

Hemingway and a Changed America

I will closely examine one 20th century text, "Big Two-Hearted River" by Ernest Hemingway to demonstrate how the nihilistic atmosphere in American culture of the time affected the shift in literature and writing styles. I will begin by producing the historical context and the resulting cultural changes of the post-Great War era by calling on Scott and Reed. From there, I will investigate how these events influenced Hemingway's craft and the characters within his stories, specifically Nick Adams. Furthermore, I will centralize on Hemingway's subtle use of commonplace objects in a natural landscape to showcase Adam's transformation.

The Great War, or World War I, was the catalyst of change in American culture. The Romanticism that was the signature of the Victorian Age abruptly ended as the world became entrenched in the first modern war; as the poet Philip Larkin stated, "never such innocence again". A.O. Scott, a film and book critic for The New York Times, notes in his article, "A War to End all Innocence", that World War I changed public sentiment entirely. Soldiers went over to fight with the Romantic notions that had been engrained in them through literature, but after exposure to the horrific experience of war, returned with a very different mindset. Instead, these troops came back with "suspicion of authority" and a "taste for absurdity, sarcasm, and black humor." (Scott, 2014), which had a direct effect on the arts of the time. There was no longer room, or appreciation, for the old romantic, elevated language of time past, instead literature became harsher with more abrupt language combined with cynicism.

As the 20th century continued, the American Dream was repeatedly put to the test. Although there were some good years spanning the 1920's, the nation was again shattered with the implosion of the economic system. Kennedy notes in his overview of this time period, that with every 1 and 4 household going without a breadwinner, feelings of extreme anxiety pervaded the country. The disillusioned state was further developed as many during the time believed it to be the end of the civilized state, as they knew it, with great fears that no one or any specific route had the ability to fix the problems and the return the world to what it once was.

Although economic stability returned with the Second World War, the American Dream was tainted. No longer could society return to the artistic landscape of a transcendental, romantic world. Instead, the American Dream became a front with deep undercurrents of existentialism and nihilism. These changes were reflected within the new art forms that arose during this time period. One that reflects the state of the American psyche came in the form of a new literary design: Realism.

Realism became a prominent writing technique as it gave writers the ability to "Parallel and embody the historical transformations of Western Culture" (Lehan, 2005). In its form, described by Mary Slattery in her analysis, "What is Literary Realism", it is a referential tool that uses the reader's understanding of reality to note connection between what is stated and "the mundane...familiar to us from our habituation with reality" (Slattery, 1972). Thus allowing for works to subtly build their characters and produce cultural commentary without having to do so directly.

At the forefront of these literary adaptations was Hemingway, a writer who was greatly influenced by his service and traumatic injury, in the Italian trenches of World War

I. The semi-autobiographical nature of his Nick Adams's stories bears heavy influence from his experience of returning home from war. Hemingway's works employ the technique of Realism in conjunction with his own style of craft, the iceberg style of writing. Although this style of writing withholds a large majority of the true message, about 7/8 of it, the reader is able to gain further insight to the characters and themes that pervade the work by identifying the correlations between objects and the meaning that they hold that appear in his very real landscapes.

In Hemingway's, "Big Two-Hearted River" the usage of Realism allows Hemingway to blend the horrors of war with the primal landscape of the forest, pushing Nick Adams to adjust to, if not confront, the demons that followed him home. For example, when Nick notices the blackened grasshoppers he poses the question of "how long they would stay that way". This casual observation of nature after the fire can be seen to be representative of the soldiers returning from war; just as the grasshoppers are scarred, so are the returning men with no comprehension of how long the alterations would last.

The change that Nick Adams undergoes during his journey in the wild can be traced through the pack that he brings with him. When Adams first steps off of the train, into the barren wasteland at the start of his journey, the pack is "Still, it was too heavy. It was much too heavy." The understanding of Hemingway's craft, especially his subtle employment of realism within his works, allows the reader to accept that the pack is a symbol of all the trauma he is carrying with him from the war. Even when he is making himself dinner, the mentality of willingness "to carry it" arises. In some ways, it can be seen that Adams appreciates that he can only bring what he can carry because there will be no one to help him with the burden. This mentality reveals to the reader how the transformation on the

journey that Adams must go through is one that he must shoulder himself—there is no one but him who can carry the burden of what he carries inside of him. A burden that may have to be done over time, as he can only fix what he can “carry” at the moment.

