Three Day Blow” 125). Nick’s thoughts on Marjorie are unclear and often contradictory. He goes back and forth between hoping he can repair their relationship and feeling resolute in the finality of the break-up. Whenever the wind is involved in his mental processes, however, he is always leaning toward finality and moving onward with the hunting and fishing he has planned.

The beginning description of the story serves a similar function as the logging metaphor in “The End of Something,” reflecting aspects of Nick and Marjorie’s relationship long before the topic has been raised. There is, however, a significant differentiation between the two metaphors. The first sentence of the story is as follows:

The rain stopped as Nick turned into the road that went up through the orchard. The fruit had been picked and the fall wind blew through the bare trees. Nick stopped and picked up a Wagner apple from beside the road, shiny in the brown grass from the rain. (115)

The rain has ceased, meaning the natural nourishment for the orchard is over, and the fruit has been picked, implying that there is nothing left for Nick to take. This directly mirrors the lumbermill, which takes what it can and leaves in “The End of Something.” However, in “The Three Day Blow” Nick is still able to find an apple. In “The End of Something,” Nick figuratively realizes that the orchard is picked clean – Marjorie has nothing left to offer him – and he breaks-up with her. In “The Three Day Blow,” he finds an apple, representing a shred of hope for their relationship, and believes it can be extended. But, as the text states, it is only a single apple and the rain has stopped. Thus, this excerpt from the text indicates that Nick will successfully reunite with Marjorie, but only for a short period. The final sentence of the story also implies this: “Still he could always go into town Saturday night. It was a good thing to have in reserve” (“The Three Day Blow” 125). Nick hopes that he will meet Marjorie again, but he still values his relationship with nature more, leaving a possibly reunion with Marjorie as his back-up plan.

Significantly, Hemingway's chooses an orchard to signify this process. While trees are among the most common symbols of the natural world, an orchard is an artificial and, therefore, impure recreation of nature. "The Three Day Blow" treats it as such and, since it serves to stand-in for the character of Marjorie, it reinforces the idea that her appreciation for nature is inferior to male characters like Nick, Bill, and their fathers. Natural elements seem to have abandoned the orchard due to its artificiality: the rain has stopped nurturing it and the wind blows away from it, toward the lake, a genuinely natural formation where the boys intend to fish.

Though Hemingway's descriptions of nature seem to push Nick away from Marjorie, the end of the story implies that her companionship may be acceptable in contexts that do not concern nature. Nick claims that the wind blew away all thoughts of Marjorie, but some still remain; with the final sentence of the story, he expresses the desire to meet her again, but only when he "[goes] into town on Saturday." This means that either the wind has spared these lingering thoughts of Marjorie, or Nick's dedication to a masculine outdoors is in jeopardy. The story takes place on a Thursday and the wind is supposed to end in three days – on Saturday. Therefore, the main force pushing Marjorie out of Nick's mind will relent eventually, but only when he goes into town and only after he has already gone fishing and hunting with his male friends and his father.

### **"Big Two-Hearted River"**

As an exemplary story for Hemingway's famous "Iceberg Theory," critics have reached a near-universal consensus on "Big Two-Hearted River": the story represents the "resolution to [Nick's] trauma in war" without directly mentioning the war (Flora 41). Rather, it recounts Nick Adams's step-by-step actions on a fishing trip, only indirectly implying the trauma he has faced

and avoiding the explicit statement of that trauma. It is this level of subtlety that has earned “Big Two-Hearted River” its reputation as “the most brilliant” of the Nick Adams stories (Flora 41).

However, for this underlying reading about wartime experience to be clearly understood, the reader must have knowledge of Hemingway’s stories that take place while Nick is at war, such as “Now I Lay Me” and “The Battler.” As a self-contained story, “Big Two-Hearted River,” is not about war at all, but about a broader and more widely-applicable theme: natural forces and their effects on loss. Without the war reading, “Big Two-Hearted River” centers on the recurring idea of an emotionally-damaged Nick Adams eschewing society in favor of the natural world. Even with this reading, the subtlety and theme of loss are both still present.

