

Islands in the Stream Study Guide

Islands in the Stream by Ernest Hemingway

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Plot Summary

Thomas Hudson lives in a strongly built house on the island of Bimini off the coast of Florida, the most western island in the Caribbean. The house sits on the highest point of land between the harbor and the open sea. Clear green phosphorescent water fills the view, and beneath that off-white sand, with palm trees near the house.

An artist who paints island scenes for a living, Thomas welcomes his three sons—Tom, David, and Andrew—when they come to visit for five weeks during the summer. Tom is the firstborn whose mother, Ginny Watson, is Thomas's first wife. His second former wife gave birth to the other two boys.

Shortly before the boys arrive, Roger Davis gets into a fight with an unsavory rich tourist. A former boxer, Roger easily beats the man to a pulp. The man later threatens Roger with a shotgun, but Roger again humiliates the man and he puts the gun away.

A hammerhead shark nearly attacks David during a goggle-fishing trip to the reef near Bimini. Thomas tries to shoot the shark with a rifle but keeps missing. Eddy, one of Thomas's hired help, takes out the shark with a machine gun. On another fishing trip, David hooks a very large swordfish that takes most of the day to fight. Upon bringing the swordfish to the boat, the hook lets go and David loses his trophy. The boys, Thomas, and his friends play a trick on tourists, one of whom turns out to be a family friend. After the boys leave, Thomas receives word that they, along with their mother, have been killed in a car wreck.

World War II breaks out and Thomas is conscripted into serving as the skipper of a submarine-hunting boat. During a break between missions, Ginny Watson visits Thomas in Cuba. They make love, after which Thomas breaks the news that their son Tom has died in the war.

Thomas and crew discover a key where a group of German sailors who had lost their submarine have killed everyone and burned down their shacks. Thomas tries to think like a German sailor and guesses correctly as to their general course. Thomas and crew go from key to key and find evidence that they are on the right trail. On one island, a dying German soldier is discovered and brought on board for questioning. The man refuses to talk and is too close to death to be useful. He dies and the crew buries him on the key where he was found. At another key, they find one of the boats that the Germans had taken from the massacre key and abandoned. A subsequent key yields the second boat and a German sailor who kills one of the crew members before Thomas kills him. A big shootout happens at the last key, where Thomas and crew kill all the Germans. Three German bullets rip into Thomas during the fight and may have caused fatal injuries. One of the crew members tells Thomas that he has never understood those who love him.



Part I: Bimini Chapter I

Part I: Bimini Chapter I Summary

Thomas Hudson lives in a strongly built house on the island of Bimini off the coast of Florida, the most western island in the Caribbean. The house sits on the highest point of land between the harbor and the open sea. Clear green phosphorescent water fills the view, and beneath that off-white sand, with palm trees near the house. During the daylight hours, Thomas can safely swim and spot incoming sharks long before they become a danger. At night, no such warning exists, and the sharks do swim close to shore and feed.

An artist, Thomas paints well and has lived in the house nearly a full year. The tropical weather, including the hurricanes, fascinates him. He especially enjoys the fireplace in the house, where he burns driftwood blown in by the storms. Thomas sometimes feels it wrong to burn up the natural works of art, but he also knows the supply will always be replenished.

Part I: Bimini Chapter I Analysis

Hemingway sets both the scene and the character of Thomas Hudson at once. The beauty of Bimini, with its glowing green water and white sands, offsets the danger of sharks, although an easily avoided threat. Nature, however wonderful, demands respect.

The author's use of the second person (you) in the opening descriptive narrative gives the sense of conversation, as if Thomas were talking to a visitor. He is an artist and a romantic, as indicated by his feelings for the fireplace and driftwood. He burns the driftwood and enjoys the flame colors that the salt and sand create, but he also feels a little guilty for destroying the natural works of art.

Thomas can read the tropical weather without instrumentation, which indicates a highly curious and observant mind. As the artist enjoys his surroundings and the driftwood fires, he knows that the peace can quickly turn violent. The pounding of the surf reminds Thomas of wartime in his youth, a memory that builds suspense that something bad must follow peace.



Part I: Bimini Chapter II

Part I: Bimini Chapter II Summary

Thomas, married at least twice and with two children by one former wife and a single child by the other, contemplates the upcoming visit of his sons for five weeks during the summer. One mother plans, without first consulting with Thomas, to visit Paris, and the other works on a motion picture in the south of France. The children will join their respective mothers after visiting Thomas.

Having built a good career as an artist, Thomas no longer worries about the behavior of his former wives. He welcomes the children's visit and does not complain that one of the mothers pushed her agenda onto him without warning or discussion. Thomas wonders why he ever left either woman, but then remembers the reasons. He cannot stand living with a woman, even if he has fondness for her, for any long period. This is not the fault of the women but instead is due to his problems with selfishness and ruthlessness. He has learned to channel his energy into his work, has mastered the skills for avoiding domestic fights, and has discovered how to keep from marrying a woman. Thomas lives alone on purpose and because he must in order to gain a level of comfort within the discipline of his work.

In a conversation with Joseph, a black man native to the island who works for Thomas, the reader learns that Andy, one of Thomas's sons, carries a mean streak, and that Thomas likes to start drinking alcohol before breakfast. He seems to prefer gin and tonic. His other boys are named Tom and David. Joseph wants to pattern himself after all three boys according to their most admirable traits—smart like David, easygoing and polite like Tom, and mean like Andy. Joseph and Thomas talk about their friends and the Queen of England's birthday celebration.

Part I: Bimini Chapter II Analysis

Working together, narrative and dialog flesh out Thomas Hudson's character. Women attract him and he attracts them but he lacks the patience, compassion and empathy required for marriage. Perhaps his alcohol consumption lubricates his mouth and dulls his brain too much, a common result of adding alcohol to relationships. Thomas decides to make work, not a wife, his focus. He still likes to have relationships with women, just not marriage and, by all means, no fighting.

Hemingway's famous tight prose delivers the primary character traits of Thomas's three boys through dialog. One of them, Andy, has a mean streak. Dave has intelligence, and Tom has the pleasant personality. Joseph's desire to be like all three reflects what most adolescent boys want to become—smart, popular and strong. Thomas wants Joseph to set a good example for the boys, indicating that he does not see a good balance developing among them. Joseph refers to the boys' activities as "fearsome projects" (p.

17), which hints that they create trouble repeatedly. Thomas may have his hands full for the next five weeks.



Part I: Bimini Chapter III

Part I: Bimini Chapter III Summary

Thomas showers and dresses for the day. He sees Uncle Edward, a tall and handsome black islander along the King's Highway, the main street on the island. A child taunts Uncle Edward from behind a shack. Uncle Edward calls back to the hidden child that he will tell the Constable, which does not stop the taunting. Uncle Edward complains about lost dignity.

Near the Ponce de Leon bar, a black boy named Louis tells Thomas about a yachtsman who threw all sorts of things out a window of his yacht in some kind of tantrum. Louis says he sang for the yachtsman and his lady friend, but refused to sing the usual island songs. This angered the yachtsman, who then upsets his lady friend and made her cry. Louis wants to give her conch pearls in an attempt to make her feel better.

While drinking a gin and tonic in the Ponce de Leon, Thomas hears from Louis that he gave the lady the conch pearls but that she just looked at them and cried. Bobby the bartender and owner talks with Thomas about his painting and making a living from it. Thomas does simple island scenes, but Bobby thinks he should paint gigantic canvases of water spouts, a full hurricane, the sinking of the Titanic, and Armageddon. Bobby gives Thomas a drink on the house and free beer to two sailors down the bar in celebration of Queen Mary's birthday. The sailors ask if this is the same Queen that the ocean liner is named after. Bobby tells them that they will get no more free beer.

Part I: Bimini Chapter III Analysis

The island culture comes to life in three simple scenes. Thomas sees Uncle Edward, Thomas talks with Louis, and Thomas drinks in the Ponce de Leon. The taunting of Uncle Edward consists of a silly old English song, and his faux outrage at the attack on his dignity fails to gain any fire or brimstone. Louis shows genuine concern for the lady who the yachtsman, an unsavory and loud rich man, makes cry. Although Thomas does not see why any woman would want conch pearls, they happen to be rare and very valuable if jewelry grade. Conch pearls cannot be cultured and only about one in 10,000 conches have pearls. Of those, only ten percent are jewelry grade. They are also the only pearls sold by weight and not size.