As Adam’s journey goes on, he continually feels the weight of the pack on his back. However, as he delves farther into the wilderness and finds a patch to rest, “the pack, leaning against a jack pine, looked much smaller.” The correlation between the pack and Nick’s internal weight allows for the imagery of the pack appearing small against the natural world to demonstrate that nature is the place in which he can learn to cope. In the primal landscape of the forest, his problems do not seem as overwhelming.

The theme of being in nature as a catharsis is built, as the reader is privy to seemingly irrelevant information that Hemingway presents on his setting up of camp:

“He smoothed out the sandy soil with his hand and pulled all the sweet fern bushes by their roots...One he folded double, next to the ground. The other two he spread on top.” (Hemingway).

Initially, the staccato style of writing in describing the precise way in which Adams goes about setting up his camp fits with the surface level description of his trip. It can be seen that in some ways the step-by-step description of how Adam’s builds his tent is a “manner ordained by custom and tradition” (Stein, 558). As he finishes up what is expected of him, Hemingway reveals that Adams “had not been unhappy all day”, but with distractions being done it “was different”. It’s with the primitive, engrained tasks that ensure safety and survival in the wilderness that act as a catharsis for Adams, keeping him from thinking introspectively. These rituals that Nick goes through on his journey can be described as his actions of “retrieving...control by doing familiar things on familiar terrain.

(Adair, pg.20). The ritualistic catharsis of carrying out mundane tasks can also be seen in his preparation of coffee, "he decided to bring it to a boil...that was Hopkins way". Although it was a memory from his past, he carries out the preparation as a tribute to what once was, and it seems to be ok because "he was tired enough". His ability to allow his mind to wander to the memory of the past on how the coffee was made reveals to the reader the progress, however small it may have been, that the act of returning to the wild has allowed him to make.

The pack begins to lighten and transform as the trip continues, becoming less of a burden as a "pack" and transforming into a "sack" that aids as a tool in the catching of fish. The time spent out in the wilderness slowly unpacks Adams of his anxieties and tribulations, and turns these things into tools that allow him to return to one of his original past-times: fishing.

Although the single pack represents all of the things that Nick Adams felt he could deal with on the trip, there is more lurking in the background. In Hemingway's world, this abyss that Adams still needs to broach comes in the physical representation of the swamp.

Throughout the story, the swamp maintains itself as a zone that remains on Adams' peripherals, but cannot bring himself to venture into. "The branches grew so low...you could not crash through the branches" is reminiscent of the landscape that the ill-effects of the trauma of war that Nick will someday have to make his way through to find peace on the other side. In order to make it through both landscapes, Nick will have to move slowly, picking his way to find the best route through it.

Hemingway's craft of engaging the reader through a realist style of writing sets a precedent for the American identity within its literary history. Although "Big Two-Hearted

River” initially comes across as a simple story of a man on a fishing trip, the subtle undercurrents of the very real human sentiments of suffering and change make it an applicable work across the span of time. Although, it is a clear reflection of the time period with its poignant message that it carries about human psyche after a traumatic event and its ability to heal itself just as the country itself worked to rebuild in reality.

Hemingway’s writing technique in “Big Two-Hearted River” served to influence later pieces of literature, such as *The Things They Carried* by Tim O’Brien. The usage of realism to deliver a message through the symbolism of mundane, familiar objects allows the writer to develop their characters in an extremely subtle way. Additionally, *The Things They Carried* uses the natural landscape to highlight the inner-turmoil of the characters, just as Hemingway does to showcase Nick and his journey. Both works of literature don’t focus specifically on the war aspect of their character’s lives, but instead the simple items, or the things they carry, such as the pack, build the story and the characters journey towards peace. In terms of style, Hemingway was extremely influential to the modern literary movement, especially the advent of Noir Fiction. Instead of ornate diction, Hemingway produced works of unadorned language and simple statements, such as “He was sleepy. He felt sleep coming. He curled up under the blanket and went to sleep.” (Hemingway). This economical style of writing can be seen in later works by authors such as James Cain in his popular works *Double Indemnity* and *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, but is a very distinctive feature of Hemingway and all of his works that helped to shape and build the American Narrative.

Big Two-Hearted River, perhaps the most well known of the Nick Adams Collection presents itself a simple story of a young man on a solo-fishing trip. However, Hemingway

had the ability to craft an entirely new dimension to the story and the character of Nick Adams with subtleties and the very familiar object of a pack. From a short story about a man in the woods comes a poignant message of the lasting effects of war and how a man can come back from the brink to save himself.

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