

The Nick Adams Stories Study Guide

The Nick Adams Stories by Ernest Hemingway

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Preface

Preface Summary and Analysis

The editor explains the reason for the collection of short stories, namely, that the stories surrounding Nick Adams have never been arranged into a coherent whole and, as such, their interconnection is largely unknown. He also informs the reader that the work includes a number of unpublished manuscripts that have not been published before.



The Northern Woods: Three Shots

The Northern Woods: Three Shots Summary

Nick, his father, and his uncle are camping and Nick remembers, with shame, how he had gotten scared thinking about how he would one day die when he was alone and summoned his uncle and father back to camp by firing three shots into the air with his rifle. The uncle is frustrated, thinking that Nick is a coward, but his father is more understanding. When his father returns, he lies and says that he heard an animal.

The Northern Woods: Three Shots Analysis

This story was never published and so it is unclear whether Hemingway intended to develop the story further. As it is, the story can be seen as a conflict between Nick's immaturity (he is very young) and his realization that all life eventually comes to an end.



The Northern Woods: Indian Camp

The Northern Woods: Indian Camp Summary

Nick accompanies his father, who is a doctor, and his uncle to an Indian camp. An Indian woman has been giving birth for two days due to complications and his father has to operate to recover the child. Nick, who evidently is very young, is frightened by the surgery and does not watch. His father is told that the baby's father hurt himself in an ax accident recently and takes a look at him to find that he had actually killed himself. He tries to spare Nick from seeing it, but he is too late. As they are leaving the camp, the two discuss suicide and death.

The Northern Woods: Indian Camp Analysis

This chapter continues the themes of immaturity and death. Nick, whose immaturity is illustrated by his father's active attempts to shelter him, is forced to confront the very serious issue of death and suicide, in a very graphic way. His father's role as comforter and guardian are also heavily emphasized in this story.



The Northern Woods: The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife

The Northern Woods: The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife Summary

The doctor, Nick's father, nearly instigates a fight with a man he wants to cut wood that was dropped by a logging company, but backs down. He returns home to his wife, a good-natured Christian scientist and lies, saying that the other man tried to start the fight. He fiddles with his shotgun, but ultimately decides to go on a walk with his son

The Northern Woods: The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife Analysis

While thus far, Henry has been in control and level-headed, this chapter shows him losing his temper. His cleaning his shotgun indicates that he is still angry about the near-fight, but he is soothed by wife, which perhaps is a confirmation of the stereotype that the role of a wife is to help husband relax and stay calm.



The Northern Woods: Ten Indians

The Northern Woods: Ten Indians Summary

Nick is returning home from a Fourth of July celebration on a wagon and they pass by a group of nine drunken Indians. A few derogatory remarks are exchanged about Indians and the boys in the wagon tease Nick for spending a lot of time with an Indian girl named Prudence Mitchell, but Nick denies everything. He gets home and eats dinner while his father sits with him, who tells him that he saw Prudence and another boy playing in the woods. Nick is very upset by this and even cries, thinking his heart is broken, but he soon forgets about it and falls asleep.

The Northern Woods: Ten Indians Analysis

By depicting a large group of drunken Indians, this chapter plays into common racial prejudices against Native Americans, which is only slightly countered by the fact that Nick has a romantic interest in a young Indian girl. Nick's immaturity is featured in this chapter again, shown by his exaggerated response to finding out about Prudence playing with another boy followed by his almost instant recovery.



The Northern Woods: The Indians Moved Away

The Northern Woods: The Indians Moved Away Summary

This chapter is an account of why all of the Indians left Petoskey, the agricultural town where Nick has grown up. While some of the Indians who lived there were once moderately successful farmers, when their children inherited them, they squandered them. Other Indians just mysteriously left or were ruined by drink.

The Northern Woods: The Indians Moved Away Analysis

This chapter continues the theme established in "Ten Indians" of negatively portraying Indians as irresponsible and drunkards. No good reason is given for any of the Indians leaving town; rather, all left because of vice or foolishness.



On His Own: The Light of the World

On His Own: The Light of the World Summary

Nick, now seventeen, visits a bar with his friend, Tom. After ordering a few drinks, they get into a fight with the bartender and leave to go to the train station. There, they find an eclectic group of people: a cook, one very large prostitute named Alice, two prostitutes who are slightly less large, two skinny blond prostitutes, and a few others. When they arrive, Alice is teasing the cook. Nick and Tom converse with the group and a famous, murdered boxer, Steve Ketchel, is brought up. One of the blondes claims to have been in love with Steve Ketchel and gets into a fight with Alice who claims she had slept with Steve and did not believe that the blonde had. Amid this dispute, Nick and Tom leave for the train platform.

On His Own: The Light of the World Analysis

Nick is now older and "on his own," but still retains some of the characteristics of his childhood, such as his quietness and passivity, which is in marked contrast to the outspoken directness of Tom. Unlike the previous stories, Hemingway uses the first person here, allowing the reader access to Nick's thoughts. Here, in particular, Nick alternates between finding aspects of Alice beautiful—her voice and her face—and finding her size repulsive, perhaps showing a kind of thoughtfulness not common for a man his age, who might not be able to look past her size.



On His Own: The Battler

On His Own: The Battler Summary

Nick has just been punched by a brakeman on a passing train. It is not clear when this story takes place in relation to the previous one. Bruised and cut up, he walks towards a fire he sees burning in the forest nearby and finds a somewhat deranged and disfigured little man who used to be a famous boxer, named Ad Francis. After remarking on Nick's developing black eye, Ad tries to convince Nick that he's crazy and then shows off various physical oddities about himself, such as his missing ear and slow heart rate. Ad's friend, Bugs, a black man, then arrives and the three have dinner together. When Nick will not give Ad his knife—on Bugs' advice—Ad gets angry and is about to fight Nick, but Bugs knocks him out with a blackjack first. Bugs explains that he to do it often when Ad gets out of control. Ad went crazy after a failed marriage to a sister (though whether or not she is biologically his sister is unclear) and wound up in jail, where he met Bugs. The two roam around living off of money Ad's sister sends to them, as he squandered most of the money he earned while boxing. Bugs recommends that Nick leave before Ad wakes up, and he does.