The islanders live a laid-back life full of care for one another, have a Caribbean lilt to the language, and engage in imaginative flights of fancy. Bobby takes flight with Thomas's painting, something that Thomas tolerates and has probably heard a hundred times before. His artwork sells well in New York City, so he has no reason to paint grand scenes of hurricanes and Armageddon. People like the peaceful island life in their living rooms, not scenes of violence and suffering.



Celebrating Queen Mary's birthday is an important event on Bimini. Bobby punishes the visiting sailors for not knowing whom Queen Mary is or if the ocean liner is named after her, reflecting a natural contempt for those who visit but do not understand anything about the island of Bimini or its culture. This is a common attitude toward visitors to any tourist destination. Hemingway seems to be reinforcing the wise advice to study up on a place before visiting.



Part I: Bimini Chapter IV

Part I: Bimini Chapter IV Summary

Thomas Hudson and Johnny Goodner sit in the stern of Johnny's cabin cruiser, the Narwhal, which is stern-to-stern with another cabin cruiser in the same slip, one owned by the unsavory rich man who had made his lady friend cry. Roger Davis, a writer, comes by and drinks with Thomas and Johnny. They make the conversation of old friends, have dinner together, and relax as people gather on the dock with a guitar and banjo while people at Bobby's bar celebrate the birthday of Queen Mary. More people gather on the dock and sing. Rupert Pinder, a large and strong black islander, asks if Johnny will buy rum for the people on the dock, and he does. Off one of the other boats, people shoot fireworks into the air.

Rupert fetches the rum in a big wicker-covered jug and dispenses it to the crowd. More fireworks go off and somebody shoots tracer bullets from a light machine gun over the ocean. The rum jug arrives at Johnny's cruiser along with Frank Hart, who carries a flare gun and an assortment of flares. Frank shoots a flare at Bobby's bar and it hits the wall near the door. Thomas keeps telling Frank to stop shooting flares because of the fire danger, but Frank ignores Thomas. Rupert urges Frank to shoot at the Commissioner's house and burn it down. Frank takes practice shots, the noise of which angers the unsavory rich man. He comes partially dressed to the stern of his cruiser and complains.

Fred Wilson, who had joined the group along with Frank, talks back to the angry man. Frank joins in the confrontation and the unsavory rich man goes below. He returns more fully dressed and tears into Roger rather than Fred or Frank. Roger tries to talk sense into the rich man, and failing this, he tries to leave. The rich man jumps onto the dock with Roger and takes a swing at him. Roger fights the rich man and beats him so severely that the rich man's crew must carry him back on board his boat. Roger feels badly about beating the rich man. A bit later the rich man shows up again with a shotgun. Fortunately for Roger, the rich man does not use the gun and goes below.

Roger goes with Thomas to his house for the night. They talk about all the evil in the world, and about how the evil seems to be getting worse. Roger takes enjoyment in fighting other men and winning, something that depresses him. He worries about becoming evil too.

Part I: Bimini Chapter IV Analysis

Celebration escalates steadily toward violence as the islanders drink and revel into the night. Roger Davis takes pleasure in the thrashing he gives the unsavory rich man, but Roger does not like this side of his personality no matter how much he believes the rich man deserved the pounding. Nothing good can come of it, and the rich man will only



become worse for the humiliation. Roger sees this as a problem that grows steadily worse throughout the world.

Thomas tries to control the situation but fails. The momentum to make trouble overpowers his efforts, and everyone is fortunate that something worse did not happen. Frank Hart's flares could have started either the bar or the Commissioner's house on fire. Gasoline drums on a dock could have blown up. The islanders could have rioted in some manner with the mob energy built around the Commissioner's house. The island seems peaceful only on its surface, but not far below, only a few drinks away, dark anger rages within the islanders. For Roger, anger leads him into depression and fighting only makes it worse.

This scene can be taken as an allegory for the state of the world shortly before World War II. Fascism is pitted against Communism in Europe within localized wars, similar to how Roger fights the rich man. These small wars eventually become one big war between the Allies and the Axis, and the bloodshed turns out to be massive. Evil feeds on itself, Hemingway expresses. Violence creates more evil, not less, yet humankind has a lust for violence that often overcomes any efforts at control. However, another way to look at this is that the rich man acted foolishly out of hurt pride by throwing the first punch and thus gave Roger an excuse, which is not allegorical but is instead a simple plot element.



Part I: Bimini Chapter V

Part I: Bimini Chapter V Summary

The next morning Thomas works on his painting and Roger goes sculling in a dinghy to work the pain out of his right hand, which he had injured in the fight. They prepare for Thomas's children to arrive.

Tom, the oldest of the boys, strikes Thomas as sad-looking until the boy talks about something of interest. The middle child, David, reminds Thomas of an otter. Andrew, the youngest, is the athlete and has a bad streak. They talk about goggle fishing, horses, and Paris. While living with his father and mother in Paris, Tom had met many great writers and painters. He especially likes James Joyce and feels he understands parts of Ulysses. Andrew asks if the family had ever been poor. Thomas answers that they were poor only in Paris, but by the time the other two boys were born, poverty was in the family's past.

Tom and Thomas recall an incident involving a live pigeon that they take home and Tom makes into a pet. Their cat kills the pigeon, but Tom does not get angry at the cat.

Part I: Bimini Chapter V Analysis

The author reveals the children's personalities through conversation. Tom thinks deeply and observes closely, showing the makings of a writer. David has a grace in water that reminds Thomas of an otter. Andrew becomes impatient easily and wants action. The three distinct personalities often conflict, with Andrew being the most dangerous of the three. His brothers are aware of his bad streak, and so exercise caution. Andrew tries to be good, but something bad grows in him regardless.

Tom, being the oldest, tends to dominate the conversation. His recollections of Paris involve the poverty and the culture in fine details, yet without any regret. Pound and Joyce may have been madmen, but they had also been friends. The cat might have killed a new pet pigeon, but the bond with the cat had been more strongly developed. Thomas enjoys recalling the Paris experiences as well.

Hemingway explores the way that relationships develop among family members and adult friends. The relationships are sometimes messy with conflicts of personalities, but something else keeps people together. The cat and pigeon story illustrates how older relationships survive due to deeper feelings. How the children relate to each other, considering themselves brothers and not half-brothers, reinforces the idea of family even while broken apart.



Part I: Bimini Chapter VI

Part I: Bimini Chapter VI Summary

Roger and Thomas stay up while the boys sleep, and they talk about Roger's brother Dave who died in a canoe accident when Roger was twelve and Dave eleven. Roger believes that his father never forgave him but did try to understand what his surviving son was going through. Even though Roger had gone into the water after his brother, the water proved too deep and cold. He tells Thomas that he has never gotten over the tragedy and will need to tell it someday.

Roger expresses a desire to write something good rather than the formula junk that makes him money. Roger had once painted and quit. Thomas asks him why, and Roger replies, "Because I couldn't kid myself any longer. I can't kid myself any longer on the writing either" (p. 80).

Thomas suggests that Roger stay with him and work on the good book, and that a good book ought to be honestly written. Roger doubts he has the depth to do a good book. The next morning everyone prepares for goggle fishing.

Part I: Bimini Chapter VI Analysis

Roger's writing career depends upon selling novels that have little literary value, possibly adventure, mystery, true crime, or even romance. Thomas refers to painting as being less of a lonely quest than writing due to the tangible nature of the painting itself. A writer must paint in the mind and imagination with only paper and ink to show to the world. A good book must be realistic and honest, while a painting does not necessarily need these qualities. Thomas prefers to paint realistic scenes, and his customers probably do not care for too much honesty. Mood counts for Thomas's artwork. With Roger's fiction, entertainment counts.

