

# Big Two-Hearted River



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Ernest Hemingway was born in Oak Park, Illinois, to well-educated, affluent parents. His lifelong interest in the outdoors was inspired by his father, who took young Hemingway on camping trips and taught him how to hunt and fish. When he was just 18, Hemingway went to Italy to work as an ambulance driver for the Red Cross during World War I and was badly wounded there. After this, Hemingway moved to Canada, where he got a job as a reporter for the *Toronto Star Weekly*. He married his first wife, Hadley Richardson, and they moved to Paris in 1921, where Hemingway worked as a foreign correspondent for a newspaper. In Paris, Hemingway spent time with well-known expatriate writers including Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and James Joyce, a group whom Stein dubbed the “Lost Generation.” While keeping his job as a newspaper reporter, Hemingway also began to seriously write fiction, and published the short story collection *In Our Time* and his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*. In 1928, he moved to Florida, and *A Farewell to Arms* was published the following year, establishing Hemingway as a major American writer. His third wife, Martha Gelhorn, inspired him to write *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, for which he received a Pulitzer nomination. In 1952, he went on to publish *The Old Man and the Sea*, which won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. In 1954, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature. By this time, Hemingway’s mental and physical health was slowly deteriorating due to alcoholism and a possible genetic disorder. On July 2, 1961, he shot himself and died at his home in Ketchum, Idaho.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1914, World War I broke out between the Allies (Great Britain, France, Russia, Italy, Romania, Japan, and the United States) and the Central Powers (Germany, Austria-Hungary, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman Empire) and lasted until 1918. Due to advancements in technology and the horrors of trench warfare, the war caused unprecedented destruction and resulted in the deaths of more than 16 million people. Before World War I, people generally believed that fighting in a war was honorable and chivalrous, but this war caused widespread doubt about this notion after people witnessed death on such an incomprehensibly large scale. The level of destruction seemed pointless and led to many people questioning traditional notions of patriotism and courage. It also led to an idealization of the past, while acknowledging that it was impossible to return to. Hemingway was part of a group of American expatriate writers in Paris who wrote about these

themes and were collectively termed the “Lost Generation,” suggesting that they represented the ideas of a generation that was directionless or lost because they were disillusioned by the war and struggled to make their way past it.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Nick, the protagonist of “Big Two-Hearted River,” is a recurring character in around two dozen Hemingway short stories and is believed to be semi-autobiographical. Hemingway wrote these stories over a decade, and they show Nick at various stages in his life. For instance, in “Indian Camp,” Nick is a boy who grapples with death and mortality, and in “A Way You’ll Never Be,” he is a soldier in Italy during World War I, suffering from the after-effects of a head wound. All these stories were later republished in one collection titled *The Nick Adams Stories*, which is an interesting read to get a deeper perspective on Nick as a character. Hemingway wrote “Big Two-Hearted River” when he was in Paris in the 1920s, where he was part of a group of expatriate writers called the Lost Generation. These writers were disillusioned by the devastation caused by World War I and their writing explored the tragedy of the human condition. One of these writers was F. Scott Fitzgerald, whose novel *The Great Gatsby* explores the hollowness in culture and relationships in post-war America. Through his writing, Hemingway inspired a literary style called “minimalism” which keeps the language of the story simple while also omitting background details of why a character behaves or feels a certain way (like how Nick’s time in the war is never specifically mentioned in “Big Two-Hearted River”), leaving it to the reader to fill in the gaps. Many writers were influenced by this style, including Raymond Carver, whose famous short story “Cathedral” is a good example of the minimalist style. Denis Johnson’s also uses the minimalist style in his collection of linked short stories, *Jesus’ Son*. Hemingway’s depiction of Nick walking uphill while struggling to carry a heavy pack is the same image used by Tim O’Brien to depict suffering soldiers in his 1990 short story collection *The Things They Carried*. Hemingway wrote about World War I while O’Brien’s characters are from the Vietnam War, yet their characters’ pain is very similar as they try to reconcile their pre-war memories and selves with the changes the wars have wrought in them. Cormac McCarthy’s novel *The Road* follows characters navigating a burned-over destroyed land, which is similar to Nick’s experience of Seney in “Big Two-Hearted River.” In *The Road*, the protagonist’s memory of trout swimming in a river brings him comfort, suggesting that while McCarthy imagines a harsher world in which redemption does not come as easily, this novel builds on Hemingway’s vision in “Big Two-Hearted River.”

## KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Big Two-Hearted River
- **When Written:** 1924
- **Where Written:** Paris, France
- **When Published:** 1925
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** The wilderness outside of Seney, Michigan
- **Climax:** Nick feels anxious about entering the swamp to fish for trout but decides that he doesn't have to hurry because he has plenty of time to make his way in there.
- **Antagonist:** Painful memories and emotions
- **Point of View:** Third person

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Gone Fishing.** After Hemingway returned wounded and disoriented from World War I, he took a fishing trip to Michigan with his high school buddies. This experience inspired "Big Two-Hearted River." In his first drafts of the story, he had other characters present, but on the advice of Gertrude Stein, he whittled it down to just Nick and the wilderness.

**Reading Between the Lines.** In his memoir *A Moveable Feast*, Hemingway describes writing "Big Two-Hearted River" in these words: "When I stopped writing I did not want to leave the river where I could see the trout in the pool, its surface pushing and swelling smooth against the resistance of the log-driven piles of the bridge. The story was about coming back from the war but there was no mention of the war in it."



## PLOT SUMMARY

In Part I, a train drops Nick off at the station in the town of **Seney**, Michigan, and then curves around one of the burned hills and disappears. Nick sits on his pack and bedding and looks around him. Seney has been burned to the ground and there is no sign of the familiar landmarks Nick is used to seeing—the 13 saloons, the hotel, and the scattered houses on the hillside are all gone. Nick walks over to the **river**, which is still there, the way he remembers it. He watches the trout in the river, which seem unmoving despite the rapid current around them.

Nick is happy as he walks back to pick up his pack, thinking that although Seney is destroyed, the country can't all be burned in the fire. He adjusts the heavy pack on his back and takes the road that leads into the wilderness by the river, climbing the hill that separates the railroad tracks from the plain dotted with pine trees. Nick struggles uphill—his pack is very heavy, the day is hot. Yet he is happy because he feels he has left behind many of his needs, including the need to think.

A **black grasshopper** crawls up Nick's sock while he takes a cigarette break, and he realizes he has seen some of these creatures around as he hiked. He examines it carefully and sees that it is just an ordinary grasshopper that has turned black from living in a burned, ash-ridden environment. Even though it has been a year since the fire, the insect is still black, and Nick wonders how long it will stay that way. He speaks to it, telling it to fly away.