On His Own: The Battler Analysis

Nick shows a tougher and more assertive side in this story, especially in his expressed desire to get revenge on the brakeman who punched him. However, the sincerity of this is questionable, since he acts very timidly when threatened by Ad, though that could very well be on account of the latter's presumable skill in fighting. Hemingway's portrayal of a black man is a mixture here. The black man is, on the one hand, a criminal; but he is also thoughtful, relatively well-spoken, and well-intentioned, a significant contrast to the rather one-dimensional portrayal of Indians in the childhood stories.

On His Own: The Killers

On His Own: The Killers Summary

Nick is eating at a restaurant when two men, Al and Max, come in and order lunch. Their mannerisms are very rude and they start making odd requests of the man tending the counter, George, such as demanding to see the cook and making Nick stand behind the counter. Eventually, they tie up Nick and the cook in the kitchen while one hides in the back with a shotgun; their plan is to kill a famous boxer named Ole Anderson who frequents the restaurant. Ole never comes in and then men eventually leave without causing any harm. Nick goes to where Ole lives and finds him laying in bed. He tells him that there are men looking to kill him, and Ole does not show surprise nor does he want Nick to do anything about, like inform the police. He thanks Nick for telling him and Nick departs and decides to leave town, not wanting to be around for a murder.

On His Own: The Killers Analysis

This is the third story which somehow involves a famous boxer, indicating that Hemingway had a particular interest in these men's lives. In all three cases, the men wind up in very unfortunate situations after their careers are over—Steve Ketchel is murdered by his father, Ad Francis goes insane, and Ole has assassins looking for him. Nick's passivity is also once again shown here, as he offers no resistance to the seemingly random demands of the two assassins.



On His Own: The Last Good Country

On His Own: The Last Good Country Summary

Nick is in the woods trying to catch trout in a stream and his younger sister, Littless, with whom he has a special relationship, is trying to convince him to come back home for dinner. However, there are apparently two wardens at the house who are looking to take Nick away and send him to boarding school—for what, it is not clear—and so he has resolved to run away. Littless begs to come with him and, after some hesitation, he finally allows her to come along, at least for a time. They plan out their escape and hear a horse and buggy carrying the two men driving down the road. Nick and his sister successfully hide from them and, when they are gone, Nick says that he wants to kill them, and his sister unsuccessfully tries to extract a promise that he will not kill anyone. The fact that he sold some trout and killed a moose and something else (the identity of which is not revealed) is evidently related to why the men want to take him away, his Littless reveals.

Nick meets Littless near their house from which she's smuggled out supplies for their trip. The men have returned to the house and are waiting for Nick to return. The two head to their Aunt Halley's hotel and receive a sizable amount of money from her. She is very supportive of him and promises to give him whatever he needs and offers her hotel to him any night he might need refuge. Her husband, she says, will do everything he can to fix Nick's situation.

The two return to the house once again at night for some final supplies and find the men who are looking for Nick drinking heavily on the porch of the house. Nick says he wishes they could put "knockout drops" in their drinks and Littless offers to do it, but they do not have any. They gather their supplies and set out after Littless leaves a note for their mother. While they are walking, Littless, with a hint of jealousy, asks whether Nick is thing about a girl named Trudy. This makes Nick mad and they fight briefly, but Littless makes him promise that they will get along. After finding a suitable spot, they sleep for a few hours until morning.

When morning comes, they take a roundabout path to a forest which has been cut down, but the people who cleared it only took the bark and left behind the large logs. This makes travel through the area difficult, but they make it through and come to what Nick calls the "good part:" a virgin forest which seems untouched by humanity. It scares his sister—or would scare her, she says, if she were alone—but it evokes a kind of religious feeling from Nick which he likens to being in a cathedral. She asks if they will ever one day go to Europe and see a cathedral, and he says they will, if he makes money off writing. His writing style, apparently, is too "morbid" and that is why he has not had success so far. After traveling through the virgin forest, the two come to where they will live, a peaceful meadow bordered by the virgin forest and a swamp.



The wardens awake while Nick and Littless are working their way through the chopped down forest. They find that the cupboards have been robbed bare, a clear sign that they neglected their duties and let Nick escape. They decide to go see Mr. Packard, Aunt Halley's husband, to see if he knows anything and Suzy, a servant girl for the Adams family comes along to get groceries. When she gets there, she lets Mr. Packard know what is happening with the kids but not to let the wardens know.

Packard, apparently, runs a grocery store and lets his wife run the hotel, since he cannot stand the fact that it does not have a bar. His wife, on the other hand, loves the variety of people it brings and the culture that comes along with them. While Mr. Packard dislikes the educational seminars that take place at his hotel, he does occasionally go to the religious meetings. He once told Nick that sins were a good thing, since they allowed one to repent, but it does not mean that you should commit them. In the same conversation, he asked Nick about a girl he used to be romantically involved with but was no longer. Nick said that he would probably get back together with her, but Mr. Packard suggests otherwise.

The wardens go to interrogate Mr. Packard. Mr. Packard knows both of them: Evans is the local warden and the other warden is from down-state and he knows him by the name of Splayfoot, a reference to his large feet. He knows Splayfoot from when he framed a man for someone's murder and thus is well aware of how dangerous he is, and is afraid that he will hurt Nick. Packard slips and asks why they are bringing a gun to hunt for children, and Splayfoot asks why he used the plural. Packard covers up his mistake and gives them no information. During the conversation, the men reveal that they are looking for Nick for violating game laws: He evidently shot and killed a buck. After the men leave, Packard has a brief conversation with Suzy and they discuss how Evans may send his boy to look for Nick. Suzy says she misses working for Packard, and Packard agrees, but says that his wife does not see it the same way, indicating that the two may once have had an affair.

Back at the camp, Nick has just fashioned a bed out of foliage for them to sleep on and goes to a nearby stream to fish for trout using improvised tools. He catches a large trout immediately but has to spend some time catching two smaller ones. He returns to the camp to find that Littless has cut her hair and she asks if she looks like a boy. He says she does, a little bit, and she says she is glad, because she has always wanted to be a boy. He says he is glad she isn't one. She then tells him a fantasy she had where she acquired some knockout drops for him by going to a brothel in Sheboygan and becoming an assistant to a prostitute.