The urge to write something greater than formula entertainment stories may stem from Roger's guilt over his brother's death. Perhaps by creating a good story with the canoe death as its starting point, Roger will lessen his guilt and come to know himself better and thereby help his readers to come to know themselves better. Through this conversation, Hemingway seems to be explaining why writers write in the first place. The final chapter scene foreshadows something that is to happen during the goggle fishing expedition, while the canoe death story builds suspense toward the upcoming scene by associating water with danger.



Part I: Bimini Chapter VII

Part I: Bimini Chapter VII Summary

Thomas and the rest go out in Thomas's cabin cruiser to near the reef, where they anchor by an old wreck that pokes out of the water even at high tide. Joseph takes Andrew with him in the dinghy out to the reef, and the other two boys swim out with Roger. They begin looking for fish through their facemasks. Thomas talks with Eddy in the galley about any possible danger, and Eddy suggests that the boys and Roger stay close to the dinghy so they can quickly deposit their speared fish into the dinghy. This will avoid the blood from attracting predators to the reef. Eddy worries about the boys and suggests that Thomas take out his rifle, which he does. The boys and Roger start spearing fish while Thomas maneuvers the cruiser closer to their position.

Eddy spots a hammerhead shark moving from the open sea to the reef and straight for David, who has just caught a good-sized fish. Thomas tries to shoot the shark but keeps missing. David prepares to throw his fish at the shark to divert it. As Thomas prepares to shoot his last bullet, Eddy fires on the shark with a light machine gun and manages to kill it just in time. The boys, Roger, and Joseph return to the cruiser. After everyone calms down, they have a hearty supper of fresh fish.

Part I: Bimini Chapter VII Analysis

Eddy tries to take the most blame for the near disaster. He knows the island well, having grown up there, and high tide is a dangerous time to spear fish. Stuck fish will always leave traces of blood in the water, no matter how carefully and quickly put into the dinghy. Thomas and the other adults try to take blame as well, but the boys will hear nothing of it. They have just experienced a high adventure, a story worth repeating at school, and the boys want to reconstruct as believable a story as they can.

This danger comes swiftly and so the resolution must also come quickly—the shark either gets its way or dies. Eddy's use of his machine gun saves both David's life and Thomas's guilt had he missed with his last shot. Hemingway creates a sense of well-being afterward through the dialog of the adults and boys and their meal of fresh fish.



Part I: Bimini Chapter VIII

Part I: Bimini Chapter VIII Summary

Thomas reflects on the boys in the house while he lies in bed and they sleep. He enjoys their company but knows that once they leave he will need to immediately go back to his work routine or suffer from loneliness. The shark incident turned out well as had many other small events during the visit so far. Thomas realizes how much he loves his children and wishes he had never left them and their mother. He understands the mistakes he had made but no longer feels remorse for the past.

His thoughts drift to when Roger had been in love with a woman who had major faults that everyone could see except Roger. Then one day Roger enters Thomas' studio with the news that he finally sees her faults and has abandoned her in a restaurant while on a date. This becomes Roger's method—he links up with a woman whom he should avoid, then abandons her in a restaurant. Roger keeps talking about starting anew and writing his good book, but takes no action toward the goal.

Part I: Bimini Chapter VIII Analysis

Thomas regrets his past and cannot change it, so he must accept the little amount of time he has with his sons. His method of avoiding loneliness and too much remorse involves his work with painting pictures. As revealed earlier, Thomas left his wife not because he had stopped loving her, but rather for his own inability to live with any woman.

Roger has a different problem that stops him from finding comfort and happiness with a woman. He makes terrible choices because he cannot detect the true nature of the women he attracts quickly enough. This could be due to his lack of self-understanding from too little introspection—the women are wrong because Roger is wrong. He would like to write a good book, evidence that he knows what he should do to gain self-understanding, but he never takes the initial steps. This keeps him in a loop of failed relationships.

Painting may be easier than writing, Thomas suspects. However, the activity may not make any difference. Thomas has stopped trying to develop relationships outside his children, and these relationships have very little time to grow. In effect, Thomas hides behind the craft of his painting while Roger yearns for the art side of his writing craft. Both make good money at what they do, and neither learn anything new about themselves from their efforts. Both Thomas and Roger are stuck in place.



Part I: Bimini Chapter IX

Part I: Bimini Chapter IX Summary

Eddy, Thomas's cook, helps prepare the cruiser to go after big fish. The day looks to remain calm, the lines have been spliced, the gear loaded on board, and the bait obtained. By nine in the morning, the boys, Eddy, Roger, and Thomas head out to the Gulf Stream for their deep-sea fishing trip.

Tom talks with his father about the ocean and a French author that he and Roger know. Thomas says he also knows the author. The conversation turns to school and how boring it is. Just then a large broadbill swordfish comes up and heads for David's bait.

Roger coaches David as the swordfish hits and goes deep, taking out most of the line. The only strategy amounts to holding back on the big fish until it tires. Tom expresses concern that the fish may be too big for the boy, but David refuses to give up. The swordfish tires and comes to the surface, breaking in a mighty leap. Eddy estimates the weight to be about a thousand pounds, a record-breaker. The fish goes deep again, taking out even more line than before, and the initial strategy repeats. Roger advises Thomas on maneuvering the cruiser to help tire the swordfish out. The fight goes on for most of the day, and by the middle of the afternoon, the swordfish again comes to the surface. David, very tired and with burst blisters on his hands and with feet bleeding from rubbing against the boat, cranks the fish in. Just as Roger grabs the steel leader, the hook lets loose. Eddy dives after the dying fish with a gaff, but it sinks too quickly and is lost.

Andrew asks Dave, after he recovers a little from his endurance test, how it felt to be fighting the big swordfish. Dave says that he came to love the fish and wanted it worse than anything else.

Part I: Bimini Chapter IX Analysis

The boys now have two unbelievable stories, one about the hammerhead shark and another about the big one that got away. Had the swordfish actually weighed in at a thousand pounds, David would have become the world's record holder. The disappointment must run deep, yet David experiences what few people ever do. He bonded with his prey over the many hours of fighting and feels that love between predator and prey. Everybody admires both his courage to keep on fighting and his endurance. Thomas estimates that this is what changes a boy into a man.

These are classic Hemingway themes about endurance and gaining manhood. Roger encourages David, possibly more so because Roger may have an affinity toward David because he shares the same first name as Roger's dead brother from the canoe accident. But the fight takes a great deal of endurance as the swordfish goes very deep and must be hauled up multiple times using with brute force. A contrast exists between



how Roger enters manhood from the death of his brother, an intensely tragic experience for a boy of twelve, and how David enters manhood through the more normal physical challenge of fighting a big swordfish.

Everybody on the boat shares some part of David's adventure and failure. The intense feelings cannot be as easily shaken off as the shark incident because of the full commitment from all to catch that record-breaking fish, including Eddy, who dives in after it.



Part I: Bimini Chapter X

Part I: Bimini Chapter X Summary

During breakfast the next day, Thomas learns from Joseph that Eddy had been fighting with other islanders most of the night because they refuse to believe the fish story. Eddy shows up later and looks terrible from all the beatings he took. Thomas decides to paint the swordfish on two canvases, one with the fish at the pinnacle of its leap and another with it in the water alongside the boat. He then goes to pick up supplies from the weekly run-boat and drops in on Bobby's bar. They discuss the waterspout painting that Thomas had done on Bobby's suggestion and had given to him to hang in the bar. A white houseboat arrives, and Bobby expects many good customers from it.

Roger enters the bar and tries to take the responsibility for David's condition after fighting the swordfish. Thomas tells him that the responsibility all lies with the father. Bobby comments that Thomas and Roger look similar enough to be related, although they are not. The conversation turns to suicide, something that one of Roger's former girlfriends had committed. Bobby tells a humorous story of suicide to help get Roger's mind away from the subject, which seems to work.

Part I: Bimini Chapter X Analysis

Eddy feels greatly frustrated that the big fish got away, or more accurately, slipped away to die on the bottom of the ocean. He attempts to beat the truth into people and they try to beat the truth out of him, but this effort is doomed to fail. The truth of the matter cannot be proven without the swordfish, nor does fighting prove anything. Roger's feelings run along a different path, one where he should have called off the fight earlier before David suffered wounds to his feet. Yet the fighting does prove one thing in Hemingway's world—the boy became a man, and men are not afraid to fight each other or nature. They do so quite often on this island during this period, along with quite a bit of drinking, which bolsters nerve, reduces thought, and numbs pain.