He walks on and comes to the fire line, past which the land seems alive again, with ferns underfoot and islands of pine trees on the plain. Nick is very tired and could turn toward the river to set up camp at any point, but he wants to see how far he can go in a day. He takes a nap under some pine trees and wakes up when it is close to sunset. He begins to make his way to the river, which is about a mile away. When he reaches it, he sees the trout jumping out of the water to catch insects, and it looks to him like it is raining.

Nick meticulously sets up camp between two pines, and is pleased with the end result. He feels a comforting sense of accomplishment, and also feels safe. He then realizes he is famished and warms up some canned food for dinner. He enjoys it tremendously when it is ready. While making coffee, he thinks about his friend Hopkins, whom he knew some time ago, and with whom he used to argue about the best way to make coffee. Hopkins was well-liked and rich. He went away when a telegram came for him, and Nick never saw him again. Nick thinks that the end to Hopkins's story is bitter just like the coffee. He feels his mind starting to work again, but knows that his exhaustion will put a stop to his thoughts. The night is quiet, and so is the **swamp**. He goes into his tent and falls asleep.

Part II begins the next morning, when Nick is woken up by the sun warming up the tent. He crawls out and looks around him at the meadow, the river, and the swamp with its many trees. Nick is too excited to eat breakfast, but knows that he must. While the water for his coffee is warming on the fire, he catches brown grasshoppers to use as bait for fishing. He knows they will not hop away in the cold morning dew, but that they will be very hard to catch once the sun warms them. He puts them in a jar and corks it with pine bark, making sure to leave an air passage so they can breathe. When he goes to wash his hands in the river, he is excited to be close to it. After making and eating his breakfast of buckwheat flapjacks, he packs some onion sandwiches for lunch and then tidies up his camp.

Nick then assembles his old fly rod that he's had for many years, and heads to the stream with it and his other paraphernalia: the jar of grasshoppers hanging from his neck, his landing net hooked to his belt, and an old flour sack strapped to his shoulders. He feels prepared and happy. When he steps into the water, it is very cold. The first trout he catches is too small. Nick wets his hand before he releases it back into the water because he knows that trout can get a fatal fungal infection if touched with a dry hand.

Nick moves into deeper water because he wants to catch bigger trout. This time, he feels a pull on the line and struggles to reel it in—he sees that he has hooked a huge trout when it leaps out of the water. It is the biggest one Nick has ever seen, but it breaks the line and escapes. Nick feels shaky and a little sick with disappointment. He climbs out of the water and smokes a cigarette, watching the river until he feels all right again.

He enters the water where it is not too deep, and fishes by an upturned elm. He lands a big trout this time and reels it in successfully. He puts the fish in the flour sack with the bottom of the sack dangling in the water so the fish can stay alive. It is getting hot, and Nick moves downstream. He puts a grasshopper on the hook and sends the bait into a hollow log on the stream, and immediately feels a bite. He sees the trout shaking its head to try and get the hook out, and he pulls it in with some effort. He puts this fish in the sack too.

Nick sits on the hollow log and eats his lunch. He watches the river where it narrows and heads into the swamp. There are many trees in the swamp with low-growing branches, and it looks impenetrable. Nick does not feel like going into the darkness of the swamp. The water would be deep enough to reach his armpits, and it would be impossible to successfully catch trout there. He does not want to go further down the river today.

Nick breaks the necks of the fish he has caught by whacking them on the log. He then cleans them and discards the innards on the shore for the minks to find. He washes the fish in the river, and then heads ashore to his camp. He turns and looks back at the river and thinks that he has “plenty of days coming” to fish in the swamp.



## CHARACTERS

**Nick** – Nick, the protagonist of “Big Two Hearted River,” is a recurring character in several Hemingway stories, many of which are set before, during, and after World War I. Though never explicitly mentioned in this story, readers can reasonably assume that Nick has just returned from the war and wants to put his traumatic memories behind him—he wants to leave behind his “need for thinking.” When Nick arrives in **Seney**, Michigan, where he has been before, he is unsettled to find that the entire town has been burned to the ground. He decides to embark on a solo fishing trip in the wilderness outside town. Nick he doesn't meet or speak with other people while he's hiking and fishing, which serves to highlight his sense of alienation. He does, however, encounter other living creatures as he walks through the woods and is always kind to them, suggesting that Nick's compassion likely makes him especially vulnerable to emotional suffering. He is careful when he picks up a **black grasshoppers** to examine it, and speaks to it before

letting it go, telling it to “fly away somewhere.” Later on, he ensures that the brown grasshoppers he plans to use as bait can breathe in the jar he puts them in, and while fishing, he wets his hand before touching a trout so it won't get a fungal attack. He has seen other fishermen who don't take the trouble to do this, and he finds their carelessness irritating. Although the grasshoppers and fish will die, it seems that Nick's time as a soldier has made him particularly sensitive to the pain of other creatures, and he wants to prevent suffering to the best of his ability. All of Nick's actions in this story are marked by careful planning and meticulousness, again hearkening to his implied time as a soldier. He has packed extensively for this camping trip (struggling, as a result, with a very heavy pack that mirrors his emotional burdens). He feels a sense of safety and satisfaction after he methodically completes a task, like setting up camp or accoutering himself to go fishing. His attention to detail gives him a sense of control that he enjoys, especially because he knows he lacks control with regard to his emotions. For instance, he struggles to rein in his disappointment when a big trout escapes while he's fishing, and he is overwhelmed by dread when he looks at the dark **swamp** by the **river**. However, by the end, he is optimistic that “there are plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp,” suggesting that Nick believes his healing is imminent.

**Hopkins** – Though Hopkins doesn't appear in the story, Nick thinks about him at his camp by the **river** while making coffee “the way Hopkins used to.” Hopkins was a friend Nick had “a long time ago,” and Nick remembers that he was “a serious coffee drinker” and “the most serious man Nick had ever known.” He recalls several things about Hopkins: he used to play polo, had made “millions of dollars” on an oil well in Texas, and had a girlfriend whom his friends nicknamed “the Blonde Venus.” However, though Hopkins was rich, successful, and well-liked by his friends, he could not escape the tragedy of the war. Hopkins got a telegram and “went away,” which suggests that he was drafted to fight in World War I. Before he left, he gave away his pistol to Nick and his camera to another friend, Bill, and the three of them made plans to go fishing together on Hopkins's yacht the following summer. Then, “[t]hey never saw Hopkins again,” so he most likely died in the war. Nick drinks the coffee he's made and is amused to find that it is bitter, just like the end to Hopkins's story. But Nick doesn't want to think these sad thoughts about the death and destruction caused by the war, and he is glad that he tired enough to “choke” his mind from thinking more about these things. Nick's memories of Hopkins emphasize the tragic outcomes of the war and also reveal Nick's strategy to avoid dealing with his difficult memories by intentionally exhausting himself and “choking” his mind of all thought.