They eat dinner and then go to sleep. Since they have to use one of their two blankets to hide the fire, they sleep under the same blanket. He wakes before she does and thinks to himself that he loves her very much, but perhaps she loves him too much. He hopes that it will all be sorted out in time. He starts making breakfast cakes for them and she awakes when they are nearly done. While they are eating, she says that she wants to stay there forever and become his common-law wife. When he says that is not sure that that is possible, she says that if they have children together, then they will have to be married.



The two go out to hunt birds and pick berries to eat that day and Nick thinks to himself how happy he is to be with his sister, no matter how the situation turns out. Nick shows his sister the stream he fished in the day before and they also find some unique birds, all of which she finds to be very beautiful. Nick finds some grouses and shoots them, but spares another bird that he could easily kill at the request of his sister. As they are returning to their camp, Littleless asks if the Evans boy knows about the camp and he says "no" at first, but upon reflection, realizes that he might and becomes nervous. He decides to skip berry-picking to see if the Evans boy is at their camp, but he is not. Littleless is nervous now, too, and he tries to calm. She is too tired to do anything, so he decides to read a book to her.

On His Own: The Last Good Country Analysis

The most prominent feature of this story is Nick's relationship with his sister. What at first may seem like innocent love between siblings is gradually revealed to border on incestuous. Her attachment to him clearly has a romantic element—she fantasizes about marrying him and having his children—and his response is, at least, confused, if not accepting of her affection.

Hemingway also showcases the beauty of nature. While normally giving only the barest descriptions of where a scene is set, he does not hold back at all in describing, with great detail, the various landscapes and terrains the siblings encounter. Nature can be seen as a refuge from the unjust laws of the local government which threaten to take Nick away from his home and his sister, thus the title "The Last Good Country."

Hemingway's attitude towards the warden (and indirectly the arbitrary laws of the government) is made obvious in more ways, too. No one is willing to help them find Nick, and most are even willing to actively undermine their pursuit through deceit and by helping Nick. Mrs. Packard herself is a violator of the law, and Mr. Packard and Suzy both express how stupid they think the gaming law is. The wardens are depicted at times as incompetent and at others as downright evil and dangerous.

Unfortunately, "The Last Good Country" is an unfinished manuscript and, as such, ends long before any of the main threads of the story can be brought to conclusion, leaving the reader only to guess as to what happens to Nick.

On His Own: Crossing the Mississippi

On His Own: Crossing the Mississippi Summary

Nick is on board a train headed for Mississippi and recalls being at a game in the World Series between the Chicago White Sox and the New York Yankees. He wonders if the White Sox won the final game and asks a man selling magazines, who tells him that the White Sox did, which pleases him. He watches with anticipation to see when the train will cross the Mississippi, a sight he has not seen. When it does, it summons to mind images of Mark Twain and his characters.

On His Own: Crossing the Mississippi Analysis

Though short, this story, like "The Last Good Country," continues the theme of glorifying nature. Nearly half of the story is dedicated to describing the changing landscape as he enters Mississippi. The reference to Twain is perhaps a way for Hemingway to pay respect to the author and link himself with his literary style.

War: Night Before Landing

War: Night Before Landing Summary

Nick, now in the military, is on a warship headed for the Bay of Biscay in France. He and Leon go to tease a fellow soldier, Galinski, about a girl who does not like him. In the bunk above Galinski's is a "round" man named Carper who apparently has been drunk for two weeks straight. After talking briefly with Galinski and Carper, Nick and Leon decide to get bottles of wine and talk in a lifeboat. Nick wonders aloud if war will scare him and admonishes him not to think like that, mentioning that the reason Carper drinks so much is because he got fired from another job for being cowardly. They then talk about women and Nick says he is engaged to a girl back home; Leon is single.

War: Night Before Landing Analysis

Nick is now older than he was in the "On His Own" stories, but how much older is not clear. Despite this, he still shows some of the fear of death that came through even in the childhood stories. Carper serves as an example of what could happen to him if he were to be overcome by that fear.

War:

War: Summary

Nick is wounded in battle, though not fatally, taking place somewhere in Austria. A fellow soldier, Rinaldi, has also been injured. Nick says to him they have made a "separate peace" but Rinaldi replies only by saying "We're not patriots."

War: Analysis

This brief portrait of Nick in battle shows him calm and collected, even when injured, in contrast to the fear anticipated elsewhere. He has a good attitude and even the sour attitude of his comrade does not spoil it.



War: Now I Lay Me

War: Now I Lay Me Summary

Nick lies awake at night in some kind of barracks. He does not allow himself to fall asleep, because he is afraid he will die if falls asleep in the dark. So, he just lays there and comes up with things to think about to keep him awake. He imagines himself fishing for trout in the streams of his childhood; he tries to remember everyone he has ever met and pray for them; he tries to remember his most distant memory and remember everything after that. He notices that his orderly, John, is awake, too, and the two talk briefly and share a smoke. They do not have much to talk about and largely rehash stories they have already told one another. John tells Nick he should get married to an Italian girl, since they make good wives, and that he would not regret it. Nick suggests that they go to sleep, but he stays awake and adds thinking about girls that he knew to his nightly routine. He quickly gets bored of this, though, and goes back to thinking about fishing. John's tour of duty ends not long after, but he comes back later to see Nick and is disappointed that he still has not married. Nick says that John would probably be disappointed to find out that he still has not married to this day.

War: Now I Lay Me Analysis

The fear of death features prominently in this story and it is very reminiscent of the fear Nick exhibits as a very young boy in "Three Shots." His fear of his soul leaving his body if he goes to sleep in the dark is childish and immature, and perhaps signifies a kind of reversion caused by the horrors of war. The theme of marriage has arisen a few times in minor ways in previous stories (like "Night Before Landing") but is more visible here, with John's insistence that Nick get married and Nick's disclosure that he never did get married.



War: The Way You'll Never Be

War: The Way You'll Never Be Summary

Nick is an American soldier visiting an Italian battalion to show them that the Americans are coming and to give them hope. On his way to the battalion, Nick passes through the site of a battle, riddled with corpses. He meets a young second lieutenant who is suspicious of him, but takes him to Captain Para, whom Nick evidently knows. When he meets Para, Nick tells him about why he has been sent and regrets that he could not bring any gifts for the soldiers. They talk briefly about times they had drunk together, and Nick says that every time he has gone to battle, he has been drunk. Nick apparently had suffered a head wound recently, and Para does not think that it was treated properly, and Nick asks whether he seems crazy. Para says he seems in fine shape and Nick complains about how difficult life becomes after one is certified as crazy. Nick sleeps for a little but has tortured, meandering dreams composed of memories from battle thoughts of his girl.

