

Feeling Transcends Language In Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River"
 Ryder Lamb

With the Modernist movement there was a much stronger disillusionment with the ability of language to truly convey reality. For the Modernists, "language was still a medium for conveying the world, but they found it increasingly difficult to deliver a common reality through words, which seemed not to be in agreement with the things they were meant to say" (Childs 70). For writers such as James Joyce and Virginia Woolf, the Modernist sense of uncertainty and ambiguity was conveyed through subjective, fragmented, stream-of-consciousness portrayals—"realities"—of their characters' minds. Ernest Hemingway's novel, *In Our Time*, however, rarely provides the reader with such elaborate and revealing thoughts. Instead, found especially in the novel's "Big Two-Hearted River," the Modernist uncertainty with language and struggle with an ambiguous reality is expressed through a feeling created by the character's relationship with the physical world.

The short story, "Big Two-Hearted River" begins with the one and only physical character, Nick Adams, arriving at the burnt remains of a town, Seney, for a fishing trip. Though the landscape has changed, "The river was there" (Hemingway 133), and, familiar with the location, Nick begins his hike. Now returned from the war, "It was a long time since Nick had looked into a stream and seen trout" (Hemingway 134). However, the story is about much more than hiking, camping and fishing. Though never mentioned, Hemingway allows much more to be found, or felt, in "Big Two-Hearted River". In *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway explains his theory of writing:

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-burg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water (Hemingway 192).

Perhaps at least somewhat due to an uncertainty with language, Hemingway seeks to avoid including unnecessary "things" in his writing. "Feelings" such as those produced throughout *In Our Time* emerge strongly without any statement of them. Though only one-eighth of the story may exist in text, in language, there is another seven-eighths to be found beneath the surface, if the writer is effective enough. Thus, Hemingway provides the reader with a whole collection of related stories and vignettes as a foundation for revealing the ice-burg in its entirety. Found throughout *In Our Time* are stories of war, stories of Nick, and, in some cases, stories of both. Given Hemingway's "Ice-burg theory" and the context the novel as a whole, "Big Two-Hearted River," the final short story found in *In Our Time*, portrays a Nick Adams who has experienced the horrors of war, but who also, like the Modernists, finds himself unable or unwilling to conventionally articulate that experience.

From the moment that Nick heads into the burned country, his train now out of sight, the reader sees what Nick sees, and even is told that this is, "where he had expected to find the scattered houses of the town" (Hemingway 133). However, additional thoughts are scarce. As Nick views trout in the river, "he felt all the old feeling," evoked from the sight of their steady movement and "wavering fins". Then, shortly later, "He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs" (Hemingway 134). Though these brief glimpses into Nick's thoughts are indeed on the personal, psychological level, they still reflect an

essential connection with the physical world; Nick did not “think,” he *felt*. The reader is told that “Nick’s heart tightened,” but what Nick felt when he saw the trout or when he left behind the need to think is not provided. Very little about Nick is given in writing, but from his experience different feelings emerge. Conclusions can be drawn from what the narrator provides of Nick, but they come from a feeling, a sense. There is no particular term, no definite statement to define Nick’s psychological reality; it exists, but language alone will not suffice.

As Nick’s fishing trip continues, the narration continues to depict the physical. He smells the “heathery sweet fern” of the forest, senses direction by the sun, sees the “sooty black” grasshoppers, feels “the ache” from the weight of his pack, and tastes his dinner, which is still “too hot.” Nick very rarely speaks, and there are no internal monologues, none of Joyce’s stream-of-consciousness, just actions and visceral feelings. Even when Nick thinks of his old friend, Hopkins, the description remains very matter-of-factly:

He was a very serious coffee drinker. He was the most serious man Nick had ever known. Not heavy, serious. That was a long time ago. Hopkins spoke without moving his lip. He had played polo. He made millions of dollars in Texas... They were all going fishing again next summer. The Hop Head was rich. He would get a yacht and they would all cruise along the north shore of Lake Superior. He was excited but serious. They said good-bye and all felt bad. It broke up the trip. They never saw Hopkins again. This was a long time ago on the Black River (Hemingway 141).

Still, though from these brief sentences containing no mention of attachment, one can sense the nostalgia beyond the words themselves. Then, as Nick fishes in the stream, he views the swamp. And though the description of the swamp is seemingly objective, “In the swamp the banks were bare, the big cedars came together overhead, the sun did not come through, except in patches; in the fast deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic,” there is a sense of darkness, despair (Hemingway 155). There is a *feeling* the reader can gather that the swamp represents something tragic beyond simply a fishing situation, but nothing is explicitly told of what Nick is thinking, what psychological effects the sight of the swamp may have caused. Instead of going into the swamp, Nick “feels like reading.” For Nick, reading implies a mental escape. Though it seems this trip, too, is an escape for Nick, where he felt he could leave behind the need to think and write, it is, perhaps, a reality. Nick’s desire to remove himself from the dark, ‘tragic’ feeling of the swamp, from the physical world, with an escape into language seems to symbolize an escape from the truth. Language inadequately represents the reality that exists in the physical, tangible world. It is only an escape, a deterrent from the indescribable feelings that exist in life.

Ultimately, Nick Adams appears to have trouble articulating whatever may exist in his mind. This was one of the Modernist’s dilemmas; language is inadequate in representing truth, “a common reality.” While Modernists such as Joyce and Woolf attempted to convey reality through a more realistic, fragmented portrayal of consciousness, Hemingway, in *In Our Time*, creates a case for the inadequacy of language by revealing very little of its characters’ thoughts. “Big Two-Hearted River” provides the reader with very little insight into Nick’s mind with actual, worded, dialogue—both spoken and internal. Avoiding written depictions of the mind, Hemingway uses the more reliably understood language of physical description. And though these physical descriptions are still written, still products of language, Hemingway overcomes this paradoxical impasse to create a feeling that transcends language altogether.

Works Cited

Childs, Peter. *Modernism*. 2nd Ed. The New Critical Idiom. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Hemingway, Ernest. *Death in the Afternoon*. 1932. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons.

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***Commentary by Brynn Lewallen
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This paper contains mature writing for a first-year student. It reads easily and the ideas flow well together. Ryder Lamb's use of quotes is very effective, and the leading in to and out of the quotes is clear and concise. Take the second sentence in the fourth paragraph, for example, where he describes the "heathery sweet fern" and "sooty black" grasshoppers. Lamb integrates a few short phrases from the text into his own explanation, providing a vivid example that smoothly fits within his explanation. Paragraph four, where the writer really reaches his stride, has the best clarity in the essay.

The conclusion is strong as well. It begins with a sentence about Nick, the main character of "Big Two-Hearted River," and broadens to a discussion of the Modernists. Next, Lamb returns to Hemingway and relates him to other Modernists. One reason this closing is so effective is that it returns to mentioning James Joyce and Virginia Woolf as other Modernists, and another reason is that it begins with the specific idea of the paper and gradually expands to a more universal discussion. This is exactly what a conclusion should do.

The topic of the paper is something that could easily be expanded in the future for another paper, perhaps for an additional study of Modernist writers. I would be intrigued to read more about Joyce and Woolf along with a further discussion of Hemingway.