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



## THE INEVITABILITY OF CHANGE

In “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick, the protagonist, is constantly confronted by change. He arrives at the town of **Seney**, Michigan, on a solitary fishing trip and finds that the town has burned to the ground since he was last there. Seney is deserted, its saloons and houses are completely destroyed, and the fire has affected the landscape and wildlife. These specific changes are bleak and depressing, but Nick also appears to view change in general as unpleasant. Readers may already be familiar with Nick Adams, who is a recurring character in two dozen Hemingway stories. Many of these stories center around World War I and even feature Nick as a soldier. Given this context, readers can reasonably assume that in “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick has recently returned from the war. However, he returns to an unfamiliar home, which is deeply disorienting for him. By taking a nostalgia-fueled fishing trip in the wilderness outside of Seney, Nick attempts to return to a pre-war past, but the story emphasizes the impossibility of this since change is everywhere around him.

Nick takes great pleasure in markers of constancy. He seeks out the things he remembers from his past to orient him when the changes around him prove to be too overwhelming. Yet Hemingway suggests that these things, too, are in flux, and that Nick is mistaken when he thinks of them as permanent or unchanging. When he gets to Seney, Nick “expect[s] to find the scattered houses of the town” dotting the hillside, and other landmarks like the Mansion House hotel. Instead, he finds the town to be burned to the ground and completely different from his memories of it: “The thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney ha[ve] left not a trace” and the “stretch of hillside” that was once peppered with houses is now desolate and charred. Seeing this, he walks away from the destruction before him and heads towards the **river**. Compared to the devastating changes of the town, “The river [is] there.” Its very presence is a comfort to Nick because it is unchanged from how he remembers it. Yet, since a river is constantly in motion, it is, in a sense, always changing too.

When he gets to the river, Nick watches the trout swimming at the bottom with admiration because they keep themselves “steady in the current.” They do not seem to move as the water rushes around them, so, to Nick, they appear to resist change. He “watche[s] them a long time,” fascinated by their ability “to hold steady in the fast water,” suggesting Nick’s own desire to

remain still while changes rush past him. However, their “wavering fins” do a lot of work to maintain the illusion of stillness, and the fish “change their positions in quick angles” before they settle into seeming tranquility. So, once again, Nick is mistaken when he thinks of them as static.

In searching for some semblance of constancy, Nick is trying to return to his pre-war past. However, reminders of the war crop up all around him, suggesting that the war has profoundly changed the world and that Nick cannot escape this fact. For instance, Seney is completely scorched and obliterated, and even though this vast destruction of the landscape is attributed to a fire, it does look like a warzone. The description of the town makes it seem as if it were bombed out, and there is nothing left of it but the crumbling stone foundations of a hotel and the metal railroad tracks—everything else has vanished in the fire. This dramatic change in the physical landscape of Seney mirrors how the world has been forever changed by World War I.

These wartime changes are also reflected in the strange phenomenon of the **grasshoppers** of Seney that have “turned black by living in the burned-over land.” Nick initially assumes that they are a different kind of grasshopper, but on closer inspection he discovers that they are just “ordinary hoppers” that have been transformed by the destruction around them. Though it has been a year since Seney’s fire, they are still black, suggesting that destructive events have the capacity to affect lives for a long time. Nick, too, has been changed by the war, and empathizes with these black grasshoppers. He wonders “how long they [will] stay that way,” suggesting that he would like them to revert to their previous colorful selves. Perhaps he sees himself in them, and wonders how long it will take for his own marks from the war—his traumatic memories and unmanageable emotions—to heal over and disappear so he can return to his pre-war self. So, while Nick seeks markers of constancy amidst the clear signs of change that surround him, what he really seems to be searching for is his old self that he lost in the war.



## NATURE AND CONTROL

Nick, the protagonist of “Big Two-Hearted River,” has returned from World War I and intends to head to a familiar place he remembers—the wilderness outside the town of **Seney**, Michigan—so he can begin to collect himself. However, when he reaches Seney, he finds it has completely burned down, and is disconcerted by its unfamiliar, desolated landscape. As Nick makes his way down to the **river**, the rejuvenating power of nature soothes and revives him. In the story, when nature is predictable and pliable, it is a source of comfort and healing for Nick. However, Hemingway highlights that nature can also be untamed and uncontrollable—like the **swamp** by the river—and when faced with these aspects of nature, Nick comes close to losing the

little control he has over his troubled emotions.

When nature is constant and familiar, Nick finds it rejuvenating. Fishing for trout in this region is something he did before the war, and his pleasant memories of fishing connect him to a simpler past. Nick is so familiar with this landscape that “he [does] not need to get a map out. He [knows] where he [is] from the position of the river.” He has returned from the war and is being assaulted by changes, so it is a comfort to him to return to a recognizable place where he “[knows] where he [is].” When he gets to the town of Seney and sees that it is “burned over and changed,” he thinks that “it [does] not matter. It could not all be burned. He [knows] that.” He is proven right when he walks on to the river and reaches the end of the fire line where he sees “sweet fern, growing ankle high [...] and clumps of jack pines; a long undulating country [...] alive again.” The constancy of nature gives him hope—it signifies the beginning of life in spite of the surrounding destruction.

Furthermore, Nick finds comfort in taming the landscape around him by turning it into a campsite. Though he is floundering emotionally after returning from the war, he feels an empowering sense of control as he goes about these tasks with precision and meticulousness. For instance, he takes a great amount of care just to lay his bed out when he is making camp: “Between two jack pines, the ground was quite level. He took the ax out of the pack and chopped out two projecting roots. That leveled a piece of ground large enough to sleep on. He smoothed out the sandy soil with his hand and pulled all the sweet fern bushes by their roots. [...] He smoothed the uprooted earth. He did not want anything making lumps under the blankets. When he had the ground smooth, he spread his three blankets.” Nick gets a deep sense of satisfaction from carving a spot out for himself in the wilderness, and he does this with great thoroughness. He is pleased when he accomplishes this: “Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. [...] Now things were done. [...] He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him.” Nick feels powerful and capable after asserting control over the landscape, and this also gives him a sense of safety.

However, nature in this story does not always make Nick feel safe. When confronted with aspects of nature that are uncontrollable, Nick feels threatened and struggles to rein in his emotions. For instance, when Nick hooks a very large trout in the river, it breaks the line and escapes. Losing this big fish to the depths of the river fills Nick with a staggering sense of disappointment because he wasn’t able to assert his control over it. This causes him to come close to losing control over himself: “He felt, vaguely, a little sick, as though it would be better to sit down.”