Nick awakes and talks to the adjutant, who has informed him that Para will return soon. Nick explains to him what his purpose is there but goes off into a lengthy tangent about locusts and grasshoppers, explaining the difference and the best way to catch them. Nick meets back up with Para, who tells him that it probably is not a good idea for him to tour the troops now, as it might invite enemy shelling. He suggests, rather, that Nick go back to camp and get supplies. After taking a brief nap—which is accompanied by the same kind of strange dreams—Nick leaves for his camp on bicycle.

War: The Way You'll Never Be Analysis

Nick is obviously in very bad mental shape in this story, evidently due to a head wound he suffered in battle. His thoughts are chaotic and disorganized and this occasionally slips its way into his speech, making it equally incoherent. It is not clear why he is still in the service at all, though it would seem that his duties no longer require him to be attached to a unit. He is little more than a symbol for future American troops. Given his acquaintance with a Captain, now Major, it is not unreasonable to think that he once held a respectable rank as an officer. This story also shows Hemingway's willingness to break the continuity in the Nick Adams stories, since Nick's insanity is only seen in this story and nowhere else.

War: In Another Country

War: In Another Country Summary

Nick is in a hospital recovering from a leg injury. He is friends with four other boys, but feels alienated from three of them because their injuries were in combat, while his was in an accident; the fourth boy was also injured in combat, but within an hour of first going to the front, and so his lack of experience is not as distancing. There is also a major at the hospital who has a disfigured hand. When Nick brings up marriage to him, the major gets angry and tells him never to marry since it just means setting oneself up for loss. He apologizes and explains that his wife has just died.

War: In Another Country Analysis

From the number of stories involving Nick staying at a hospital, it is likely that Hemingway is indulging in some biography by depicting scenes or at least themes from his own time spent as a soldier in World War I. Like many of the other war stories, this depicts the horrors of war and its psychological impact very vividly.



Soldier Home: Two Big-Hearted River

Soldier Home: Two Big-Hearted River Summary

Nick gets off a train near where a city named Seney used to be. The area is now totally uncivilized. He makes his way through the country and stops to admire a stream with trout in it. The forest has been burned down and very little remains; even the grasshoppers have been turned black. He makes it to a wooded area and takes a brief nap then makes his way towards the river. He finds a suitable camping spot and stops, cooks dinner, and goes to sleep.

Nick wakes up and plans to go fishing, but decides he must make breakfast first: buckwheat cakes with apple butter. He collects some grasshoppers to use as bait and heads to the river to fish for trout. His first attempt nets him only a small trout, which he let goes. His second attempt fails, too, as he hooks a trout that is stronger than his rod can handle. Eventually, he catches two appropriately sized fish and ends his days fishing. He sees that the river flows into a nearly impassable swamp and decides not to explore it. He goes back to camp, noting that there will be plenty of time to fish in the swamp.

Soldier Home: Two Big-Hearted River Analysis

This story is shrouded in a bit of mystery. Nick is evidently somewhat older now, out of the service, returning to a countryside which is reminiscent of his childhood, as depicted especially in "The Last Good Country." Why Nick decided to get off of the train here is not at all clear, nor is it clear why he intends to camp out in the woods for at least several days. Nonetheless, Nick is quite prepared for it: He remembers all the tricks to catch trout and otherwise survive in the wild. Through Nick's action, Hemingway is able to express his appreciation for nature in another way. Though he is obviously a hunter, he approaches natural life with great care. He does not kill the grasshopper who climbs on his leg and he lets the small trout go; he even makes sure to wet his hand before touching him to make sure fungus does not grow on him. As in other stories, Hemingway's most vivid descriptions are of the natural beauties in which the story is set.



Soldier Home: The End of Something

Soldier Home: The End of Something Summary

Nick is on a camping trip with Marjorie, his girlfriend, and a man named Bill. They are going through a bay that is near an old lumbering town, unsuccessfully fishing for trout. They eventually give up and go ashore to make camp. Nick is in a bad mood and acts combatively towards her. She asks what is wrong and he says that "[i]t isn't fun any more. . . . everything has gone to hell inside of me" (204). She leaves, distraught, to go to the boat and Bill comes up and asks how it went and how Nick feels, but Nick tells him just to leave.

Soldier Home: The End of Something Analysis

What Marjorie's exact relationship to Nick is unclear at this point—which is likely intentional, given the story's title—but it is obvious that Nick is not happy with it. Given Bill's questions, it seems that Nick had been planning this break-up, and her reaction indicates she felt it was coming, though it clearly is not what she wants.



Soldier Home: The Three Day Blow

Soldier Home: The Three Day Blow Summary

Nick is visiting Bill, the same character in "The End of Something." As he approaches the house, he notes how strong the wind is blowing, and Bill tells him that it will blow that way for three days. The two friends drink whiskey in front of the fireplace and talk about baseball and books. So far, they had been drinking casually, but decided to get drunk. As the alcohol loosens up conversation, Bill says that Nick did a good thing by breaking it off with Marjorie and that the relationship would never have worked out. Nick stays very, still in some inner turmoil over the break-up, but his mood lightens when he realizes that the relationship is not necessarily finally and completely over. He resolves to go to town on Saturday, presumably to see Marjorie. He does not tell Bill any of this, though, since Bill's opinion of Marjorie is pretty clear. Eventually, they decide not to get drunk—or more drunk—and to go out and find Bill's father.

Soldier Home: The Three Day Blow Analysis

The main theme of this story is regret. Seemingly continuous with "The End of Something," though how long after is not clear, Nick is having second thoughts about having broken up with Marjorie and is despairing over the fact that he thinks he will never see her again. Upon realizing that he might, his mood lightens. It is not clear, however, that Nick should get back together with her: Bill brings up a number of points against their relationship—they just seemed incompatible—and Nick himself said the end was inevitable. Nick may simply be suffering from a broken heart and longs to recover something which never really was.



