

“The Big Two-Hearted River”  
by Ernest Hemingway

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### 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).