In a letter to friend and fellow writer Robert McAlmon, Hemingway himself wrote of the importance of forgoing the explicit reasoning behind Nick’s trauma and his fixation on specific actions in “Big Two-Hearted River”: “I have decided that all that mental conversation in the long fishing story is the shit and have cut it all out. The last nine pages [...] I’ve finished it off the way it ought to have been all along. Just the straight fishing” (*Ernest Hemingway: Selected Letters* 133). While Hemingway rarely uses “mental conversation” in any of his works, the removal in this particular story altered the main theme of “Big Two-Hearted River.” Initially, the wartime trauma was an unavoidable aspect of the story; with its removal, however, Hemingway prevented the reader from focusing on Nick’s wartime experiences. Instead, the focus of the story became the way in which nature allowed Nick Adams *not* to relive whatever traumatic experiences he is trying to avoid recalling. Any in-text recollection of the war would have defeated the purpose of the story.

While most of the story explains the specific details and actions of Nick's fishing, there is one outlying narrative that intersects with the story: while making coffee, Nick remembers his friend Hopkins, with whom he shared a complex relationship. Nick recalls that, though the two "argued about everything," they also planned to go fishing together and, the last time they saw each other, Hopkins gave Nick a pistol as a parting gift ("Big Two-Hearted River" 217). With the phrase, "They never saw Hopkins again," Hopkins is not mentioned again, save once when Nick mentions that he made coffee in the way Hopkins had advised. After Nick recalls Hopkins's disappearance, the narration returns to the detailed, step-by-step processes of Nick's actions: fishing and exploring the natural landscape.

Thus, through the narration, Nick's mind turns to the simplicity of fishing in order to avoid dealing with loss. The pain Nick tries to avoid serves as proof as to why he prefers nature to human relationships; the latter ends invariably and gives Nick no control over outcomes. Friends like Hopkins can disappear without warning. In contrast, Hemingway's descriptions of Nick's specific interactions with nature show that Nick is in control of every movement he makes, and he "needs to re-experience this control in order to regain his mental balance" (Brogger 20). To express Nick's control, each movement in the story is written clearly and deliberately. The following quotation shows the methodical, step-by-step tone in which the piece is written:

Through the deepening water, Nick waded over to the hollow log. He took the sack off, over his head, the trout flopping as it came out of water, and hung it so the trout were deep in the water. Then he pulled himself up on the log and sat, the water from his trouser and boots running down into the stream. He laid his rod down moved along to the

shady end of the log and took the sandwiches out of his pocket. He dipped the sandwiches in the cold water. The current carried away the crumbs. He ate the sandwiches and dipped his hat full of water to drink, the water running out through his hat just ahead of his drinking. (230)

With the exception of the excerpt about Hopkins, the entire narration follows this same concrete and specific style.

Though Nick's thoughts about Hopkins only occupy one small section of the text, the character recurs phonetically throughout the entire story. Nick uses grasshoppers as bait and, in total, Hemingway uses the word "grasshopper" or "hopper" thirty-seven times in "Big Two-Hearted River." They first appear only four paragraphs after the final mention of Hopkins. Thus, nature seems to serve as only a temporary balm for Nick's psychological wounds; the pain is still there, but the natural world provides Nick with short-term relief from his pain – eventually, he will need to address it.

This eventual need to confront the tragedy is manifested through Nick's thoughts on the swamp at the end of the story. In contrast to the stream, which affords Nick complete control of himself and his actions, the swamp is described in terms of a *lack* of control. Hemingway writes, "It would not be possible to walk through a swamp like that. The branches grew so low. You would have to keep almost level with the ground to move at all. You could not crash through the branches" ("Big Two-Hearted River" 231). The swamp acts as a stand-in for Nick's state of mind if he should force himself to deal with Hopkins's disappearance. Nick fears it, believing such a state would deprive him of his self-control and force in him into a "tragic adventure."