Soldier Home: Summer People

Soldier Home: Summer People Summary

Nick is in Hortons Bay. He thinks very poorly of a man named Ogdar, who is dating a girl named Kate whom he has a romantic interest in. He thinks that he would be a better partner for her than Ogdar. He avoids the dock at first, because he knows that Kate, Ogdar, and his other friends are there swimming, but eventually decides to go. He is welcomed warmly by Kate and swims for awhile, finding great pleasure in diving and being underwater, not so much in the act of swimming itself. His friend Bill brings his car to the dock to take everyone home and he rides back with them. Kate and Ogdar are dropped off at his house, but she tells him to come by in an hour. He walks home with a friend but then sneaks back to Kate's house where they meet and have sex outside. They share some dinner and Kate asks him to say, but Nick refuses and goes back to his house to sleep.

Soldier Home: Summer People Analysis

Nick here is portrayed here as much more judgmental—his attitude towards Ogdar is very harsh, to say the least—and much less straitlaced than he is in other stories. This uncharacteristic behavior is perhaps the result of an unchecked desire—or lust—for Kate. His interest seems to be purely sexual, since he does not reciprocate when she says that she loves him and his first emotion after finishing the sexual act is annoyance: he notices the coarse blanket. This exploitative attitude is confirmed when he calls her "slut"—twice—after the act takes place.

Company of Two: Wedding Day

Company of Two: Wedding Day Summary

This brief story shows Nick drinking and talking with two friends before his wedding. Afterward, he gets into a boat with his wife and take it to a cottage.

Company of Two: Wedding Day Analysis

The most striking feature of this short, unpublished piece is the fact that it omits any mention of the wedding itself, while describing what happens before and after. This may reflect Nick's calm, maybe even unconcerned, attitude.



Company of Two: On Writing

Company of Two: On Writing Summary

Nick is fishing for trout in a stream and loses himself in thought. He first thinks about all of the friends he lost after marrying Helen; he lost them, he thinks, because by marrying Helen, fishing was no longer the most important thing in his life, as it had been when they were friends. He misses his friends and thinks over the times they spent together. He thinks back to time he spent in Spain and bullfights, and how movies ruined bullfights, because movies, or writing, about anything real ruins it. That is why, he says, his philosophy is to never write about anything real. He models his writing after Cezanne, a painter, who discarded all conventional tricks and tried to simply depict things as if they really were. Nick gets an idea for a story—though he never says what it is—and decides to stop fishing and head back. On the way, he tries to help a rabbit who has two ticks on it.

Company of Two: On Writing Analysis

The first lines of this unpublished piece are identical to a set of lines in "Two Big-Hearted River," indicating that he probably initially wrote them for this piece and found they suited the other better. There is a bit of irony in the artistic musings in this piece: He criticizes Joyce for modeling a character after himself, but Nick is largely based on Hemingway's own life. Whether this irony is intentional or not is unclear, and perhaps his changing views on literature are why this piece was never published.

Company of Two: An Alpine Idyll

Company of Two: An Alpine Idyll Summary

Nick is on a long skiing vacation with his friend, John. After a month in the mountains, they go down to a nearby village to drink and eat at an inn. On the way there, they see two men filling in a grave. They order some drinks at the inn and the men come in. One of the men and the innkeeper join them for drinks and tell them that the other man, a peasant, lost his wife several months back but could not bury her since it was too difficult to travel during the winter. He kept her in the shed and disfigured her face by using it to hang his lantern on when he worked.

Company of Two: An Alpine Idyll Analysis

This story can be interpreted as trying to confirm certain class stereotypes. The innkeeper refers to peasants collectively as beasts and, in this case, the facts seem to bear him out.



Company of Two: Cross-Country Snow

Company of Two: Cross-Country Snow Summary

Nick is skiing with his friend George in the Swiss Alps. George is ahead of him on the path, and also evidently more skilled, since he makes it down the mountain successfully but Nick loses control and falls. Afterward, the two go to a lodge and get some wine. George is afraid that after Nick's wife, Helen, has their child, that Nick will not be able to ski any more, but Nick says that he will. They get up and head home.

Company of Two: Cross-Country Snow Analysis

The dominant theme of this story is the conflict between friendship and fun, on the one hand, and parenthood and responsibility on the other. Nick's attitude is that life is not worth living if one cannot have fun, regardless of whether one is a parent; nonetheless, he is still happy to become a father.



Company of Two: Fathers and Sons

Company of Two: Fathers and Sons Summary

Nick is driving through the country with his son and thinking back to memories of his own father: his father's remarkable eyesight, how his father taught him about fishing and hunting, how his father did not teach him about sex. He recalls how he first learned about sex with an Indian girl when he was very young. He remembers getting in trouble for throwing away underwear his father had given him, because he hated his father's smell, and how he got so mad about being whipped that he even thought about shooting him. His son wakes up and asks Nick about his father and asks when he can hunt. Nick tells him that he has to wait until he is still. His son asks to go to his grandfather's tomb, but, unfortunately, it is too far away.

Company of Two: Fathers and Sons Analysis

As the title indicates, the theme of this story is fatherhood. Nick, now a father, thinks back to his own experience as a child, perhaps as much a model for what to not do as a father as what to do, though he surely admires his father.



Characters

Nick Adams appears in All Stories

Nick is the central character in all of the short stories in the collection. As the preface notes, Nick is largely a biographical creation, but his life should not be taken to strictly mirror Hemingway's. It should be noted that Nick's story is not coherent or continuous through these stories, indicating that he perhaps served as more of a vehicle for exploring a topic or situation than as a literary creature who was supposed to stand wholly on his own. For example, Nick goes crazy from a poorly treated head wound in "The Way You'll Never Be," but all stories taking place later in life depict him as perfectly sane. Likewise, Littleless, his sister who features in "The Last Good Country," is never mentioned (at least by name) in any other stories.