The talk of suicide upsets Bobby. He probably cannot understand why people would become so depressed and defeated in life that they'd want to cut it short on purpose. Roger cannot seem to do anything right with relationships or his writing, and now he feels guilty about David and losing the fish. Bobby's darkly humorous story about suicide helps to pull him out of his emotional depression, a state different from clinical depression in which no amount of dark humor does any good. Roger's old girlfriend likely suffered from clinical depression during a time when treatment for the condition was not understood, yet the symptoms were obvious enough that Roger could see where she was headed and got out before she could take him with her.



Part I: Bimini Chapter XI

Part I: Bimini Chapter XI Summary

The boys, Roger, Thomas, and Bobby plot a trick to play on the yacht people who had come to the island on the houseboat. The trick involves a skit they do at Bobby's bar, in which Andrew plays a young alcoholic. The loose script calls for ad libs as the trick unfolds around Andrew drinking glass after glass of water from a gin bottle. The yacht people come into the bar, including several men and two very good-looking young women.

One of the men asks about the painting of water spouts that Thomas had made for the bar and indicates he wants to buy it. Thomas tells the man that Bobby owns the painting, and Bobby tells the man that the painting is not for sale. Stubbornly, the yacht man keeps pushing the issue until Bobby feigns anger.

The trick goes too far for one of the women. She leaves in tears, accusing the adults of encouraging alcoholism in children. The other woman follows and returns a bit later. She sees through the trick and calls the pranksters on it. They admit that Andrew's gin is just water and she introduces herself as Audrey Bruce.

Audrey asks if she can see some of Thomas's paintings and he agrees. However, when the pushy yacht man asks to see the paintings, Thomas rejects him. Roger and Thomas talk with Audrey, who thinks the bar is a nice place to be.

Part I: Bimini Chapter XI Analysis

The islanders' trick on the houseboat people gives high entertainment that at least does not involve physical fighting. Thomas and Roger play their roles as failed and bitter artists and sometimes hit close to home. Bobby keeps pouring the water for Andrew out of the gin bottle while going into a nonsense mode about Thomas's painting behind the bar, which one of the yacht people wants to buy. But the trouble with a stunt like this is that it still invokes a level of cruelty that can escalate to a psychological fight scene, and this one does exactly that.

Contrasting the ugly scene with a beautiful setting, the young woman who sees through the sham displays both physical beauty and social grace. She catches Roger's eye and he makes a pass, but she gently declines and remains mysteriously aloof but not unfriendly.



Part I: Bimini Chapter XII

Part I: Bimini Chapter XII Summary

The next morning Thomas paints while Roger and the boys swim. Audrey shows up and converses with the swimmers. She lets them know that she has lived in France and that she enjoys their conversation better than the yacht people, who are rich and boring.

After swimming with the boys, Roger asks who taught her and she says that he did. Audrey turns out to be Audrey Raeburn who, while in France, Roger indeed taught to swim as a child. This revelation changes Roger's interest from hunting women to reacquainting with family.

Audrey has come specifically to visit with Roger and to meet Thomas. She heard about them from the unsavory rich man at another island who complained about his treatment on Bimini. They catch up on family news and remember horse races, and then everyone goes to the house for martinis. Thomas joins them and feels that the happiness of summer is waning. The boys will soon be leaving.

Part I: Bimini Chapter XII Analysis

Audrey's presence stimulates the usual relationship cycle within Roger but quickly dissipates when he learns that he had once known her when she had been a child. If luck favors Roger, the change may knock him completely out of his cycle and into a different, hopefully better, relationship course. He is no longer a young man who can afford to make mistakes without regard to the repercussions, which by now should be obvious to him.

For Thomas, the impact of an attractive woman's presence dredges up unwelcome memories, especially with her resemblance to his first wife. His feelings of lost happiness follow, as if Audrey's presence signals the end of summer and the beginning of his efforts to control his life through the painting. Where Roger may have a chance for lasting happiness, Thomas only has his sons' brief visits, little islands within his usual level of controlled despair.

The boys immediately accept Audrey into their hearts. Their youth contains vast reservoirs of love not yet jaded from failed relationships, and they seem to have little interest in Audrey as a sex icon. Their characters, in fact, lack sexuality, which is more understandable for the younger Andrew than either Tom or David. The older boys' hormones should be starting to rage. The relatively young Audrey would spark off odd behavior or pained shyness in most adolescent boys, but not these. Hemingway has created boys of either extraordinary restraint or those lacking realistic characteristics, possibly to avoid confusion with the psychological conditions of Thomas and Roger.



Part I: Bimini Chapter XIII - XV

Part I: Bimini Chapter XIII - XV Summary

The boys leave the island, which saddens Thomas and Audrey. Roger plans to leave the next day for Thomas's ranch property in the western US, where he wants to write his good novel that may start with the canoe accident from his youth and tell the whole story of how this impacts his life..

Thomas receives a telegram that informs him of the deaths of David, Andrew, and their mother in an automobile accident. Eddy suggests that Thomas could go to Paris and then the house in Cuba for a while. Thomas flies to Europe and takes a cabin on a cruise ship. There he starts to read magazines, including The New Yorker, in which he sees a mention of his two boys and their mother having died.

Part I: Bimini Chapter XIII - XV Analysis

The finality of the summer visit transforms from the simple loneliness felt among loved ones parting to the ultimate separation at death. Thomas thinks he can simply ignore his mourning, but all he does is deaden the pain through strong drink and looks toward escape into the good writing to be found in the magazines he reads. The mother of his two youngest children must have achieved some amount of fame to be mentioned in The New Yorker magazine, a fact that may hinder Thomas in the mourning that he avoids. The mention of a house in Cuba helps the transition from the Bimini part of the novel to the next, Cuba.

Part II: Cuba

Part II: Cuba Summary

World War II has broken out and Thomas Hudson accepts an assignment to pilot a boat that hunts for German submarines. He brings the boat into the Havana port during a northeastern gale and begins a four-day vacation in his Cuban house. He sleeps with his favorite cat named Boise and thinks about how the cat always tries to follow him when he goes to sea. Other memories include the time that he first took on Boise, a stray that used to hang around a local bar, while Tom, his last remaining son, was visiting. Thomas thinks of Goats, another favored cat that likes to fight other cats, and how this cat helped to find an anti-hangover capsule that had fallen under the bed.

The next morning Thomas cannot find anything to eat in the house. The hired help usually brings food in the morning for one day, but the hour is still early. Thomas decides to start drinking to ease the hunger, which works. He then remembers being in love with a woman, a princess by marriage, and how frustrating the affair had been. They had little freedom to consummate their lust for one another, eventually people learned of the affair, and a baron demanded that Thomas leave the married woman. However, the baron has died and the Germans held Paris, so Thomas stops this memory.

Mario, one of the hired help, shows up with food. Thomas decides to go into town and check on the Colonel to see if he has any orders. Thomas eats breakfast, bathes, and has his chauffeur drive him to town. The Colonel is not in, so Thomas goes to the Floridita bar/café and drinks with friends. During the conversations, Thomas reveals the news that his son Tom had been shot down while on an RAF mission and has died.

Honest Lil, an aging prostitute, talks with Thomas and asks him to tell her a story. While engaged in storytelling, a woman who Thomas recognizes enters the café. She turns out to be his first wife, a famous actress named Ginny Watson. They go to Thomas's house and make love, after which he tells her of their son's death. Ginny takes the news well enough, and after offering her Tom's letters and anything else she wants to take, Thomas leaves for town.

Part II: Cuba Analysis

Thomas looks to affection from his favorite cat because he has no human connections left. Boise gladly accepts the attention, although Thomas reads too much into the normal cat behavior. His anthropomorphizing of Goats and Boise's reactions is a common and harmless way that people compensate for intense loneliness. Thomas locks himself into his memories when not busy with his ship pilot duties.