In the story, the murky and uncontrollable aspects of nature are most powerfully represented by the swamp by the river that fills Nick with dread. He sees it as a dark place “where the sun [does] not come through,” which is also hard to enter

because the cedar trees grow together so thick and low that the swamp “look[s] solid.” As he looks at it, he comes close to panicking at the thought of entering it: Nick “[does] not want to go in there now. [...] He [does] not want it. He [does] not want to go any further down the stream today.” When he thinks of fishing in the swamp, “He [feels] a reaction against deep wading with the water deepening up under his armpits, to hook big trout in places impossible to land them. [...] In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it.” He thinks that he will have no control when he fishes in the swamp, and this—combined with the low-growing trees, deep water, and darkness—fills him with fear. The swamp seems to symbolize the uncontrollable darkness and discomfort of Nick’s thoughts, which is why he feels such terror at the idea of entering it and perhaps losing control of his tenuous grasp over himself. At the end of the story, however, Nick optimistically thinks that there are “plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp,” implying that though he isn’t yet ready for this adventure, he might be emotionally stronger later and take it on after some recuperation by the river.



## PHYSICAL VS. EMOTIONAL SUFFERING

In “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick arrives in the burned-down town of **Seney**, Michigan, on a hot day, ready for a solo camping trip. He walks uphill to set up camp the **river**, carrying not only a very heavy pack but also unpleasant memories and emotions associated with World War I, from which he has just returned. While Nick faces both physical and mental suffering in the story, he seems to prefer physical discomfort and even courts it as a means to distract himself from his emotional wounds, which are harder for him to face. Thus, Hemingway suggests that while physical pain is uncomfortable, it is ultimately a person’s emotional wounds that cause the most suffering.

Nick displays a wariness with emotions, suggesting that his mental scars are so deep and unmanageable that he doesn’t intend to face them. For instance, he sees a kingfisher fly over the river, and a big trout leap out of the water right after. The trout manages to get safely back underwater without getting eaten by the bird, but when Nick sees this, his “heart tightened as the trout moved. He felt all the old feeling.” The “old feeling” could be apprehension at the danger the trout put itself in, or joy that it escaped—but whatever it might be, it seems like Nick is wary of any strong “feeling.” Also, it is an “old” feeling, implying that Nick hasn’t felt these emotions recently, most likely because he is trying not to. He immediately turns and looks away from the trout, and when his feelings are under control again, he walks away from the river.

Nick similarly avoids unpleasant emotions later in the story when he thinks about his friend Hopkins, who “went away when the telegram came” and whom he never saw again. Though not explicitly spelled out, Hopkins has most likely died in the

war—World War I, the same war from which Nick has returned. At his camp by the river, Nick makes coffee like Hopkins used to, and laughs when the coffee turns out to be bitter because it matches the sad end to Hopkins's story. Nick realizes then that his "mind [is] starting to work. He [knows] he [can] choke it down because he [is] tired enough." His exhaustion comes as welcome relief to Nick because he doesn't want to deal with these difficult memories.

Just like extreme fatigue helps Nick avoid his challenging emotions, so do physically challenging situations. For this reason, Nick seeks them out. The landscape of the story is harsh at the story's opening, and Nick struggles with his heavy pack through the burned countryside, the heat, and the uphill climb. He tries to balance out its weight by putting a strap across his forehead, but "Still it [is] too heavy. It [is] much too heavy." As he carries this pack uphill, "His muscles [ache] and the day [is] hot, but Nick [feels] happy. He [feels] he [has] left everything behind, the need for thinking [...]." The discomfort of his physical struggle distracts Nick from the need to think, and this makes him happy. Though the environment softens as the story progresses, Nick seems to intentionally put himself in situations where he must encounter physical discomfort so it can distract him from his thoughts. Later, he is walking along the "shadeless pine plain" and he is "tired and very hot." Though he can head left towards the river at any moment to set up camp and rest, he keeps walking to the north on the plain to see how far upstream he can go in a day. He delays getting to the river so that he is famished and exhausted when he does finally reach it, and has no energy left for thinking.

When Nick is focused on his bodily discomforts—exhaustion, hunger, aching muscles—he manages to successfully "choke" down his thoughts, which is why he pushes his body to endure physical suffering. He is pleased when he finally eats a big dinner after being hungry all day and thinks of it as "a very fine experience." The solutions to physical discomfort are simple and often pleasurable, unlike the more complicated problems of the mind.

warzone—it has been destroyed in a fire, not in a bombing. Yet the level of destruction seems to remind Nick of the war he left behind. He expects the familiarity and comfort of home, but the burned, desolate town is utterly and tragically transformed. When Nick first sees Seney, he "[sits] down on the bundle of canvas and bedding," possibly because the extent of the destruction knocks the wind out of him. He gets down from the train expecting a town but "[t]here [is] no town, nothing but [...] the burned-over country." There is no sign of the "thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney," and nothing on the hillside where he "expected to find the scattered houses of the town." All the markers of familiarity have vanished, leaving Nick in an unexpected setting where he struggles to get his bearings. Reliving the war is traumatic for him. While Nick is trying to put the memories of the war behind him and move on, Seney emphasizes how difficult (or impossible) this is, since signs of the war are everywhere.



## THE RIVER

The river symbolizes hope, life, and the comforting permanence of nature that Nick turns to in order to soothe his restless mind. The town of **Seney** to which Nick returns has been completely devastated by a fire, and all familiar signs of life and habitation have been destroyed. Nick turns away from it and heads to the river, which offers a welcome contrast. "The river [is] there," a comforting presence, while everything familiar in the town has disappeared. Also, the town is abandoned and desolate while the river is teeming with trout. Nick watches them for a long time and finds them "very satisfactory." After spending time by the river and the trout, Nick feels less anxious about the burned town, and he concludes that "it [does] not matter. It [can] not all be burned. He [knows] that." This suggests that the river gives Nick hope to face his challenges, knowing that he will eventually find some respite from them. As he hikes to the meadow, Nick doesn't need a map because he uses "the position of the river" to guide him. Its permanence comforts Nick and orients him in a world that he finds hugely changed. When he hikes down to the spot where he intends to set up camp by the river, he is greeted with the beautiful scene of the trout rising—they are jumping out of the water to eat the insects that have landed on the river's surface. Nick sees them "making circles all down the surface of the water, as though it were starting to rain." Water, and particularly rain, symbolize rebirth and regeneration, which is exactly what Nick needs to begin his process of healing, and the time he spends fishing in the river gives him this.



## BLACK GRASSHOPPERS

The black grasshoppers have adapted to their burned surroundings and symbolize the changes wrought by a destructive event. Nick notes that they are not a



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## SENEY

The burned town of Seney, Michigan is a symbol of the destructive aftermath of World War I. The town's buildings and landscape are completely annihilated, with no sign of life. Nick likely witnessed similarly brutal scenes during his time as a soldier in the war, suggesting that Seney reflects the magnitude of the destruction of World War I, which has forever changed the global landscape. Seney is not a

special variety of black grasshopper but are rather “just ordinary hoppers, but all a sooty black in color.” He realizes that they have “turned black from living in a burned-over land,” and that although it has been a year since the fire, these grasshoppers are still black. He wonders “how long they will stay that way.” The grasshoppers have survived the devastation caused by the fire, but they have been visibly changed by it. Like them, Nick has survived World War I and has been changed by it, too, though his changes are not externally visible. This is why he empathizes with these creatures. When Nick wonders how long the grasshoppers will stay black, he is essentially wondering how long he will bear the emotional scars of war. He wants the little creatures to fly away and survive because, to him, this represents his own survival. Nick says to one of these black grasshoppers, “go on, hopper [...] fly away somewhere.” These are the first and only words that Nick speaks to another creature in the story (and one of only two times he speaks out loud at all), suggesting that he finds the grasshoppers’ change in appearance very moving.



