

The universal human
experience of in our
time



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The voice of his generation, Ernest Hemingway, captured the many complex emotions of Americans during the World War I era and provided clarity to his peers through his famous collection *In Our Time*. Through the stories and vignettes, Hemingway sheds light upon World War I by depicting very moving, real snapshots from before, during, and after the war. Hemingway explores the devastating affects of war on society by telling the stories of Nick Adams and others. By using a number of diverse characters in similar life situations, Hemingway emphasizes the generality of the human experience and highlights the issues of his generation. In the concluding stories of *In Our Time*, Hemingway ties together themes of survival in the world and how universal the human experience is. *In Our Time* is essentially the story of the life of Nick Adams as a boy growing into a man. Many critics have disputed whether the work is a "bildungsroman" book or not, but the development of Nick's character throughout the stories ensures that it is. The compilation of stories and vignettes must fall under the category of bildungsroman literature, considering how they show Nick's- and perhaps every boy's - progressive right of passage. The reader watches the naïve boy who "felt quite sure that he never would die" in *Indian Camp* gradually grow into to the man we later see come back from war. Along the way, Nick Adams matures in the successive stories: he regrets his decision to break up with Marjorie in "The Three Day Blow," prepares himself to be tough in "The Battler," degrades the war as a wounded soldier in Chapter VI, and eventually attempts to recover from and reflect on all his encounters in "Big Two-Hearted River." The story of Nick Adams (and that of other soldiers who fill in as the protagonist) is told by Hemingway sequentially as Nick becomes a man. In "My Old Man," Hemingway revisits the theme of the father-son

bond and the maturation of a young boy that was established earlier in “Indian Camp” and “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife.” At this point in the stories, however, the reader knows that Nick is preparing to return home from Europe. Because our protagonist is older and returning from war now, this story seems to break the flow of the book at first. Its placement just before “Big Two-Hearted River” is interesting for this reason. In hearing the story of young Joe and his father, the reader instinctively may assume this is a parallel to Nick’s youth, as they both must have the experience of losing their father. Whether or not Nick is the actual protagonist of “My Old Man,” we as readers realize that Nick has shared the same experience of this substitute protagonist. The reader understands at this point, thanks to Hemingway’s conditioning, that the identity of the character himself is basically unimportant. Joe is simply filling in as a substitute for Nick, as many of the other characters of the story are, to reinforce the theme of universality of the human experience. As in many of the other stories, the experiences of these characters are seemingly interchangeable. The reader sees poor little Joe lose his beloved father in a brutal racing accident in “My Old Man,” stripping him of everything he has in the world. When the innocent Joe hears men calling his father a crook, he is deeply hurt. This changed Joe notes, “I don’t know. Seems like when they get started they don’t leave a guy nothing” (p. 129). In the accident he has lost his father, but when the men were talking he lost more: he lost the memory of his father, he lost his role model, and his hope. By the end of “My Old Man,” Hemingway has created the lasting feeling of being all alone in the world and without hope, as we are led back into the life of Nick Adams in “Big Two-Hearted River.” Accordingly, in the next (and final) story of *In Our Time*, we find Nick alone in the

wilderness. "Big Two-Hearted River" introduces the reader to a new set of problems for Nick, who has of course returned from the war, but not unaffected. Although we may have expected Nick to return to his family as a glorious war veteran would, this is far from reality. Interestingly enough, Nick Adams is secluded from society throughout the final story, fishing, camping, and observing the nature around him. Perhaps he is alone so that he can regain all that he has lost during the war, most importantly, his sanity. In Part I, it is evident that the war left Nick empty, disillusioned, and unable to function in a normal society. Hemingway reinforces this feeling of isolation by portraying Nick as alone in the woods, secluded from society yet free from it at the same time. In an attempt to recover from the war, Nick spends his time alone in the woods of Northern Michigan, where he can become one with nature and free his mind from the complexities of American society. Nick is similar to Krebs from "Soldier's Home" in this way: both experience the same disillusionment upon returning from war and neither can muster up the energy to deal with the "consequences" of the world around them. At this point, Nick clearly "did not want any consequences. He did not want any consequences ever again. He wanted to live along without consequences," which is why he returns to the woods where he can be alone and free (p. 71). Hemingway's stark prose is famous for its straightforwardness and lack of emotion, but "Big Two-Hearted River" is noticeably drier than the rest of *In Our Time*. Especially in Part I, Hemingway does the unimaginable: he simplifies his writing even more than the reader has grown accustomed to while reading this collection of stories. The purpose for this oversimplification is most likely to emphasize the state of mind that Nick is in. Nick simplifies every move that he makes, as he has returned to his boyhood. Nick has even