The stories span a large portion of Nick's life. The first stories depict him as a skittish young boy slowly maturing under his father's guidance, whom he looks up to greatly. Nick is next presented as a young man—perhaps in his mid- to late-teenage years. He still lives at home, at least in some of the stories, but is fairly independent and travels around quite a bit. Nick then joins the military and spends a lot of time in hospitals, sometimes injured and sometimes working. He is injured in three different ways in the stories. Once he is hit in the spine (by what, it is not clear, but it does not appear to be life-threatening); once he is seriously wounded in the head, which leads to serious brain damage; and once his leg is injured. The leg injury is perhaps referenced in a later story, in which he cites his leg as a reason for not being able to pull off a ski maneuver ("Cross-Country Snow"). After the service, he returns to the states and lives on his own before settling down and marrying his wife, Helen. Throughout the stories, his interest in writing is mentioned occasionally, but it would seem that it becomes a serious interest only late in his life.

Littleless appears in The Last Good Country

Littleless is Nick's younger sister who features prominently in "The Last Good Country." When Nick chooses to run away from home to avoid being taken to boarding school for violating gaming laws, Littleless comes along with him and helps him live in the wilderness. She obviously looks up very much to her brother and is eager to try to help him out and please him whenever she has the opportunity. They are very close with one another and Hemingway mentions in the opening of the book that the two have a relationship that is exclusive of other members of the family. In fact, the two have a relationship that is a little too close and intimate for siblings. She seems to have fantasized quite a bit about marrying him and having his children, though, given her young age (about eleven or twelve) it is likely these exist only in a confused state. Nick, in turn, obviously loves Littleless very much and also has feelings that border on incestuous (without ever being sexually explicit). The two kiss frequently and talk about



how much they love one another, and the escape into the wilderness seems at times more like a honeymoon.

Littless is mentioned by name only in "The Last Good Country" but it is possible she is referred to in "Fathers and Sons" when Nick says, recalling his childhood, "There was only one person in his family that he liked the smell of, one sister. All others he avoided all contact with" (pp. 265-6).

Henry Adams appears in Three Shots, Indian Camp, The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife

Henry Adams is Nick's father. He is a medical doctor and is shown helping out Indians in need in "Indian Camp." In his childhood, Nick has a great admiration for his father and learns much from him. Later in his life, recalling his childhood, he is grateful that his father taught him how to hunt and fish, since those are two hobbies which he has retained his entire life. His father evidently met some kind of unfortunate, untimely end, but the exact nature is not described.

Mr. Packard appears in The Last Good Country

Mr. Packard is Nick's uncle who helps him escape from the wardens in "The Last Good Country." He was once a U.S. Postmaster but now owns a hotel and grocery store near Nick's home. He avoids the hotel, though, because he says he does not like a hotel without a bar. He helps Nick by furnishing him with supplies (or, rather, reimbursing his family for supplies Nick took).

Mrs. Packard appears in The Last Good Country

Mrs. Halley Packard is Nick's aunt. She runs her husband's hotel and is complicit in some Nick's violations of gaming laws by buying the trout that he catches from the stream. Like her husband, she is supportive of Nick and tells him he can stay in the hotel or take any provisions if necessary.

Splayfoot / Henry J. Porter appears in The Last Good Country

Splayfoot (Mr. Packard's nickname for him, on account of his large feet) or Henry J. Porter (his proclaimed real name, though Mr. Packard does not believe it) is a warden from "down state" who, with Evans, is looking for Nick who has violated gaming laws by shooting a buck. Splayfoot, according to Mr. Packard, is dangerous—he once framed a man for a murder which he apparently committed—and Mr. Packard worries that he will harm Nick.



Evans appears in The Last Good Country

Evans is the local warden who is searching for Nick with Splayfoot. Evans, in contrast to his more savvy partner, is rather incompetent and clueless, which is perhaps the reason why a warden from another county came to help him in his search.

Evans' Boy appears in The Last Good Country

Evans' son never appears in "The Last Good Country" but frequently spies on Nick and reports his misdoings to his father. Suzy and Mr. Packard fear that Evans' boy might already be on Nick's track. Nick gets fearful when he realizes that Evans' boy might know the area he and his sister are camping in.

Suzy appears in The Last Good Country

Suzy is a hired helper in the Adams house in "The Last Good Country" and, like most everyone else in town, is actively trying to help Nick escape from the wardens. She rides with the wardens to Mr. Packard's grocery store and informs him of the situation.

Kate appears in Summer People, On Writing

Kate is a girl Nick is attracted to and has sex with at least once after returning from the service. Given the nature of their romantic encounter, it is likely that it was not a one-time occurrence, however. Nick's interest in her appears to be purely sexual and, to some extent, exploitative.

Helen appears in Wedding Day, Cross-Country Snow

Helen is Nick's wife. Little is known about her, and she appears only briefly in "Wedding Day" when the newly-married couple are rowing to a cottage where they are going to spend their honeymoon. The two spend some time apart apparently (for reasons unknown), as Nick spends at least a few months with his friend George in Europe. In "Cross-Country Snow," Nick mentions that she will be having their first child.



Objects/Places

Petoskey appears in Three Shots, Indian Camp, The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife,

Petoskey is the small town—apparently centered around agriculture—in which Nick spends his early years. It is certainly the setting of the stories contained in "The Northern Woods," but it is not clear whether his home in later stories is in the same town.

Hortons Bay appears in The Indians Moved Away, The End of Something, Three Day Blow

Hortons Bay is the setting for most of the stories in "A Soldier Home" and is close to his childhood home of Petoskey. It is here that he develops his friendships with Bill, the Ghee, and Kate.

Switzerland appears in An Alpine Idyll, Cross-Country Snow

After getting married, Nick spends a considerable amount of time skiing with his friend George in Switzerland. Why he spends at least a few months here while his wife is pregnant at home is never explained.

Fishing appears in Three Shots, The Last Good Country, Big Two-Hearted River, T

Fishing is one of Nick's favorite hobbies, which he learned from his father when he was very young. After he is married, he thinks that fishing is the tie which bound him together with his group of friends from Hortons Bay, who distanced themselves from him after his wedding.

Hunting appears in Three Shots, The Last Good Country, Big Two-Hearted River, T

Like fishing, hunting is a favorite hobby of Nick's and, also like fishing, is a skill he relies upon to survive in several stories.



Streams appears in Three Shots, The Last Good Country, Big Two-Hearted River, T

Nick spends a considerable amount of time in streams in the stories, fishing for trout. He is very familiar with where trout hide in the streams and very comfortable navigating them safely.