Thomas continually drinks away his sorrow and thinks about death quite often. Themes of death and the meaning of life pepper his conversation with Honest Lil. His memories



bring him back to better times, such as when his first wife gave money to the impoverished elderly couple. He still loves his wife and she loves him, yet they cannot live together for various reasons.

With all three sons and his second wife dead, and now his first wife still loving him but remaining inaccessible, Thomas only has the cats and the sea that interest him. He keeps relationships at a superficial level, with the possible exception of Honest Lil, for whom he displays deep affection. Yet it is the affection of a friend, not a lover or a loving husband and father.

Due to the structure of this section, it could be that Hemingway intended to broaden this part of the novel and split it into chapters but died before he was able to do so.



Part III: At Sea Chapter I - II

Part III: At Sea Chapter I - II Summary

Thomas Hudson and his crew discover a massacre on an island. Nine bodies lay in the ashes of burned shacks, and the crew estimates the massacre to be a week old. Somebody had tried to put out the fires. Thomas probes the bodies and finds four bullets, which he identifies as those made for a German machine pistol.

Two crew members search the rest of the island and find a dead German sailor, shot once in the base of the spine and again in the neck. The bullets they retrieve are for a 9mm German Luger. Thomas speculates that a German submarine crew had lost its craft and landed on the island in their lifeboats. They killed the islanders to keep them quiet and possibly because they were black. He thinks the dead German sailor rebelled against the massacre, and so was shot. They take on fresh water and conchs for food before beginning their pursuit of the Germans. Thomas believes the Germans are headed toward Cuba, where they may try to sneak passage on a Spanish ship.

Part III: At Sea Chapter I - II Analysis

The German sailors perform a war atrocity by killing all the islanders and burning their shacks and bodies. The infamous Nazi Germany, marked by racial dominance of the Aryans and racial bigotry against all others, makes its Western presence known by this act. Thomas sets his focus on these sailors in a logical and ruthless way. He is in no mood to put up with this atrocity, or any sort of nonsense, which he shows by shooting a land crab that refuses to stand down and scurry away. His .357 bullet demolishes the crab, and although Thomas understands that the creature was only doing what crabs naturally do, he feels no remorse. The time for feeling anything like mercy has long passed.

Thomas and his crew hunt for submarines under the guise of being a scientific expedition, but in reality their boat carries heavy machine guns, frags (hand grenades), and explosives. They play with each other about their scientific ruse, but their mission involves serious wartime duties.



Part III: At Sea Chapter III - V

Part III: At Sea Chapter III - V Summary

Thomas sleeps on the beach and dreams of his first wife. The vividness of the dream leaves an empty feeling in him when he wakes, as can be seen in the text: "When he woke he touched the blanket and he did not know, for an instant, that it was a dream. Then he lay on his side and felt the pistol holster between his legs and how it was really and all the hollowness in him were twice as hollow and there was a new one from the dream" (p. 334).

Thomas and crew search for the Germans during the night and Thomas tries to guess what the course they might be taking. One of the crew members picks up fragments of a radio transmission in German. Thomas orders the radio operator to establish a fix on the origination of the transmission.

They stop at an island and pick up supplies, and a lieutenant informs Thomas that a German submarine has indeed been recently sunk. The lieutenant adds that he had seen an unmarked boat pass by recently. The distance had been too great to identify who might have been in the boat. After joking about a pig that had been delivered for Thomas and his crew but had panicked, then swum out to sea and drowned, Thomas decides to search for the Germans on the small islands to the west.

Part III: At Sea Chapter III - V Analysis

Thomas's unwelcome dream reminds him of his losses and of happier days. He needs to concentrate on capturing the Germans, his current work that keeps him from thinking too much. The conversations with his crew members stay on a matter-of-fact level, and the banter carries with it ironic and dark humor. The chase begins with small clues, such as a radio transmission in German and the lieutenant's boat sighting, which pull Thomas and his crew onward.

An allegorical image arises in the joking between the lieutenant and Thomas about a pig that swims out to sea in terror and drowns. This could symbolize the Germans attempting to escape and the suicidal nature of a world at war. When Hemingway uses symbolism and allegory, he applies the techniques lightly and with faultless placement in the story. Here the image of the pig out of its element gains prominence through the joking between Thomas and the lieutenant.



Part III: At Sea Chapter VI - VII

Part III: At Sea Chapter VI - VII Summary

Thomas thinks about the Germans as he directs his boat on what he suspects is their course. His evidence so far tells very little about their number, armament, or condition. Reflecting on the war, Thomas does his part well but feels no pride in chasing Germans down, saying to himself, "But you have to do it. Sure, he said. But I don't have to be proud of it. I only have to do it well. I didn't hire out to like it. You did not even hire out, he told himself. That makes it even worse" (p. 345).

Ara, one of the crew members, pleads with Thomas to eat and get some sleep, expressing a concern that the rest of the crew has regarding how hard Thomas pushes himself on their mission. While anchored at the island of Cayo Cruz, Ara and Willie leave in the dinghy to search the key while Tomas tries to sleep. Antonio gives him a big mixed drink and Henry sets up an air mattress. Alone, Thomas throws the drink contents into the wind and tries to sleep, his mind still active on chasing the Germans.

Part III: At Sea Chapter VI - VII Analysis

The crew of Thomas' submarine-hunting boat care very much about his welfare. Their personalities come out a little more; all are competent seamen and warriors. Thomas respects them, yet maintains the overall responsibilities of ship captain perhaps too much. He needs his rest, and the crew sees to it that he gets it.

Thomas overworks himself not out of a sense of duty to country or in any way to win the war. He hunts submarines because the government has conscripted him into the task. The overworking has more to do with avoiding thoughts of his first wife and child than anything else. Thomas will kill the Germans if necessary and they will try to kill him, but he holds no feelings of honor or courage about the whole business of humans murdering each other during wartime.

Under the stress of war and because of his internal suffering, Thomas cannot sleep while on duty or when taking a few days of leave in Cuba. The quality of his life has degenerated more so than most because he starts out with a poor quality on Bimini. Now his surroundings while chasing Germans offer little comfort other than when he pilots the boat and can appreciate nature.



Part III: At Sea Chapter VIII - XII

Part III: At Sea Chapter VIII - XII Summary

Ara and Willie find a German on the island, except he is near death from gangrene. Thomas attempts an interrogation. The German sailor refuses to talk, having accepted his imminent death, and refuses morphine because the pain has passed. The German dies, Thomas orders photos of the body to be taken, and the crew members bury the body on the island in a marked grave.

Ara finds an abandoned boat on the next island, plus evidence that the Germans had been there. The crew realizes they are very close and decide to wash up in a monsoon-like rainstorm before continuing on the chase. Thomas speculates on the condition of the Germans and tries not to think about his better times.

While moving toward the next island, the crew catches a large wahoo fish that runs about sixty pounds. Thomas and Willie have a little problem between them that quickly smooths over as Henry reminds Thomas how much he needs Willie, a former Marine. The crew prepares their weapons for an expected fight with the Germans as they approach Cayo Romano.

Part III: At Sea Chapter VIII - XII Analysis

The evidence mounts that Thomas and his crew are hot on the trail of the Germans—first the dying German and then the abandoned boat. Tension begins to mount as they approach Cayo Romano, where everyone expects to fight at least some of the Germans. Landing the big wahoo game fish gives the crew some relief.

Hemingway reveals the strange calm and serenity that befalls a person near death and beyond pain. The dying German soldier has no need to fear interrogation, so Thomas cannot use the implied threat of torture to make him talk. Death stands only hours away, and the German knows it. This event also foreshadows more deaths to come.

The discovery of used wound dressings foreshadows a situation in which one of Thomas' crew members dies. One of the Germans is wounded but heals normally. He may not be able to accompany the rest of the German sailors, but he may also be able to use a gun.



Part III: At Sea Chapter XIII - XXI

Part III: At Sea Chapter XIII - XXI Summary

Upon trying to make their way through a narrow and shallow area near Cayo Contrabando, Thomas and his crew run their boat aground. Thomas, Willie, and Peters take the dinghy around a bend and discover the turtle boat that the Germans are using to make their escape. When the group boards the turtle boat, an injured German shoots Peters dead. Thomas shoots the German dead. They remove Peters's body for burial at sea, punch holes in the boat with hand grenades, and set booby traps in case the Germans return. Willie explores the rest of the island and finds nothing.