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abandoned all his needs except for those that are purely physiological: " Nick felt happy. He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him" (p. 134). The only things Nick does in Part I of " Big Two-Hearted River" are to satisfy the basic needs for food and shelter. He clearly has put the need for thinking behind him, as he forgets simple things such as water for his coffee. Much of Nick's surroundings in " Big Two-Hearted River" represent his inner psychological state. The reader has the chance to see the world through Nick's eyes as he methodically sets up camp along the river. Throughout the story, the reader becomes Nick's psychologist, and can easily analyze his extensive description of the surrounding nature, which he observes endlessly in Part I. Like the town of Seney that he passes, Nick is burnt out when he returns from war. Seney and its charred remnants represent Nick's emotional scars after World War I. First, Nick is amazed as he watches the fish remain steady in the current, and observes their behavior intensely. Nick tries to imitate the steadiness of the fish throughout the story, as he meticulously sets up camp, cooks food, and gradually walks up the river. Just as the grasshopper that Nick picks up is blackened, Nick, too, has been deeply scarred by the war. While inspecting one of the many black grasshoppers he sees, Nick " wondered how long they would stay that way" (p. 136). On a deeper level, he is wondering about himself, wondering how long he will remain damaged by the war. Nick's psychological state in Part I of " Big Two-Hearted River" should come as no surprise to the reader, especially after reading " Soldier's Home." Surely Nick is not the only veteran who feels that his home is different upon return from war. Veterans are known to feel this exact sense of disappointment after experiencing the horrors of war, known as " shell

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shock" since World War I. Hemingway paints a very realistic picture of this shell shock in both Nick and Krebs, who is also numb upon returning to the states in "Soldier's Home." Like Krebs, Nick cannot stand to do anything that might complicate his life. Every veteran deals with the trauma of war differently in spite of this shared reaction. While Krebs sat at home without motivation to we see that Nick reminisces of his boyhood by camping out in the woods and fishing. In between the two parts of "Big Two-Hearted River" is an interesting anecdote about men who are once again in the face of death in Chapter XV. As five men are prepared for their hanging, they are scared out of their minds, understandably. Somehow the priest insensitively tells the most frightened one, Sam Cardinella, to "be a man, my son." By saying this, the priest implies that it is childish for him to be afraid, and a real man would not be so scared of death. This leads us into the final story, the second part of "Big Two-Hearted River," in which Nick seemingly learns to "be a man" and "stand things." As we return to Part II of "Big Two-Hearted River," the reader finds Nick waking up to a new day in the Northern Michigan woods. Nick shows improvement psychologically, as he "was excited. He was excited by the early morning and the river," in which he wants to go fishing (p. 145). Nick even eats breakfast in spite of his excitement, because he knows he should, indicating that he is beginning to think about things again rather than mindlessly go through the motions of life as he was in Part I. Nick savors everything: the flapjacks he ate for breakfast, the camp, everything about fishing in the cold river. Nick slowly develops and recovers while fishing on the river. He battles with the largest fish he has ever heard of in an intense battle scene. Similar to Maera the bullfighter's story, in this battle man and animal become one. These two "

hearts” of the river are battling each other in a unifying fight, until Nick loses the fish. Nick’s prior disillusionment upon returning home from war is beginning to fade as he rejoices in his fishing. “ Slowly the disappointment left him. It went away slowly, the feeling of disappointment that came sharply” (p. 151). Although he refers to the disappointment of losing a fish, Nick also could be acknowledging that his feeling of disillusionment from the war is now slowly going away. After catching two trout, Nick looks into the swamp and has an inner debate over whether to go into such a “ tragic adventure.” Nick’s decision not to enter the swamp and to postpone it until a later -but undeclared, of course- date shows his newfound maturity. At the end of Part II, Nick has instilled hope in the reader by showing signs of recovery. Since the war, Nick has put his complex issues behind him and learned to stand things so that he can function in society. Nick, and the other interchangeable protagonists of the novel, have either learned to “ stand” their world or have gotten lost in it or died. Through *In Our Time*, Hemingway has, like Nick Adams, pieced together his revelations in a meaningful way that provides understanding of the human experience.