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“Big Two-Hearted River”, Hemingway Short Formal Paper

When a man who has become acclimated to fighting and bloodshed is given time to depressurize and find themselves, they become like a child experiencing the world for the first time, re-examining and existing in a world which just as easily would have forgotten them. The masculinity of the soldier paired with the trauma he has experienced, leaves him with a boyish wonder for the world and an appreciation of the subtleness and comfort of nature. Hemingway’s short story, “Big Two-Hearted River” focuses on a return to the innocence of childhood through Nick, a military man back in the United States after a presumably far off war. A journey through a Michigan forest represents not a rekindling with nature, but rather with a self before the war, a reunion with the lost personality and lifestyle of a young soldier and a recognition of the psychological damage and mental burden that now must also fit into the grand portrait of himself.

Hemingway starts Nick off in the town of Seney, burned to the ground, a true-to-life replica of some of the devastation he had seen during his deployment, only this time there seems to be no one to blame. It is important to Hemingway that this disaster is understood as something natural, a forest fire, something that nature can recover from fully. Just as Nick must also recover, although from a less natural travail, and possibly never completely, as the ruins of Seney may stay as a scar no matter how well the woods around it bounce back. It is for his recuperation

and wellbeing that he distances himself from people, in fact, in this story he doesn't have direct contact with people in the present. There are glimpses of old friends and baggage men but for this adventure Nick is going alone. And while camping alone is generally ill advised for safety reasons, it is crucial to Nick, because he can't find himself without being by himself, no one can.

Hemingway forces the reader to pay diligent attention to every move and feeling of Nick as he navigates the landscape. Although Nick's emotions often come off as little more than monosyllabic grunts of "good" or "tired", his thoughts reveal a wealth of wildlife trivia (Hemingway). Whether it be the colors of grasshoppers or the white fungus infections on trout, he reveals a deep care for the animals out in the woods with him, clueing into the more boy scout and less soldier boy nature of Nick (Hemingway). He also reveals a distaste for other people who don't know the customs or handling practices for trout, he tells of a time when fishermen ended up infecting trout with fungus, either showing a lack of knowledge or lack of care towards the creatures (Hemingway). He doesn't like those fishermen, is it because of their disrespect and harm towards the fish, or because they're taking up his space, and competing with him for food? If the latter, then the point must be made that an encroachment upon his space is met with frustration because it "barely" interferes with his sovereignty. The fragility of his emotions next to this otherwise slight transgression only cements the belief that the crude and underdeveloped emotional state of Nick is due to the stunting effect of the war, and now he has to come to terms with that.

The masculine urge to stomp off into the woods by oneself is nothing more than a cry for a return to childhood. For a simpler, less violent existence in which the struggles of adult life and male responsibilities of machismo are forsaken for the excitement of exploration and abridged independence. Being alone for a masculine man is especially calming because of the lack of

conflict it brings, surely survival against nature may bring its challenges, but that's nothing compared to the constant measuring, posturing and competing against other men, for the sake of justifying one's own existence. It would be especially powerful for soldiers, like Nick, who might feel like social pariah after experiencing unspeakable violence layered on unfeeling, "unfeeling" masculinity. Nick finds himself in his isolation, he can talk to himself and rely on himself and out of all the memories, he pieces together the new him, drawing from both the old and the new, childhood and war, to bring about a new image. A new picture of himself, not stated and unannounced but ever present and evolving throughout the short story, one of wonder and excitement for the small things, proud of his accomplishments and proving his self-sufficiency to his lonesome. "Big Two-Hearted River" is a short story by Ernest Hemingway that brilliantly provides insight into the mind and thinking process (or lack thereof) of a masculine figure on the road to reconcile his inner child with the man he's become and the tortured machine of violence he sees himself as.

Work Cited

Hemingway, Ernest. "Big Two-Hearted River." *NCSU Library Course Reserves*, 25 Sep. 2023,

https://xroads.virginia.edu/~DRBR/hem_river.html.