Thomas notices an island where all the birds have flown away, indicating the presence of somebody. He guesses the Germans are there and takes a channel bordered by thick foliage on either side, expecting an ambush. Everybody prepares for a battle with . 50 caliber machine guns, light machine guns, hand grenades, and homemade dynamite bombs made out of fire extinguishers.

The Germans open fire from both sides of the mangrove channel. Thomas takes three hits to his leg and torso, but he continues to command the response while Ara ties a tourniquet on his thigh. The bleeding from his leg stops, although Thomas realizes he has internal bleeding too. The crew pours machine gun fire, throws hand grenades, and pitches the homemade bombs at the Germans. One of the enemy comes out of the brush with his hands behind his head, but is shot dead accidentally, which dismays Thomas. He wanted at least one prisoner to prove that he and the crew had fought the Germans.

Thomas loses quite a bit of blood and must lie down. The crew members plan to take him to the nearest base and have a surgeon flown in to patch him up. Willie talks with Thomas and tells him that he loves Thomas. Thomas says he understands, but Willie tells him, "'You never understand anybody that loves you'" (p. 446).

Part III: At Sea Chapter XIII - XXI Analysis

The search ends with all the Germans being killed and Thomas receiving serious injuries. In the last line of the story Willie sums up the primary struggle that Thomas has experienced in his life, the inability to understand those who love him. Whether Thomas lives or dies is not as important as is hearing these words from Willie.

While on this last leg of the search, Thomas again recalls happier times. His concentration on the job at hand slips each time he drinks alcohol, with the old remorse soon following. Only action can pull him back, but the war seems incidental. He could just as well be painting flamingos to keep the bad feelings away.



Death may release Thomas from his remorseful pain. However, the war may not kill him either, so he could live quite a while longer. If so, he has this revelation about his nature that Willie offers and a chance to regain a level of happiness, perhaps not as intense as he remembers, but better than he has had for a long time. Thomas has lived his life either running away from himself or suppressing his feelings. Now, with possibly life-threatening wounds, he must decide if life is worth the fight. Willie may have given him a reason to live—the chance for gaining and holding onto happiness through better understanding those who love him.



Characters

Thomas Hudson

Thomas Hudson would like nothing better from life than to live with his first wife, Ginny Watson, and their son, Tom. He fails at this due to his lack of patience and a proclivity to emotional fights, which are serious flaws within a marriage. He tries another marriage and runs into the same problems but does father two boys, David and Andrew. At the opening of the book, Thomas finds relative peace on the beautiful island of Bimini, as long as he fills his days with painting. He also finds alcohol to be useful.

When his three sons come to visit him on the island, Thomas enjoys the short time with them. Shortly after their visit, he receives word that his second wife and his two youngest sons have all died in a car wreck. Then World War II breaks out and the government orders Thomas to take a crew of men on a gunboat disguised as a science vessel and look for German submarines. He accepts his duty. While between missions in Cuba, Ginny comes to visit.

Thomas has a selfish streak. He makes love to Ginny before giving her the bad news about Tom, who has died in the war. Had he told her beforehand, the grief would have destroyed any ideas about sex. Thomas gets laid, Ginny hears the bad news, and nothing is right afterward.

What started out as a fairly comfortable life on a relatively peaceful island creating artwork that sells in New York City galleries significantly changes as Thomas finds himself hunting for German sailors who had lost their submarine and have committed a massacre on a small key. All three of his sons are dead. He is twice divorced. He hates the war business and knows it could kill him. Life turns miserable and meaningless for Thomas Hudson, except for the beauty of nature.

Roger Davis

Roger Davis writes for a living and is a good friend of Thomas Hudson's. The books that Roger writes are all trashy formula fiction works, and he strongly desires to write something of literary worth. A former boxer, Roger also likes to fight. He thrashes and pounds an unsavory rich tourist, thoroughly humiliating the man and crushing what little dignity he once had.

But Roger knows how to fish for the big ocean species. When David hooks a huge swordfish, Roger coaches the boy through hours of tortuous fighting. He shares in the disappointment when the trophy breaks free of the hook just as it nears the boat, exhausted and defeated.

At the end of the Bimini part, Roger takes off for Thomas's ranch in the American West. He intends to write his good book, the one that will have truth in it rather than yet



another predictable story populated with stock characters. He may have it in him. Roger's character displays passion, courage, strength, and discipline, as opposed to Thomas's character, with his burdensome love failure eating away at his soul.

The Boys (Tom, David, Andrew)

Tom is the oldest boy and probably the favorite. He fondly remembers Paris with Ginny and Thomas, much to Andrew's vexation. Andrew would rather do something or hear stories about doing something. While David struggles with his swordfish, Tom looks on and worries about his safety. Andrew tries to help in any way he can. David loses the fish at the last moment but learns to be a man, which in Hemingway's estimation involves endurance and strength.

Ginny Watson

Ginny Watson, a famous movie actress, is Thomas's first wife. She is remarkably beautiful and perfect in every way, or at least Thomas thinks so. He blames himself for their failed marriage, but Ginny still cares for Thomas and he still cares for her. They simply cannot live together. Ginny provides a good home for their child, Tom. She does her duty in the war through the USO, and she makes love to Thomas one last time. Tragically, she really is too good for Thomas.

Bimini Islanders

The Bimini islanders live simple lives within the island paradise. Yet complexities roil within and come out with the application of rum and a little encouragement. They resent the island authorities and nearly burn down the Commissioner's house. Regardless, they individually carry hearts of gold and of the lion within their breasts. Hemingway may go a bit far in presenting the islanders' nobility, perhaps as compensation for the racism of the age.

Willie

Willie is a former Marine who ships with Thomas while searching for Germans in the keys. True to the Marines' nickname, Willie does the grunt work during the search by taking on a mosquito-infested key single-handedly. He also has the honor of pointing out the greatest weakness of Thomas Hudson at the end of the story—Thomas has never understood anyone who loves him.

Honest Lil

Honest Lil is an aging prostitute in Havana. She can turn on huge tears at will and uses her talent to good advantage. Honest Lil wants to hear good stories from Thomas,



stories that involve love. She may have had sex with nearly all the men in Havana, but what she wants is to make love, and not through her profession. She wants Thomas to tell her that love exists, which may be an impossibility for someone who does not understand what love means.

Hired Help

Thomas likes his hired help on the island of Bimini better than those in Cuba. Eddy on the island plays a significant role in two major scenes—once while a shark threatens David, and again when David hooks a big swordfish. Phillip on the island takes very good care of Thomas and the boys. However, Thomas dislikes his moody chauffeur and unreliable house help in Cuba.

Tourists

The arrival of tourists to Bimini usually means one of two things: customers and trouble. An unsavory rich tourist treats one of the young islanders rudely and makes his girlfriend cry. He later pays for this by Roger's bare fists and pugilistic skills. However, a later houseboat arrival brings Audrey Bruce, a family friend, and a boatload of paying customers to Bobby's bar.

Havana People

Most people in Havana live in terrible poverty. Thomas remembers a time when Ginny gave money to an old couple living in a lean-to. He hears about how crushing the war has been on the people. In contrast to this, the Havana authorities seem to do well, and visitors have enough money to buy a good time.

Germans

The Germans massacre a small island village, an act which Thomas writes off as coming from desperate men. He later thinks that fanaticism drives the Germans more than fear, yet they are only known by their trail and actions. The evidence indicates that the Germans are good sailors who take care of their own, which is to be expected from any nation. In their last act of firing on Thomas's boat, desperation plays an undeniable role. They need a boat.

Dying German Sailor

The dying German sailor deserves special mention. He has already left this life by the time Thomas and his crew find the man. The German sailor only smiles ruefully when Thomas demands information and threatens torture because there is no further pain that can be inflicted. The German has endured past this point, which Thomas respects.

This scene carries profound meaning that Hemingway does not explain. He leaves the interpretation up to the reader.



Objects/Places

Bimini

Bimini is a small island off the coast of Florida. Thomas Hudson lives there at the beginning of the novel and his three sons visit there. The middle son, David, almost lands a record-breaking swordfish.

