

Read Like a Grownup
Podcast
Session 001

Bonus Materials:
“The Big Two-Hearted River”

December 2013

Episode 001 Bonus Materials

“The Big Two-Hearted River”

Reading Questions

The following questions will help you notice elements of the story not mentioned in the podcast. Listen to the podcast for a comprehensive reading of this story.

1. What details does Hemingway give in Part 1 to reveal Nick’s inner turmoil?
2. After noticing the black grasshoppers, what does Nick do to help make himself part of the green country?
3. Why does Nick spend so much time thinking about Hopkins? How might these memories help Nick heal?
4. Why does Nick’s equipment make him “professionally happy”? How is fishing another part of Nick’s ritual?
5. Nick’s first big fish is “a heaviness, a power not to be held.” What might this uncatchable fish symbolize for Nick? Why does the sun help relieve Nick’s disappointment?
6. Both of the trout Nick field-dresses are males. What is significant about this detail?

Application Questions

1. Think about how you spend your time. What are your most noticeable habits and practices (your “rituals”)? Write down at least three. Include as much detail as you can (when do you engage in these rituals? for how long? where?).
2. How do these rituals help connect you to your world? How specifically do these rituals help you live your life better?
3. Think critically about your rituals. Are they shaping you in a positive direction or a negative direction?
4. What changes do you need to make to your habituated practices? How do your rituals need be strengthened? How do they need to change?

Analysis of the Story

Nick camps and fishes along an unnamed river in his search for healing and peace. He deliberately creates a “good place” for himself, and imitates (unknowingly?) several Christian sacramental rituals. His fishing is good, but also contains several images of death, including a final threatening image of tragic fishing when the river flows into a swamp. Nick leaves the river, realizing that even in his good place, death and threat appear: even the reliable river has two hearts.

Part 1

Nick comes to the river seeking some kind of reassurance or peace, because he has experienced some trauma that has scarred him. He returns to a place of peace he knew earlier in his life hoping that he could recreate that peace in himself. The episode with the grasshoppers reveals Nick’s crisis—he sees himself in the grasshoppers and hopes that his time in the green place will heal him. The making of camp and the meal (with all its sacramental imagery) confirms that Nick has come to “the good place” where “nothing could touch him” (5).

The church imagery is deliberate, but Hemingway isn’t invoking the church. Rather, the church offers no comfort to Nick, so **he seeks peace in his own sacraments and rituals**. His tent is a chapel of sanctuary, a “good place” no evil can enter. His dinner is red food and bread and causes him to exclaim, “Chrise. Geezus Chrise” at the first taste. Then he drinks “coffee according to Hopkins”, followed by his memories of good times with Hopkins. The coffee is Nick’s “gospel”, his good news that good times were had before, and his hope that they can be had again.

For Nick, the trout represent the peace that he seeks. The trout are free, powerful beings living in a swift river. Perhaps by catching the trout, Nick will participate in their freedom and power.

Given all the other sacramental imagery, we have to wonder whether the trout has a pseudo-Christian connotation as well. We have to be very careful about misreading Hemingway here, since he gives no clear clues that we should read the trout as anything other than trout. However, the fishing imagery at the end of the story recalls for me when Jesus appears to the disciples at the end of the Gospel of John. He has cooked them a breakfast of fish and calls them to renewed fellowship with him. Whether Hemingway intended this connotation or not (I doubt it), I connect these stories by both imagery and theme.

Part 2

Given the sacramental imagery of Part 1, we expect Nick’s day at the river to correspond to baptism, the sacrament of new life and new beginnings. This is indeed what Nick hopes to get from the river. Though Nick finds successful fishing, there are also many images of death:

grasshoppers, fungus-killed trout, the gutted trout, and the final threatening image of the swamp. Though Nick has a good day on the river, it ends with his sudden negative reaction to fishing in the swamp. In spite of all the good the river has given him, even here in the “good place”, tragedy threatens. Nick cannot escape death and threat, no matter where he goes. And so, at the very end of the story, Nick’s sacramental river reveals its two hearts: it gives life and it takes life away. Nick must decide whether he can say, “Blessed be the name of the river.”

