

Measured Steps:

Recovery in "Big Two-Hearted River"

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Some readers are bored by Ernest Hemingway's almost plotless story, "Big Two-Hearted River," but not Nicolas Paquette. His essay "Measured Steps" sees the suppressed drama, the barely contained emotion, in Nick Adams's journey across a scorched landscape toward the river where he sets up camp and then goes fishing. We don't know much about Nick, but we do know that he has survived the First World War, and that his recovery is an act of patience: suffering carefully managed over time. Paquette is right to argue that Nick rations his experiences so that he feels safe and in control. His burdens lighten as he slows time down, and he knows better than to fish in deep waters until he has regained more of his strength. Through closely observed details, Paquette builds a subtle and insightful argument.

— Dr. Alice Brittan

Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" is a slow-paced story of one man's journey towards healing. The best way to heal is by overcoming the challenges of the recovery process in one's own time; patience is key. In a society that has forgotten the value of patience, how does one heal? Hemingway suggests that a return to nature may be the answer. In "Big Two-Hearted River," Nick Adams ventures alone into nature to face his challenges one at a time. His journey of hiking, camping, and fishing are instrumental in overcoming his mental wounds.

The exact wounds from which Nick suffers are a mystery to the reader, but Hemingway wastes no time in ensuring the reader that the wounds are most certainly

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there. The town to which Nick arrives is destroyed, burnt to its foundations, along with the surrounding area. The “fire-scarred” (134) landscape reflects Nick’s scarred psyche. While looking into a river near town, he sees trout fighting the current. Something about the way the trout are moving is unsettling to Nick: “Nick’s heart tightened as he watched the trout move. He felt all the old feeling ” (134). Nick’s reaction to the trout shows that not all is well in his mind. The last hint of his pain in the opening of the story is the pack he carries, which Hemingway describes as “Heavy... Much too heavy” (134). Hemingway draws the reader’s attention to the weight of his pack because it represents the crushing weight of the emotional trauma which he carries with him. Before Nick has set out, the reader is three representations of his demons: the scorched earth, the unsettling trout, and the heavy camping pack, all of which Nick deals with later in the story.

Nick leaves the town behind and starts walking north. The hike is not easy: the sun beats down on Nick, his pack is heavy as ever, and he is walking uphill. Despite all of this, Nick is nothing but optimistic throughout his arduous journey. Nick’s “muscles ached, and the day was hot, but Nick felt happy” (134). As he ventures further from his starting point, his ashen surroundings eventually give way to an expanse of green. Nick is patient, and doesn’t take a straight line to the river, opting instead to “hit the river as far upstream as he could in one day’s walking” (136). His patience and good spirits are vital to his healing process, as

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the change in his environment reflects the gradual change in his mental state.

Nick's mental state is aided further by making camp. Nick takes pleasure in the minor accomplishment: "There had been this to do. Now it was done" (139). Nick's joy in the small things enforces the point of small, gradual steps towards good health. Another sign of progress accompanies this happiness. His "far too heavy" pack, now looks "much smaller" (138). The burden he carries on his shoulders lightens both physically and figuratively. In his camp, he finally feels safe enough to face his memories, which he does for the first time since the story began. He reflects on his friend Hopkins as he makes his coffee. He remembers Hopkins fondly, but the memory ends on a sour note. The reader can infer that Hopkins died, as "they never saw Hopkins again" (141). Nick's recollection of Hopkins is the first time Nick is not thinking in the moment, the first time he feels safe enough to think back on his late friend. Nick goes to sleep, the scorched earth behind him, and the weight off his shoulders. The first part of the story ends here.

The second part of the story focuses on the last unresolved challenge established in the opening: the trout that he had found unsettling. Nick spends the majority of the second half of the story fishing. The first trout Nick hooks is too small. He releases it and realizes he will only find small trout where he is fishing. He wades into deeper, darker water, and casts again. Nick hooks a huge trout, as broad as a salmon. The battle with the trout is the highest

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point of action in this deliberately uneventful story. He battles with the fish, and it eventually breaks his line. The experience shakes Nick and he “[feels], vaguely, a little sick” (150). He sits down for a while to recover. The fish breaking his line strongly affects Nick because the fish represents the challenges of recovery. It is the hardest challenge he has faced since the beginning of the story, and the first one he has failed. For a few moments, Nick abandons his measured steps. He took on too great of a challenge, and faced the consequences.

Nick gathers himself and goes to shallower water. He hooks and lands a good-sized trout. Nick is happy with his trout, and his mindset of gradual progress returns: “Nick had one good trout, he did not care about getting many trout” (154). He proceeds to hook another good-sized trout, then calls it a day. He looks to the nearby swamp; Nick does not want to fish there yet, in the “fast deep water. In the half light” (155). The swamp is a challenge that he is not yet ready to face. He has learned from his experience with the huge trout. The final sentence of the story exemplifies the mindset it is promoting: “there were plenty of days where he could fish the swamp” (156). There’s no point in taking on a challenge too early. It will be there, and so will Nick, when he is ready.

Throughout the story, Nick makes progress towards healing through a positive attitude, persistence, and patience. Nick applies this philosophy to the hiking, camping, and fishing to significant effect. At the end of the story, Nick’s problems are not resolved, but he makes

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visible progress, and that is the lesson in this story. Progress should be celebrated, no matter how small, because every step is a step closer to relief from one's demons.

WORKS CITED

Hemingway, Ernest. "Big Two-Hearted River." *In Our Time*, Boni & Liveright, 1925, 133-156