## THE SWAMP

The murky, tangled swamp is a reflection of Nick’s dark memories and unresolved emotions. While nature in the story is mostly a rejuvenating and hopeful force, the swamp, in contrast, comes across as uncontrollable and terrifying. At the end of Part I, when Nick is tired and ready to fall asleep in his comfortable tent, “The swamp [is] perfectly quiet,” suggesting that at that moment his mind is calm and empty of disconcerting thoughts and memories. However, in Part II, the swamp is an ominous presence when Nick is fishing on the river. Its tree trunks are “close together” and seem impenetrable. Nick is constantly aware of the swamp, and repeatedly thinks that he does not want to go inside it, which suggests that he is afraid of it. Throughout the story, Nick attempts to avoid situations that might trigger a strong emotional response in him—he suppresses memories of his friend Hopkins (who is implied to have died in World War I), reigning in his emotions and struggling to control his reactions. It seems like he feels he will lose control if he enters the swamp. In order to control his emotions, he needs to control his environment much like he controls his emotions—whether through making an elaborate camp or dinner, or successfully landing a trout—but at the swamp, he fears he will have no control. There, among the low-growing trees, darkness, and deep water, he thinks that fishing will be a “tragic adventure.” However, toward the end of the story, Nick thinks that there are “plenty of days coming where he could fish the swamp,” suggesting that he is optimistic that the fishing trip by the river will fortify him so he will be resilient enough to face the challenge of the swamp, and thus, to confront his painful memories.



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Simon & Schuster edition of *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* published in 1987.

### Part I Quotes

●● The train went on up the track out of sight, around one of the hills of burnt timber. Nick sat down on the bundle of canvas and bedding the baggage man had pitched out of the door of the baggage car. There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country. The thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney had not left a trace. The foundations of the Mansion House hotel stuck up above the ground. The stone was chipped and split by the fire. It was all that was left of the town of Seney.

**Related Characters:** Nick

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 163

### Explanation and Analysis

The first image in the story is one of abandonment—the train that has brought Nick to Seney, Michigan, is moving farther away, and then disappears from view. The baggage man is the only other human being who enters the pages of the story, other than Nick, and he “pitche[s]” Nick’s pack out of the train, a word that seems hasty and dismissive, as though he wanted Nick gone quickly. Even though Nick’s solitude is completely voluntary—he has chosen to come on this fishing trip by himself—the language at the opening suggests that he is perhaps reconsidering this decision when he sees the burned, desolate town around him and feels abandoned by human companionship. Nick seems to be so shocked at the sight of the burned town that he needs to sit down to take it all in.

It is clear that Nick has been to this town before and knows it well. He expects to see the “thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney” and the “Mansion House hotel,” revealing that he is familiar with its landmarks and places of entertainment. Also, these places—saloons and hotels—suggest crowds and companionship, places where people congregate to drink and be together. Their complete destruction highlights the contrast between what used to be and what is. Now, there is “no town, nothing but the rails and the burned over country,” and Nick is the only person in

what was once the vibrant town of Seney.

The fire that destroyed the town must have been a raging, intense one, to cause such massive destruction and even split the foundation stones of the hotel. Given the context of Hemingway's other short stories that feature Nick, the reader can infer that Nick has returned from the fighting at World War I right before this story. Knowing this, the scene that greets him at Seney must seem like a warzone to him. While Nick is trying to escape from the horrors of the war and seek refuge in familiar, comforting surroundings, vestiges of the war seem to be following him around. Through this persistent sense of desolation and loss, Hemingway suggests that the trauma of war is long-lasting, and that the destruction of World War I was so epic that it altered the global landscape.

☛ The river was there. [...] Nick looked down into the clear, brown water, colored from the pebbly bottom, and watched the trout keeping themselves steady in the current with wavering fins. As he watched them they changed their positions by quick angles, only to hold steady in the fast water again. Nick watched them a long time.

**Related Characters:** Nick

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 163

### Explanation and Analysis

After seeing that the town of Seney has been completely destroyed in the fire and is very different from his memories of it, Nick heads down to the river in the surrounding wilderness. Though the town effectively no longer exists, this river still does. The first line of this passage—"The river was there"—seems to be Nick's sigh of relief at finding something familiar and unchanged, even though his sense of relief is not directly stated. Hemingway uses a style of writing called "free indirect discourse" in which the narrator's statements and observations are often indistinguishable from the character's thoughts. So, Hemingway omits words like "Nick felt" or "Nick thought," leaving it to the reader to interpret the Nick's emotions through the third-person narrator. This style of writing lends a feeling of reserve to the story, which reflects the stoicism with which Nick behaves and the firm control he attempts to exert on his environment and his emotions.

Nick watches the trout in the river "keeping themselves *steady* in the current." They shift their positions quickly, "only to hold *steady* in the fast water again." Since Hemingway's prose is so sparse and carefully chosen, the repetition of the word "steady" in such close succession draws attention to the word. The image that he intends to highlight is that of the trout who are unmoving and unchanging even though the water is rushing around them. Like the river, the trout, too, are comforting symbols of permanence in a catastrophically changed and still-changing world. Perhaps Nick aspires to the same kind of steadiness, to remain calm and balanced while the world changes around him.

☛ A kingfisher flew up the stream. It was a long time since Nick had looked into a stream and seen trout. They were very satisfactory. As the shadow of the kingfisher moved up the stream, a big trout shot upstream in a long angle, only his shadow marking the angle, then lost his shadow as he came through the surface of the water, caught the sun, and then, as he went back into the stream under the surface, his shadow seemed to float down the stream with the current, unresisting, to his post under the bridge where he tightened facing up into the current.

Nick's heart tightened as the trout moved. He felt all the old feeling.

**Related Characters:** Nick

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 163-164

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nick has turned away from the burned town of Seney and is watching the trout in the river. Nick is glad to be in a familiar place and to be watching a scene that he finds peaceful—the trout and the river are a welcome change after the burned and transformed town, which is why he finds them "very satisfactory." Nick has been away (fighting in World War I, though this is never explicitly mentioned in the story), so it has been "a long time" since he has watched trout in this river.