Skiing appears in An Alpine Idyll, Cross-Country Snow

Nick takes up skiing as a hobby after his marriage. It may, to some extent, be a replacement for fishing and hunting, which "On Writing" suggests had to take on lesser importance after he got married.

World War I appears in Night Before Landing,

Nick serves as a soldier and sometimes as a hospital worker in World War I. Three stories indicate three different ways in which he has been injured in the war. A few stories suggest that the war helps him confront his fears and mature.

Indian Camp appears in Indian Camp, On Writing

When Nick is very young, he accompanies his father to an Indian camp where his father, a doctor, has to operate on an Indian woman facing complications in giving birth. While there, his father discovers that the woman's husband has killed himself and Nick accidentally sees the man's corpse.

Indians appears in Three Shots, Indian Camp, The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife,

Indians are an important social group during Nick's childhood. Many of his friends are Indians, like Trudy, Billy, and Prudence. The depiction of Indians in the stories is largely negative. Stereotypes about drunkenness are confirmed and one story ("The Indians Moved Away") explains the Indian departure from Petoskey as being the result of their vice and irresponsibility.



Themes

The Glory of Nature

Hemingway is often very sparing on details when describing urban or domestic settings, but his descriptions of nature can be very vivid, long, and detailed. His interest in nature can be seen first of all in the settings in which these stories take place. Nick's entire childhood and adolescence is spent among nature as is much of his adulthood. The only time Nick spends any significant time away from nature is when he is off at war, though it does occasionally feature there, too. ("Night Before Landing" is spent on a boat and, as such, the sea features prominently, just for example.)

Nature is also depicted as a refuge from the worries of society and civilized life. This is literally true of "The Last Good Country," where Nick goes into the wilderness to escape from the arbitrary and unjust laws preventing him from respectfully hunting and fishing. The beauty of the forest is highlighted several times in this story, as well, especially when Nick and Littleless are passing through a forest and have an almost religious experience. In "Summer People," going underwater into the darkness is also an escape from the world for Nick, an escape he wishes he could share with a girl one day.

Fear

Nick's timidity is a theme which is explored throughout the stories, but especially in the first three sections. In "Three Shots" Nick is so frightened by the thought of death that he fires the rifle into the air to summon his father and uncle back and then lies about there being a wild animal. In "Indian Camp" he is forced to face his fear of death when he accidentally sees an Indian man who has slit his own throat. On the boat ride back, he asks his father about death, and whether it is difficult. In "The Battler" he seems to compensate for this fear by anger—at least expressed anger—at a brakeman who hit him from a passing-by train, but he is very afraid of getting into a fight with Ad Francis when he meets him later. Fear is an issue which he must face at war, of course. Some stories suggest a kind of adaptation to his dangerous life ("Nick Sat Against the Wall...") but others show an almost child-like, imagination-driven fear of the dark ("Now I Lay Me," "A Way You'll Never Be"). The confident Nick portrayed in the stories of his later life suggest that he has faced these fears and overcome his once timid self.

Romance Between Siblings

The relationship between Nick and Littleless is perhaps the central theme in "The Last Good Country," even more important than Nick's legal trouble. From the beginning of the story, their unique relationship is made clear. Nick says that, while he cannot stand the rest of his family, he loves Littleless very much. Littleless insists on coming with Nick, and Nick hesitates to allow her, fearing for her safety and comfort. Nick frequently goes out of his way to make sure that Littleless is comfortable and not worked too hard. The



two are very happy with one another, despite the fact that Nick's situation is undesirable, to say the least and the adventure becomes as much about escaping authorities as it does about spending time together. While Hemingway only initially hints at a romantic connection between the two—they frequently kiss and tell one another how much they like spending time together—as the story progresses, the nature of their relationship becomes increasingly candid. Littleless tells her brother of her fantasy of becoming "Mrs. Nick Adams" through "common law marriage" laws. She even tells him that she would like to have his children. Nick, for his part, appears confused about the relationship. He says at one point that he loves her, but she perhaps loves him "too much" (119). Their uncertain relationship, unfortunately, is never resolved, as the work was not completed.

A romantic relationship between siblings is mentioned in another context, too, in "The Battler." Ad Francis, according to Bugs, married his sister (though he says she was his sister "no more than a rabbit" (55) — the meaning of this is ambiguous, since he also says she looks like his twin).

Style

Point of View

Most of the stories in the collection are told in the objective third person. This is in line with Hemingway's objective, straightforward descriptive style. Most of the third-person stories do allow the reader access to Nick's thoughts, however, and the narration often never leaves him, though there are exceptions (such as "The Last Good Country").

Hemingway drops the third-person in other stories, such as "Light of the World" and "Now I Lay Me." There does not appear to be just one reason for this stylistic choice, but it is an effective way of entering into Nick's thoughts, especially in a story such as "Now I Lay Me," which is composed mainly of the mental games Nick engages in to stay awake. However, in other works which focus on Nick's thoughts, Hemingway adopts a third-person stream-of-consciousness style of writing, such as in "On Writing" and, to a lesser extent, "A Way You'll Never Be." The difference in perspective can likely be largely traced to the different times at which these stories were written, though there are no doubt stylistic considerations as well.

Setting

The settings for the Nick Adams stories can be divided into two categories: nature and the military. The vast majority of the story takes place either in nature itself or in a rural setting which is so closely connected with nature that it amounts to the same. The beauty of nature is an important theme in Hemingway's work, and a kind of symbiotic relationship between man and nature is emphasized throughout. Nick lives off the land at various times, but he is never exploitative. When he catches a trout that is too small in "Big Two-Hearted River," not only does he let it go, he wets his hand before touching it to make sure it does not contract a fungal infection. When he is not living directly off the land, he always is living very close to it; never does he choose to live in an urban setting altogether remote from the woods and streams with which he is so familiar.

The only time that he is alienated from this natural form of life is when he is off at war, which further demonstrates the divide Hemingway sees between natural and artificial forms of life. Most of Nick's time at war is spent living in hospitals—whether as patient or as a worker—in various European cities, and while it is never made explicit, the superiority of his life at home is obvious. The first story about Nick after leaving the service is "Big Two-Hearted River," in which Nick takes a train into the wilderness and lives off the land for an unspecified period of time—perhaps as a way of reacquainting himself with an environment he was once so familiar with.