The Farm, Cuba

While serving in World War II as a submarine hunter, Thomas stays at his farm just outside of Havana. Ginny visits Thomas at the farm and makes love to him before hearing about their son's death in the war.

Havana, Cuba

Thomas must go into Havana for his orders while serving in the war. His first wife, Ginny, finds him in a Havana bar.

Massacre Key

The massacre key is where Thomas and his crew discover the atrocity that the German sailors have done. This becomes the start of the search for the Germans.

Mangrove Channel

The mangrove channel is where Thomas and his crew fight the German sailors. The Germans, desperate for a boat, are far outgunned and lose the battle.

Paris

Thomas once lived in Paris with his first wife and son, Tom. The father and son remember those times fondly, even though money was tight, because love and friendship are more important.

Paintings

Thomas creates good realistic island paintings that sell very well in New York City galleries. He gives a painting to Bobby, who hangs it in his bar. He works on two paintings of David's swordfish, the big one that got away.



Fish

The story features several kinds of fish—shark, swordfish, barracuda, bonefish, useless tarpon, and wahoo. The shark can kill or injure, the swordfish can wear out a fisherman, and the rest taste good except the tarpon.

Firearms

Firearms inhabit the story almost as thickly as fish, more so at the ending battle. Eddy shoots the shark thoroughly dead with a submachine gun. The Germans run into .50 caliber machine guns, Thompson submachine guns, and a world of explosive hurt.

Alcoholic Drinks

Everybody drinks up a storm except the children, and they pretend to drink. Thomas starts his mornings in Bimini with drinks and continues throughout the day. He cuts back during the war, but drinks are still available.

Driftwood

Hemingway mentions driftwood only a few times during the story, but the image carries a great deal of meaning. Thomas Hudson creates works of art and so does nature. Thomas also burns the natural works of art, which he finds to be beautiful.

Keys

Bimini is a key and so are the small islands on which Thomas and his crew search for the Germans. Each key has its own character, depending on the size of the island, the land types, and the prevailing winds.



Themes

Love

Thomas Hudson's main problem in life involves love. He loves his sons and his first wife, so the problem is not a lack of love or an inability to feel the emotions of love, but his inability to live with those whom he loves. Thomas blames only himself for this problem. Rather than changing his ways, he changes how he relates to women—he avoids arguments and marriage. Thomas keeps his distance and lives alone in his misery.

Thomas's love of painting fills the void on Bimini. The war keeps him distracted enough, except for his time between missions while in Cuba. Cats substitute for human companionship at the farm, and he has his friends in Havana. He loses two sons to a car wreck and the third to the war, meaning that he outlives his own children. This is one of the worst events that can happen to a parent, but Thomas does not allow himself to grieve.

Willie points out at the end of the story that Thomas has never understood those who love him. Understanding love hardly ever comes easy, but many people do come to terms with the emotions, while others take it all in stride. Thomas might think that people who love one another should never have conflicts, which is impossible. Few close human relationships work that way. What he probably suffers from is a fear of closeness, a sort of emotional claustrophobia, something that he cannot express even to maintain his relationships rather than killing them.

Manhood

Manhood is a classic Hemingway theme, and the story characters are mostly men, or are boys heading toward manhood. To Hemingway a man must be strong, willing to fight, able to endure physical challenges, and know how to handle guns. Men hardly ever talk about their innermost feelings or sufferings and never cry, as that is for boys who have not yet become men. Men drink alcohol and hire the services of prostitutes. They fight wars and catch big fish.

Thomas Hudson represents one kind of man, the suffering stoic who finds peace through work. Roger Davis represents another kind of man, the frustrated artist who makes a living through the craft of his art but never produces any art through his craft. He writes formula fiction, not good fiction. Hemingway may have written these two characters to explore self. The author does refer to Thomas as Papa at times, which is what Hemingway's family called him.

David, the middle son, makes great strides towards manhood by fighting the swordfish and almost landing it. The disappointment of losing the trophy and how he handles his feelings bring him closer to maturity. Tom dies flying a Spitfire in the war, a young but



proper death for a man. The deaths of David and Andrew are simply bad breaks and could happen to anyone. If Thomas dies from his battle wounds, he too leaves the world in a manly fashion.

Duty

Thomas accepts the boys for the summer, even though his second wife does not consult him first. He does his duty to his family, and since the intrusion lasts only five weeks, he accepts it without complaint. When the hammerhead shark comes for David, Thomas almost flubs his duty to protect his family, but Eddy saves the day with his machine gun. Roger offers advice and encouragement to David as he fights the swordfish, and tries to take responsibility for the loss out of a sense of duty to the boy and his friend Thomas.

His sense of duty makes Thomas perform as skipper on the submarine-hunting boat, although fighting in the war at all carries little interest for him. He would rather be painting. Nevertheless, Thomas does his best to find the Germans, who are also doing their duty to escape capture.

The idea of duty extends to Thomas's art and Roger's writing. Nobody forces Thomas to take on the task of painting the swordfish underwater, a challenge to his painting skill. Nobody offers him money to take on the project. He wants to do it because he thinks he can and the attempt should be made. Roger acts in a similar manner for writing his good book. It may never sell many copies, but out of duty to his craft and art he must at least try to write something worth reading for more than superficial entertainment. He could also learn something in the process, and thereby teach something to others.

Friendship

Thomas attracts friends who generally give him loyalty and respect. Roger Davis and Willie find something in the man that stimulates emotions near to familial love. It may be that Thomas is like a wounded wild animal—unapproachable, strong, and stoic. He needs friends to care for him and mix drinks.

The friends that Thomas makes in Paris include famous artists and writers. They may like his company because their particular madness finds the stability of Thomas comforting and he may be a good listener. Having a beautiful wife probably helps.

Thomas treats people well for the most part, but there seems to be something more to his character that goes undetected other than in the way people respond to him. He probably has good looks but is not vain. He never thinks on this level, other than to appreciate the physical beauty of certain women. This may be the reason that people are drawn to Thomas. He thinks more about others and sees them with an artist's eye, or at least this could be what others think of him. In reality, he thinks quite a bit about his own life, and mostly in self-torturous ways.

Style

Point of View

Hemingway uses both the omniscient third person and the first person to give a single point of view, that of Thomas Hudson. The author achieves a smooth flow from narrative to thoughts and dialog, in which Hemingway allows commentary from the other characters. However, the innermost thoughts and feelings of the other characters come across as if it is Thomas recalling the conversations rather than the author reporting them in real time.

Thomas sees, hears, and feels intimately, while a character like David exhibits outward signs of what he experiences. An example of this is the fight for the big swordfish. By inference, the reader understands that the fish tests David's endurance and determination; the reader's understanding is achieved not by directly reading about David's experience but by observing his actions and words through Thomas.

Part of Hemingway's art brings the reader into direct contact with the main character, as if the reader looks through Thomas's eyes and hears through his ears. A passage may describe a scene that Thomas observes while communicating vital hints as to what the main character may be thinking and feeling without directly telling these details. When Thomas kills the sand crab with his revolver, his level of ruthlessness comes through. A twinge of guilt in his thoughts keeps him human, thus balancing the demonstration with a minimal explanation:

"Poor old crab, he thought. All he was practicing was his trade. But he ought to have shuffled along" (p. 326).

Setting

The physical settings range from the beauty of the isle of Bimini to the dirty harbor and poor city of Havana, and then to the Florida Keys during World War II. However, the novel deals mostly with Thomas's inner self and his suffering with lost love.

Bimini stands as a beautiful little spot on Earth, a place where a painter can work in peace and appreciate the seasons. Contrasting with this, the island culture has its ugly side, and the surrounding ocean its deadly nature. The fight on the dock brings out Roger's lust for violence and his ability to humiliate his opponent completely. The practical joke about Andrew drinking gin in front of the houseboat people shows a cruel sense of humor. Nature attacks in the form of a large hammerhead shark, although the shark simply wants fish, not David, for lunch.