The description of Nick’s fishing seems fairly straightforward at first, but there are several important details that make us read deeper. At the beginning, Nick is again compared to the grasshoppers: both are “cold and wet with dew” and need the sun to warm them back to life. Part II also has several references to death: a grasshopper escapes Nick’s bottle only to be taken from the current by a trout; Nick remembers dead fish covered with a white fungus; the two trout Nick takes are both males (another connection to Nick?); and finally, the image of the swamp that ends the day of fishing. These images of death make us question whether Nick finds new life from the river—**whether his substituted sacrament is effective.**

Though Nick has a good day on the river, it ends with his sudden negative reaction to fishing in the swamp. He would either have to crawl on his belly through the brush, or wade up to his armpits to get into the swamp. And then the fishing would be “tragic...a tragic adventure” (12). Nick goes back to camp, wanting to maintain as much of the good day as he can. But the story ends with yet another mention of the swamp. In spite of all the good the river has given him, even here in the “good place” tragedy threatens. **Nick cannot escape death and threat, no matter where he goes.**

Final Analysis

1. Find the climax of the plot. Where’s the beginning, middle, and end? What are the most important parts?

The climax happens when Nick sets up camp. He finds the peace he sought and has high expectations for the following day. The tragic ending causes us to rethink the camp scene—we realize that it is not as good as Nick thought it was.

- Beginning: statement of Nick’s crisis (like the black grasshopper); will he find peace?
- Middle: setting up camp; Nick creates a “good place” and finds peace
- End: day’s fishing fails when the river shows its double heart; Nick realizes there is no “good place” where nothing could touch him
- Most important parts: black grasshopper paragraph, setting up camp scene, Nick’s reaction to the swamp

2. Why did Hemingway write this story? What was he trying to accomplish?

Hemingway seeks to express a sense of dislocation in his protagonist. Nick has been scarred and disillusioned by some traumatic experience. He tries to find healing by instituting his own rituals and sacraments to build a bridge between his present life and the good memories of his past.

Though initially effective, these rituals ultimately fail to produce the complete peace that Nick seeks: there is no place that is a completely “good place” where “nothing could touch him.”

This is the theme Hemingway seeks to convey to the reader: there are no utopias, no “good places” that death cannot touch. The best a man can do is continue to build good places for himself, flawed and flimsy as they may be.

3. Did Hemingway succeed? Why or why not?

This is a very successful story, mostly because of its style. Hemingway preaches nothing, teaches nothing. He makes us empathize with Nick because of the joy he feels in a simple canvas tent, canned spaghetti, and the tug of a trout on his line. This empathy makes us also feel Nick’s irrational fear when he looks at the swamp. We feel the same threat that death is always with us, that no matter how hard we strive, we cannot create a place that death cannot go.

This story also makes me realize that ritual is an inescapable function of humanity. In the face of intangible enemies (like death) and in the absence of traditional rituals (like the church), humans still must make liturgies and rituals that fight against “the dying of the light.” Some would argue that this disproves all religion—but simple inductive reasoning sees that it is a proof that humans are inescapably religious beings. We can’t find fulfillment and peace *without rituals*, even if these rituals only postpone the inevitable day when we must “fish the swamp.”

"The Big Two-Hearted River" Book Bones
by Ernest Hemingway

November 27, 2013

Quick Summary

Nick camps and fishes along an unnamed river in his search for healing and peace. He deliberately creates a "good place" for himself, and imitates (unknowingly?) several Christian sacramental rituals. His fishing is good, but also contains several images of death, including a final threatening image of tragic fishing when the river flows into a swamp. Nick leaves the river, realizing that even in his good place, death and threat appear: even the reliable river has two hearts, one that gives and one that takes away.