Language and Meaning

Hemingway's writing style is generally concise and straightforward. In most cases, he spends little or no time describing locations—with the important exception of natural settings—and hardly ever gives so much as a vague description of a person's physical appear. Nick himself is never characterized physically, and others are described only when it is somehow relevant to the story—for example, Alice's weight in "The Light of the World" is described but it is important to understanding her interactions with the other prostitutes and the cook.

Occasionally, Hemingway experiments with other styles and methods of writing. In "A Way You'll Never Be," he describes the insane Nick's dreams by using a chaotic stream-of-consciousness approach which rambles on for over a page. This same method resurfaces in a few other places, such as "On Writing" and, briefly, in "Fathers and Sons."

In "On Writing," the thoughts of Nick may be taken to represent Hemingway's own views on writing. Nick likens his writing to French painter Cezanne, a painter who bridged the gap between the impressionists and later, abstract painters. In his paintings, less emphasis was put on detail and more on simply capturing the general, geometric shape of the objects. Hemingway, accordingly, also spends little time on detail and simply tries to capture the general "shape" of a character or scene.

Structure

The book is a collection of short stories which were written at various times over Hemingway's writing clear. It is important to keep in mind that the stories were never assembled by Hemingway into a single collection, and this explains certain issues of coherence, or the lack thereof, that occur throughout the collection.

The book is divided into five sections—this, too, is an editorial choice, not one ever made by the author. The first section, "The Northern Woods," is composed of stories from Nick's life as a very young boy (probably around eight or nine). Next, "On His Own" describes Nick in his adolescence, depicting him with much more independence but suggesting ways in which he could further mature. He ships off to World War I in "War," probably around eighteen or nineteen, as he still considers himself as a boy in "In Another Country" (169). The stories after his service are collected in "Soldier at Home" and depict his life as an adult really living on his own for the first time. The final section, "Company of Two," depict Nick after his marriage, probably somewhere in his thirties. He is also, at this time, a somewhat established writer; or, at least, a writer who now takes his trade more seriously than before.

The stories should not necessarily be taken to be totally continuous. In fact, at times, there are glaring inconsistencies between them, as in "A Way You'll Never Be," in which Nick goes insane after receiving a serious head wound. This suggests that Nick was



used as a vehicle for exploring and depicting situations more than as a character who was supposed to develop an entire, complete story of his own.

It is also important to remember which stories were and were not published in Hemingway's lifetime; in this edition, the previously unpublished material is in an oblique font.



Quotes

"While they were singing the hymn Nick had realized that some day he must die. It made him feel quite sick. It was the first time he had ever realized that he himself would have to die sometime." ("Three Shots", p. 14)

"Why did he kill himself, Daddy?"

'I don't know, Nick. He couldn't stand things, I guess.'" ("Indian Camp", p. 20)

"There were no successful Indians. Formerly there had been—old Indians who owned farms and worked them and grew old and fat with many children and grandchildren. Indians like Simon Green who had lived on Hortons Creek and had a big farm. Simon Green was dead, though, and his children had sold the farm to divide the money and gone off somewhere." ("The Indians Moved Away", 35)

"She had a pretty face and a nice smooth skin and a lovely voice and she was nice all right and really friendly. But, my God, she was big. She was as big as three women." ("The Light of the World", p. 46)

"I'm going to get out of this town,' Nick Said.

'Yes," said George. 'That's a good thing to do.'

'I can't stand to think about him waiting in the room and knowing he's going to get. It's too damned awful.'" ("The Killers", p. 69)

"[Littles] 'Thank you. Because this kind of woods makes me feel awfully religious.'

[Nick] 'That's why they build cathedrals to be like this.'" ("The Last Good Country", p. 90)

"He loved his sister very much and she loved him too much. But, he thought, I guess those things straighten out. At least I hope so." ("The Last Good Country", p. 119)

"Nick turned his head and looked down at Rinaldi. 'Senta, Rinaldi, senta. You and me, we've made a separate peace.' Rinaldi lay still in the sun, breathing with difficulty. 'We're not patriots.'" ("Nick Sat Against the Wall...", p. 143)

"I myself did not want to sleep because I had been living for a long time with the knowledge that if I ever shut my eyes in the dark and let myself go, my soul would go out of my body." ("Now I Lay Me", p. 144)

"It's a hell of a nuisance once they've had you certified as nutty," Nick said. 'No one ever has any confidence in you again.'" ("A Way You'll Never Be", p. 160)

"All of a sudden everything was over,' Nick said. 'I don't know why it was. I couldn't help it. Just like when the three-day blows come now and rip all the leaves off the trees.'" ("The Three-Day Blow", p. 214)

"He wanted to write like Cezanne painted.

Cezanne started with all the tricks. Then he broke the whole thing down and built the



real thing. It was hell to do. He was the greatest. The greatest for always." ("On Writing", p. 239)

"His father was as sound on those two things [fishing and hunting] as he was unsound on sex, for instance, and Nick was glad that it had been that way; for someone has to give you your first gun or the opportunity to get and use it, and you have live where there is game or fish if you are to learn about them, and now, at thirty-eight, he loved to fish and to shoot exactly as much as when he first had gone with his father. It was a passion that had never slackened and he was very grateful to his father for bringing him to know it.

While for the other, that his father was not sound about, all the equipment you will ever have is provided and each man learns all there is for him to know about it without advice; and it makes no difference where you live." ("Fathers and Sons", p. 258)



Topics for Discussion

Describe Hemingway's attitude towards Indians.

Why does Hemingway include former boxers who have wound up unfortunately in one way or another in three stories ("The Light of the World," "The Battler," and "The Killers")?

Is there a way to coherently understand the stories of Nick at war?

In "Fathers and Sons," does Nick have positive or negative opinions about how his father raised him?

Why does Hemingway leave out any description of the wedding in "Wedding Day?"

Explain the contrast between law and nature in "The Last Good Country."

Little clearly has some romantic feelings towards Nick in "The Last Good Country." What are Nick's feelings towards his sister?

Explain Nick's relationship with Kate as described in "Summer People." How does Kate feel towards Nick and how does Nick feel towards Kate?

If the preface is correct in saying that Nick Adams is, in large part, a fictionalized version of Hemingway, why does Nick think in "On Writing" that Joyce's decision in "Ulysses" to model a character after himself was a poor choice?