Nick uses this phrase to describe fishing in the swamp, twice referring to it as a “tragic” decision. Throughout “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick’s control over nature is largely what enables him to stave off his responses to tragedy and trauma, and the swamp poses both a figurative and a literal threat to his mental safety. Faced with challenges and deprived of control, Nick’s mind would undoubtedly force itself to address the trauma, little attentiveness, “thus displacing the question of value away from the self” (Clark 63).

Despite his fear, Nick one day hopes to fish the swamp and, by extension, face the fate of those he has lost. Hemingway writes, “There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp” (“Big Two-Hearted River” 232). While the thought of losing control is, at the time of the story, too daunting for Nick, he recognizes this weakness. However, Nick expects that, eventually, he will be able to overcome the trauma of his loss by confronting the swamp and relinquishing control over the direction of his mind.

In terms of imagery, Hemingway begins “Big Two-Hearted River” with a set of details that are reminiscent of the opening of “The End of Something.” As Nick steps off of a train toward his fishing destination, he notices the desolation where there was once a town:

There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country. The thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney had not left a trace. The foundations of the Mansion House hotel stuck up above the ground. The stone was chipped and split by the fire. It was all that was left of the town of Seney. Even the surface had been burned off the ground. (210)

The foundation of the mansion echoes the foundation of the lumber mill in “The End of Something,” and the narrator’s recollection of the previously-populated area recalls the other story’s description of the abandoned Horton’s Bay. However, “Big Two-Hearted River” presents the reader with a more matured, adult Nick Adams. In “The End of Something,” the desolate landscape is strongly reflected in Nick’s demeanor; he is feeling cold, depressed, and forlorn, and his actions toward Marjorie and his dialogue show this.

In “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick Adams is still a wounded character – perhaps more so as an adult standing in the remains of Seney – but these characteristics are not as visible in the adult Nick. Instead, he is more at peace, having improved his relationship with nature, to the point that he is able to use to shield himself entirely from the devastation of loss. As evident by his lying face down in a blanket for a long time at the end of “The End of Something,” the younger incarnation of Nick had not yet attained the ability to numb himself of emotion through nature so thoroughly.

## **Conclusion**

From the earliest Nick Adams stories to the last, Ernest Hemingway employs Nick’s fascination with the physical world as a vital theme in the character’s life. As Nick matures in each story, he begins to realize “that human beings all live – because they all die – essentially alone,” and that his only honest, unwavering, and inscrutable source of companionship is the natural world (Zuckert 163). In contrast, Hemingway portrays human life and companionship as temporary, unreliable, and destructive. These ideals emerge in the contexts of war, family life, romantic relationships, and homosocial relationships and shed light on Nick Adams as a character and as a reflection of Hemingway himself. Though Nick’s relationship with the



physical world evolves over his lifetime, it is always present in some form or another, from his appearance as a young boy in “Indian Camp” to his depiction as an adult in stories like “Now I Lay Me” and “Big Two-Hearted River.”

Nature is most often at the forefront of Nick’s emotional development, reflecting and shaping his character and his interactions with the world. In this way, Nick is an intensely autobiographical character, as Hemingway himself “turned to nature to escape” the aggression and destruction he witnessed in everyday life (Love 203-204). Nick Adams and Hemingway shared a view of nature as an eternally-benevolent presence – able to provide reassurance and sanctuary far beyond what friends, parents, or spouses could. After all, Nick’s wartime companions, girlfriends, parents, and childhood friends all fade from his life, while his fondness for the outdoors remains continually intact. Thus, in Hemingway’s Nick Adams stories, the sense of place plays a more vital role in the plot than any one character, informing the narratives and developing the major themes of the Hemingway canon.

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