This passage has some very precise descriptions of Nick's observations—the shadow of the kingfisher falling on the river and startling the trout into swimming upstream, followed by it leaping out of the water and glinting in the sunlight—all in one long, breathless sentence, which

suggests that all these things are happening very quickly. These detailed descriptions invite the reader to share in Nick's sights and in his excitement at the beauty of the natural world.

The kingfisher in this passage is a threat to the fish, which swims in the direction of the bird and even leaps out of the water before escaping safely. As Nick watches, his "heart tightens," and he feels the "old feeling"—anxiety for the fish perhaps, and relief at its escape. The very precise physical description of his heart tightening stands in for Hemingway naming Nick's feeling—he leaves it up to the reader's interpretation.

The trout "tightens" in the water, facing the current, and Nick's "heart tightens" after he watches this scene play out. The verb links Nick with the fish—perhaps because Nick escaped death while he was at the war just as the fish narrowly escaped getting eaten by the kingfisher, and also because Nick wants to be like the trout, holding steady while changes swirl around him.

●● He walked along the road feeling the ache from the pull of the heavy pack. The road climbed steadily. It was hard work walking up-hill. His muscles ached and the day was hot, but Nick felt happy. He felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him.

[...] Seney was burned, the country was burned over and changed, but it did not matter. It could not all be burned.

**Related Characters:** Nick

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 164

### Explanation and Analysis

After Nick watches the trout in the river, he picks up his pack and begins hiking. This passage begins with a list of physical discomforts—Nick's muscles "ache," it is very hot, the pack is heavy, he is climbing uphill—which makes it all the more surprising to discover that "Nick fe[els] happy." He is happy because he has left behind "the need to think, the need to write." This passage sets up a dichotomy between the physical and the intellectual, and highlights Nick's nonchalance to physical suffering compared to emotional suffering. In fact, he may even seek out discomfort as a

means to distract himself from his mental anguish. The heat of the day and his aching muscles cannot dampen his happiness, but the "need to think" certainly can.

While he was momentarily shocked when he saw that Seney "was burned over and changed," Nick's time watching the river and the trout seems to have rejuvenated him and given him hope. He sees nature as unchanging and resilient, which is why he knows that it "could not all be burned." He is walking toward the end of the burned land, in search of the unchanged wilderness he is familiar with. After the traumatic sight of the burned town at the beginning of the story, Nick is hopeful again.

●● As he had walked along the road, climbing, he had started many grasshoppers from the dust. They were all black. They were not the big grasshoppers with yellow and black or red and black wings [...]. These were just ordinary hoppers, but all a sooty black in color. [...] Now, as he watched the black hopper that was nibbling at the wool of his sock with its fourway lip, he realized that they had all turned black from living in the in burned-over land. He realized that the fire must have come the year before, but the grasshoppers were all black now. He wondered how long they would stay that way.

Carefully he reached his hand down and took hold of the hopper by the wings. He turned him up, all his legs walking in the air, and looked at his jointed belly. Yes, it was black too, iridescent where the back and head were dusty.

"Go on, hopper," Nick said, speaking out loud for the first time. "Fly away somewhere."

**Related Characters:** Nick (speaker)

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 165

### Explanation and Analysis

Nick notices these black grasshoppers as he hikes on the burned land, heading away from the town of Seney towards the wilderness. These black grasshoppers represent the long-lasting effects of a traumatic event. Their home—the land surrounding Seney—was destroyed in a fire, and they have been completely transformed by this. Nick notes that "the fire must have come the year before" but that these grasshoppers are still black, suggesting that it is not easy to move on after living through a disaster. When Nick wonders

how long they will stay black, he is essentially asking that question about himself. Like these grasshoppers, he, too, has suffered through a traumatic event (World War I). While these insects manifest their changes on the outside, Nick has been psychologically changed by his experiences.

The passage calls attention to the fact that Nick speaks out loud here for the first time in the story, suggesting that he empathizes deeply with the black grasshopper that climbs on his sock, treating it “[c]arefully,” and wishing it well as he releases it.

☞ He came down a hillside covered with stumps into a meadow. At the edge of the meadow flowed the river. Nick was glad to get to the river. He walked upstream through the meadow. His trousers were soaked with the dew as he walked. After the hot day, the dew had come quickly and heavily. [...] Nick looked down the river at the trout rising. They were rising to insects come from the swamp on the other side of the stream when the sun went down. The trout jumped out of water to take them. [...] As far down the long stretch as he could see, the trout were rising, making circles all down the surface of the water, as though it were starting to rain.

**Related Characters:** Nick

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 166

### Explanation and Analysis

After Nick takes a nap under some pine trees, he makes his way to the river to set up camp. Until this point, Nick has encountered the burned land of Seney, completely devoid of life, and has since made his way through the plain which had ferns growing on it but no shade except for a few pine trees—while it was definitely an improvement on Seney, it was still hot and dry. The meadow by the riverside is a complete contrast. It is teeming with life and water. Nick’s “trousers [are] soaked with dew” as he walks through the grass, suggesting welcome relief from heat and fire. While Seney must have reminded Nick of a warzone, the meadow by the river seems like the perfect antidote to his trauma.

Nick is greeted with the striking scene of the “trout [...] rising, making circles all down the surface of the water, as though it were starting to rain.” Rain symbolizes rejuvenation, and the end of scorching heat and fire.

Perhaps this is what Nick is hoping that fishing by the river will do for him—rejuvenate him and help him move beyond the trauma he suffered in the war.

☞ Between two jack pines, the ground was quite level. He took the ax out of the pack and chopped out two projecting roots. That leveled a piece of ground large enough to sleep on. He smoothed out the sandy soil with his hand and pulled all the sweet fern bushes by their roots. His hands smelled good from the sweet fern. He smoothed the uprooted earth. He did not want anything making lumps under the blankets. When he had the ground smooth, he spread his three blankets. One he folded double, next to the ground. The other two he spread on top.

**Related Characters:** Nick

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 166-167

### Explanation and Analysis

When Nick gets to the river, he realizes he is hungry but decides to set up camp before he eats. However, as evidenced in this passage, Nick takes no shortcuts and doesn’t hurry because he is hungry. He takes his time and very meticulously goes about each task, ensuring that each step in the process meets his high standards. While carving out a comfortable spot for himself in the wilderness, Nick dominates and controls the landscape around him by chopping tree roots to clear a space for himself and uprooting ferns, so that his bed won’t be lumpy. Here, nature submits to Nick, and he seems to find it almost therapeutic to perform these simple tasks with such close attention to detail. While he is floundering emotionally, mastering these small tasks and the natural environment seems to build up his stability and sense of self.

☞ Inside the tent the light came through the brown canvas. It smelled pleasantly of canvas. Already there was something mysterious and homelike. Nick was happy as he crawled inside the tent. He had not been unhappy all day. This was different though. Now things were done. There had been this to do. Now it was done. It had been a hard trip. He was very tired. That was done. He had made his camp. He was settled. Nothing could touch him. It was a good place to camp. He was there, in the good place. He was in his home where he had made it.