Key Insights

- Nick has suffered some unnamed crisis earlier and seeks healing by fishing an old haunt. Though a fire burned the town Nick was hoping to find, the river and its trout have been unaffected. Walking away from town, Nick notices that the grasshoppers have turned black to match their surroundings. Nick wonders when they will stay that way—realizing that the same question applies to him. Perhaps the green country around the river will bring healing to his burned-over soul.
- When Nick makes camp he is deliberately trying to make "a good place" where "nothing could touch him" (5). His tent resembles a chapel of sanctuary that evil cannot enter. His meal is very sacramental (red food and bread), and the first bite causes him to exclaim, "Chrise. Geezus Chrise" (5). He means nothing by it, but still the first bite of a good meal causes him to speak the Incarnate Name—after determining not to speak again "in the darkening woods" (5). Lastly, he makes "coffee according to Hopkins" (6), which is Nick's "gospel", his hope that good times were had before, and his hope that they can be had again.
- Nick hopes to find healing in the act of fishing—an act that plunges him into the river (baptism). Nick sees several images of death while fishing: a grasshopper escapes his bottle only to be taken by a trout, memories of fungus-killed trout, the two field-dressed trout that look still alive. These images don't ruin Nick's fishing, but they foreshadow the final image of the tragic fishing in the swamp. They also challenge how effective Nick's "sacrament" of fishing is at giving new life.
- Thinking of the dangerous wading and "tragic" fishing in the swamp makes Nick return to camp. In spite of all the good the river has given him, even here in the "good place", tragedy threatens. And so, at the very end of the story, Nick's sacramental river reveals its two hearts: it gives life and it takes life away. Nick must decide whether he can say, "Blessed be the name of the river."
- Hemingway's theme is a simple one: there are no utopias, no "good places" that death cannot touch. The best a man can do is continue to build good places for himself, flawed and flimsy as they may be.

Personal Application

1. Since rituals are an inescapable part of human life, I need to be more aware of the rituals I use to shape my world, and need to evaluate how they are shaping me.
2. To become more aware, I will spend ten minutes every night for the next five nights thinking through the rituals of the day: how did I speak to my kids? how did I plan my work? how did I spend my evening?

Important Quotes

- “Nick looked at the burned-out stretch of hillside, where he had expected to find the scattered houses of the town and then walked down the railroad track to the bridge over the river. The river was there” (2).
- “His muscles ached and the day was hot, but 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” (2).
- “he realized that they had all turned black from living in the burned-over land. He realized that the fire must have come the year before, but the grasshoppers were all black now. He wondered how long they would stay that way” (3).
- “Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. It had been a hard trip. He was very tired. That was done. He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it” (5).
- “He took a full spoonful from the plate. ‘Chrise,’ Nick said, ‘Geezus Chrise,’ he said happily. He ate the whole plateful before he remembered the bread” (5).
- “Nick drank the coffee, the coffee according to Hopkins. The coffee was bitter. Nick laughed. It made a good ending to the story. His mind was starting to work” (6).
- “He stepped into the stream. It was a shock. His trousers clung tight to his legs. His shoes felt the gravel. The water was a rising cold shock” (8).
- “Years before when he had fished crowded streams, with fly fishermen ahead of him and behind him, Nick had again and again come on dead trout furry with white fungus, drifted against a rock, or floating belly up Nick did not like to fish with other men on the river. Unless they were of your party, they spoiled it” (9).
- “Of course, you could fish upstream, but in a stream like the Black, or this, you had to wallow against the current and in a deep place, the water piled up on you. It was no fun to fish upstream with this much current” (11).
- “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” (12).
- “Nick did not want to go in there now. He felt a reaction against deep wading with the water deepening up under his armpits, to hook big trout in places impossible to land them” (12).
- “[I]n the fast deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it. He didn’t want to go down the stream any further today” (12).
- “He was going back to camp. He looked back. The river just showed through the trees. There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp” (12).