Thomas lives on a farm outside of Havana, Cuba. He goes to town and checks for orders, drinks with friends, and receives a visit from his first wife. Where the farm affords a comfortable place for Thomas between his ocean trips to hunt enemy



submarines, Havana brings comfort only in its bars. Poverty and heavy traffic characterize most of the city.

A key is a low-lying island oftentimes surrounded by a reef. The word can also mean the reef itself. Thomas searches several keys while chasing after Germans who have massacred a small village and taken the islanders' two boats. Some of the keys provide evidence that Thomas and his crew are on the right trail. The Germans attack and are killed near a mangrove channel, but wound Thomas in the battle, perhaps fatally.

Paris exists as an idealized setting within Thomas's mind. He visits there often in his imagination when drinking, but this brings on the pain of his lost love and happiness. Thomas eventually stops drinking in order for him to concentrate only on his distasteful war duties while chasing Germans in the keys.

Language and Meaning

Hemingway is remembered as the voice of the Lost Generation, those born around the period between World War I and the Great Depression. His use of a journalistic style in fiction marks this voice, where short sentences trump the longer structures common in earlier literature. Realistic dialog and fresh descriptive narration, common to Lost Generation writers, along with a sense of detachment and drifting, characterize Hemingway's work.

Another common Hemingway technique is the use of simple objects as important symbols and metaphors. For example, driftwood means more than something that interests Thomas Hudson. Thomas admires driftwood as natural art, yet he burns the wood and appreciates how it burns. The implication follows that Thomas finds the destruction of beauty as also being beautiful, perhaps representing a sacrificial urge to kill that which one loves. The swordfish that David comes to love is another metaphor for this deep human desire. Whether he lands the trophy or not, the destiny of the swordfish is death.

Oftentimes Hemingway's meaning eludes a casual reading. He designs his stories to leave one powerful impact upon which other meanings attach and surface upon reflection. Arguably as famous for his short stories as his novels, Hemingway's condensed style carries through both forms. He wastes no words in his polished works, although this posthumously edited and published novel appears to amble at times.

Structure

The novel comes in three parts—Bimini, Cuba, and At Sea. Bimini and At Sea contain numbered chapter breaks, while Cuba has none due to it being a single extended event with flowing scenes located in and around Havana. Physical time proceeds as normal, but flashbacks do occur within the main character's mind.



Narratives tend to be short with deference given to lengthy dialog. Dialog makes up most of Cuba and a good deal of At Sea, two places where the story becomes a bit tedious, possibly due to this book being published from its revision stage.

The plot takes few twists or turns and the protagonist seems frozen in space, while the antagonist, Thomas Hudson, wrestles with his life failures. The story is Man against Himself. Things happen to Thomas—divorce, death of his sons, and conscription into war. Things happen around Thomas—Roger fights, his first wife visits, and Germans die. Thomas does very little other than paint to keep an even psychological keel and do his duty, although the government forces him to serve. Even while a shark imperils his son's life, another character actually kills the predator with a machine gun.



Quotes

"Sometimes he would put the lamp out and lie on the rug on the floor and watch the edges of color that the sea salt and the sand in the wood made in the flame as they burned. On the floor his eyes were even with the line of the burning wood and he could see the line of the flame when it left the wood and it made him both sad and happy. All wood that burned affected him in this way. But burning driftwood did something to him that he could not define. He thought that is was probably wrong to burn it when he was so fond of it; but he felt no guilt about it". p. 11

"Roger turned his head very slowly, saw him, and spoke over his shoulder.

"Go put the gun away and go to bed.'

"The man stood there with the gun. His swollen lips were working but he did not say anything.

"'You're mean enough to shoot a man in the back but you haven't got the guts,' Roger spoke over his shoulder very quietly. 'Go put the gun away and go to bed.'

"Roger still sat there with his back toward the man. Then he took what Thomas Hudson thought was an awful chance.

"'Doesn't he remind you just a little bit of Lady Macbeth coming out there in his nightclothes?' he asked the three others in the stern.

"Thomas Hudson waited for it then. But nothing happened and after a while the man turned and went down into the cabin taking the shotgun with him". p. 49

"Thomas Hudson was trying to be loose but steady, trying to hold his breath and not to think of anything but the shot; to squeeze and keep just a touch ahead and at the base of the fin which was wobbling more now than it had at the start when he heard the submachine gun start firing from the stern and saw water start to spout all around the fin. Then it clattered again in a short burst and the water jumped in a tighter patch right at the base of the fin. As he shot, the clatter came again, short and tight, and the fin went under and there was a boil in the water and then the biggest hammerhead he had ever seen rose white-bellied out of the sea and began to plane off over the water crazily, on his back, throwing water like an aquaplane. His belly was shining an obscene white, his yard-wide mouth like a turned-up grin, the great horns of his head with the eyes on the end, spread wide out as he bounced and slid over the water, Eddy's gun rapping and ripping into the white of his belly making black spots that were red before he turned and went down and Thomas Hudson could see him rolling over and over as he sank". pp. 88-89

"Down in the backless fighting chair, set in its swivel base, David braced his feet against the stern and lifted with his arms, back, withers, and thighs; then lowered and reeled and lifted again. Steadily, an inch, two inches, three inches at a time he was getting more and more line on the reel". p. 120

"Thomas Hudson worked on for a while. Then he went down and sat by David and watched the four of them in the surf. The girl was swimming without a cap and she



swam and dove as sleek as a seal. She was as good a swimmer as Roger except for the difference in power. When they came in onto the beach and came walking toward the house on the hard sand, the girl's hair was wet and went straight back from her forehead so there was nothing to trick the shape of her head and Thomas Hudson thought he had never seen a lovelier face nor a finer body. Except one, he thought. Except the one finest and loveliest. Don't think about it, he told himself. Just look at this girl and be glad she's here". p. 181

"When he had come back to the farm that night he was very drunk and none of the cats would sleep with him but Goats, who was not allergic to the basic rum smell, had no prejudices against drunkenness, and reveled in the rich whore smell, as full-bodied as a fine Christmas fruitcake". pp. 211-212

"She made her stately progress to the far end of the bar, speaking to many of the men she passed and smiling at others. Everyone treated her with respect. Nearly everyone she spoke to had loved her at some time in the last twenty-five years She had a skin that was as smooth as olive-colored ivory, if there were olive-colored ivory, with a slightly smoky roselike cast". pp. 266-267

"It was her. No one else got out of a car that way, practically and easily and beautifully and at the same time as though she were doing the street a great favor when she stepped on it". p. 298

"Both of them,' she said. 'Boise, tell me. What are we going to do about it?'
"The cat purred imperceptibly.
"You don't know either,' she said. 'And neither does anyone else'". p. 319

"But he did not think. Instead he lay back on the sand with his pistol pulled over so it lay between his legs and he watched the sculpture that the wind and sand had made of a piece of driftwood. It was gray and sanded and it was embedded in the white, floury sand. It looked as though it were an exhibition. It should be in the Salon d'Automne". p. 327

"He could feel his scalp prickle as it does when you meet a car coming fast, suddenly, on the wrong side of the road". p. 366

"Ever since they had grounded he had felt, in a way, reprieved. When they had grounded he had felt the heavy bump of the ship as though he were hit himself. He knew it was not rocky as she hit. He could feel that in his hands and through the soles of his feet. But the grounding had come to him as a personal wound. Then, later, had come the feeling of the bad dream that it all had happened before". pp. 399-400

"Three chickenshit bullets, he thought, to fuck good painting and prove nothing. Why did the poor bastards ever make that error on the massacre key? They could have surrendered and been all right . . . Why do they have to be such damned fanatics? We chased good and we will always fight. But I hope we are not fanatics". p. 444



Topics for Discussion

What problems does Thomas Hudson have with love?

Describe Thomas's relationship with the sea.

Compare and contrast Roger Davis with Thomas.

Why is Tom more in Thomas's painful memories than his other children?

What are Thomas's attitudes toward the people in Havana?

List the good and bad parts of Thomas Hudson's character.

How does Thomas feel about World War II and the Germans?

Describe the human culture on Bimini.

What do the stories that Thomas tells to Honest Lil indicate about him?

What effect does Hemingway create by repeatedly referring to the main character as Thomas Hudson rather than simply Thomas?