**Related Characters:** Nick

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 167

### Explanation and Analysis

After Nick sets up his tent by the river, he is happy to crawl inside and try it out. The descriptions evoke the senses—the light filtering in, the pleasant canvas smell—and invite the reader to share in the coziness of the tent. The tent feels “mysterious and homelike” to Nick, which must be comforting to him after finding Seney “burned over and changed” earlier that morning. He had come seeking the familiar town he remembered only to find it completely different from his memory of it, and totally destroyed, like the warzone he’d just left. His camp by the river, on the other hand, seems to be just the kind of comforting home for which he’s been yearning.

The task of making his camp had been weighing on Nick all day, and he is very satisfied that it is “done,” and particularly that it is done in a way that meets his high expectations. He is pleased that he was in complete control of his tasks and his environment while setting up his tent. Since Nick feels he is emotionally unstable, he revels in having a sense of external control though he struggles for internal control.

After getting through all these tasks, Nick is “very tired,” and his fatigue is mirrored by the short sentences in the passage. Inside the tent, he feels like “[n]othing could touch him,” implying that he otherwise feels anxious or threatened by something, perhaps his memories of the war or his awareness of his psychological wounds. But in this “good place,” this home among nature that he has constructed so meticulously, he finally feels safe.

☞ He could not remember which way he made coffee. He could remember an argument about it with Hopkins, but not which side he had taken. He decided to bring it to a boil. He remembered now that was Hopkins’s way. He had once argued about everything with Hopkins. [...]

That was a long time ago. Hopkins [...] had played polo. He made millions of dollars in Texas. [...] They called Hop’s girl the Blonde Venus. [...] Hopkins went away when the telegram came. That was on the Black River. [...] They were all going fishing again next summer. The Hop Head was rich. He would get a yacht and they would all cruise along the north shore of Lake Superior. [...] They said good-bye and all felt bad. It broke up the trip. They never saw Hopkins again. That was a long time ago on the Black River.

Nick drank the coffee, the coffee according to Hopkins. The coffee was bitter. Nick laughed. It made a good ending to the story. His mind was starting to work. He knew he could choke it because he was tired enough.

**Related Characters:** Hopkins, Nick

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 168-169

### Explanation and Analysis

Hopkins is the only other character in this story (other than Nick) who gets more than a passing mention. He is a friend Nick remembers when he is trying to remember the right way to make coffee. Hopkins had firm opinions on coffee-making, among many other things, and Nick used to like to argue with him. Since all of Nick’s recollections of Hopkins are in the past tense, the reader is clued into the fact that Hopkins and Nick aren’t arguing—or even hanging out—anymore. Hopkins, in fact, is most probably dead—killed in World War I. Nick hints that Hopkins got his orders to serve when the friends were fishing in the Black River, and that though they’d made plans to go fishing again next year, they “never saw Hopkins again.”

Prior to this, Hopkins is young, and his life seems full of potential. He has made a lot of money, has friends who love him, and also has a beautiful girlfriend. His death highlights the unfairness of war, which mindlessly snatches up several lives like Hopkins’s. Love and luck offer no protection against it. Nick finds the end of Hopkins’s story “bitter,” just like the coffee he is drinking. Hopkins’s death is one of the many changes wrought by the war that Nick is saddened by. But by thinking too much about Hopkins, Nick realizes that his mind “was starting to work” and he knows he is tired enough to “choke” it down. This strikingly violent word, “choke,” draws attention to itself and highlights the sheer

willpower Nick employs to avoid thinking these unpleasant thoughts. He doesn't want to lose himself in emotions he cannot control, so he exhausts himself physically in order to stop thinking.

## Part II Quotes

●● The rod under his right arm, Nick stooped, dipping his right hand into the current. He held the trout, never still, with his moist right hand, while he unhooked the barb from his mouth, then dropped him back into the stream.

He hung unsteadily in the current, then settled to the bottom beside a stone. Nick reached down his hand to touch him, his arm to the elbow under water. [...] As Nick's fingers touched him, [...] he was gone, gone in a shadow across the bottom of the stream.

He's all right, Nick thought. He was only tired.

He had wet his hand before he touched the trout, so he would not disturb the delicate mucus that covered him. If a trout was touched with a dry hand, a white fungus attacked the unprotected spot. Years before when he had fished crowded streams, with fly fishermen ahead of him and behind him, Nick had again and again come on dead trout furry with white fungus, drilled against a rock, or floating belly up in some pool. Nick did not like to fish with other men on the river. Unless they were of your party, they spoiled it.

**Related Characters:** Nick

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 175-176

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nick catches his first trout while fishing in the river but releases it because it is too small. This passage exemplifies Nick's regard for other creatures as well as his deep knowledge of the natural world. The animals and insects that Nick encounters are never just an "it" for him—they always get the masculine pronoun, "he," just as this little trout does. This doesn't mean that Nick is overly sentimental about them, however—when he needs to catch some grasshoppers for bait, he does, and he is happy to catch two big trout when he fishes—but he does treat all these creatures as humanely as possible, never causing them pain through carelessness or ignorance.

When he drops the small trout back into the water, Nick touches it to check on it and make sure that it is unharmed. Also, before he touches it to release it from the fishing hook,

he wets his hand because it might get a fungal attack if touched with a dry hand. Clearly, Nick knows a lot about the natural world. When he had gone fishing before, he repeatedly came upon the tragic sight of "dead trout furry with fungus" which is why he no longer likes to "fish with other men on the river." Nick's careful kindness is the focus here and might explain why the war has affected him so drastically. He seems more sensitive and gentler than the other people who couldn't be bothered to wet their hands before touching the trout. Though Nick doesn't interact with anyone else within this story, this episode shows us how he might be different from and kinder than most people.

●● His mouth dry, his heart down, Nick reeled in. He had never seen so big a trout. There was a heaviness, a power not to be held, and then the bulk of him, as he jumped. [...]

Nick's hand was shaky. He reeled in slowly. The thrill had been too much. He felt, vaguely, a little sick, as though it would be better to sit down.

The leader had broken where the hook was tied to it. Nick [...] thought of the trout somewhere on the bottom, holding himself steady over the gravel, far down below the light, under the logs, with the hook in his jaw. [...] The hook would imbed itself in his jaw. He'd bet the trout was angry. Anything that size would be angry. [...] By God, he was a big one. By God, he was the biggest one I ever heard of.

**Related Characters:** Nick

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 177

### Explanation and Analysis

Nick catches a big trout while fishing on the river—he thinks it is "the biggest one [he'd] ever heard of—but the fish breaks the line and escapes. This would undoubtedly be disappointing for any fisherman, but Nick's extreme disappointment seems like an overreaction. He is so stricken by this episode that he feels ill and cannot even stand up. Nick's psychological vulnerability is apparent here, as is his inability to control his emotions. A small setback is enough to trigger a huge reaction in him.

In contrast to Nick, the fish (as he imagines it) seems intimidating to him. It is very big, for one. Nick seems to fear

its anger and feels guilty about the hook in its jaw. The fish takes on mythical power and largeness—he was “a power not to be held”—while Nick is weak and ineffectual in comparison. The fish represents the aspect of nature that will not be cowed into submission, and this causes Nick a lot of anxiety. Nick seeks power through controlling the natural world and is extremely intimidated when he cannot achieve this.

●● Ahead the river narrowed and went into a swamp. The river became smooth and deep and the swamp looked solid with cedar trees, their trunks close together, their branches solid. It would not be possible to walk through a swamp like that. The branches grew so low. You would have to keep almost level with the ground to move at all. You could not crash through the branches. [...]

He wished he had brought something to read. He felt like reading. He did not feel like going on into the swamp. [...]

Nick did not want to go in there now. He felt a reaction against deep wading with the water deepening up under his armpits, to hook big trout in places impossible to land them. In the swamp the banks were bare, the big cedars came together overhead, the sun did not come through, except in patches; in the fast deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it.

**Related Characters:** Nick

**Related Themes:** 

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 179 - 180

### Explanation and Analysis

The swamp is a source of anxiety for Nick, but until this point in the story, it has been on the periphery. After he catches his fish and has his lunch, Nick finally looks the swamp head-on, and his anxiety about it peaks. The swamp looks impenetrable, with its low branches and close-growing trees. It makes Nick so uncomfortable that he wishes he had something to read, just so he could avoid looking at it. Nick imagines going into the swamp, and the sensory descriptions get unpleasant—“water deepening up under his armpits,” “fast deep water,” “half light”—as though the swamp were a claustrophobic nightmare.

For Nick, the chief problem is that although he will find big trout in the swamp (the biggest trout probably live in the swamp’s depths), it will be “impossible to land them.” He worries that his line will get tangled in the trees and branches, and that he will have to relinquish his expertise and control while floundering in the “half light.” To him, the fishing there will be “tragic,” which is a melodramatic way to describe an unproductive fishing trip. Perhaps the real tragedy for him is that in the swamp, he might lose the sense of control that is so important to him. The swamp might remind him about his time at the war when he had no control and had to listen to orders rather than make decisions. The darkness of the swamp also mirrors the darkness of his own mind, which eludes his control. To Nick, the swamp represents nature at its most uncontrollable, which he finds frightening.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## PART I

The train moves on after dropping Nick off at the town of **Seney**, which he finds has completely burned down. Nick sits down on his pack and looks around. There is nothing left of the 13 saloons that once lined Seney's street. The foundation of the Mansion House hotel sticks out of the ground and the stones have been split by the fire. Even the "surface [has] been burned off the ground."

Nick looks over at the hillside, where he'd expected to find **Seney**'s scattered houses, but finds no sign of them since they, like the town's other buildings, have been burned to the ground. He then heads to the bridge over the **river** and notes that the river is there.

Nick watches the trout in the **river** for a long time, paying close attention to how they "hold steady in the fast water." He thinks that it's been a while since he's watched trout, and that they are "very satisfactory."

Nick notices a kingfisher flying upstream. Just then, a big trout also swims upstream and leaps out of the water, into the sunlight, before it swims back to its place under the bridge. While watching the trout move, Nick's "heart tighten[s]" and he feels "all the old feeling." He turns and looks down the stream, which is "pebbly-bottomed with shallows and big boulders and a deep pool as it curved away[.]"

*The sight that greets Nick when he arrives in Seney, Michigan is an unpleasant shock to him. Clearly, Nick is very familiar with this town and its various landmarks, of which there is nothing left except the broken foundation of the hotel. Though never explicitly mentioned, it can be inferred based on Hemingway's other stories about Nick's character that Nick has recently returned from fighting in World War I. He comes to Seney expecting its familiarity comforts but is instead greeted by a scene that looks like a warzone. Through this image, Hemingway is implying that it is not easy to escape the war's horrors and memories, though Nick has presumably come here to do just that.*



*Once again, Seney's complete destruction and desolation are in focus here. The town is very different from Nick's memories of it, which he finds difficult to deal with. When Nick sees the river, he seems comforted by the fact that this landmark is still there, unlike everything else familiar in Seney.*



*To Nick, the trout seem to symbolize steadfastness and calm in the midst of chaos, and his reflection that the fish are "very satisfactory" suggests that he wants to embody this quality as well, or at least to observe it in the world around him. Since he has been away at war, he hasn't been able to appreciate simple pleasures like watching trout in a river in some time, but Nick is clearly glad to be back in a familiar place, doing something he enjoys.*



*Nick feels some sort of powerful emotion at this sight of a trout leaping out of the water while a bird of prey is lurking. Hemingway leaves this emotion unnamed—it might be anxiety for the trout, or perhaps excitement at its narrow escape. The reader can infer that, having certainly faced near-death experiences in World War I, Nick likely empathizes with the fish. To compose himself, Nick looks away, down the river. This strategy seems to help him get his high emotions under control.*



While walking back to pick up his pack, Nick is happy. He tries to adjust the pack's weight on his back, but it is "much too heavy." He walks away from the burned town of **Seney** and takes a road that heads into the country, feeling "the ache from the pull of the heavy pack." The road he's on is an uphill one, and it is a hot day, "but Nick [feels] happy. He [feels] he ha[s] left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It [is] all back of him." Though "Seney [is] burned, the country [is] burned over and changed," Nick thinks that it does not matter because he knows it could not all be burned.

*After his short time looking at the river and the trout, Nick is reinvigorated. He sees nature as permanent and unchanging, and this gives him hope. He realizes that even though Seney might be "burned over and changed," the destruction must end at some point, since nature perpetually grows and regenerates itself. The heavy pack Nick carries as he hikes is a symbol of the emotional weight he seems to be lugging around. He struggles uphill, in the heat, with the heavy pack—but he is happy because when he is exerting himself physically, he is too preoccupied to think. It seems like his memories from the war cause him great pain and that he is happy when he can avoid them.*



Nick sweats in the heat as he climbs the hills that separate the train tracks from the "pine plains." The burned land stops at the line of hills on his left. In front of him is a plain dotted with pine trees, and this plain goes right up to the far blue hills in the distance that look like they are the same height as Lake Superior. To his left, he catches glimpses of the **river**, its water glinting in the sunlight. Nick takes a break and smokes a cigarette. He does not need a map to know where he is. He can find his way by looking at the position of the river.

*Nick can now see the end of the burned land, beyond which nature flourishes again. Michigan's Lake Superior is mentioned for the first time in the story in this passage. It's clear that Nick is familiar with this region, suggesting that he has memories of spending time here that he wants to relive, unlike his painful memories of World War I. He enjoys being by the familiar, comforting presence of the river where he does not even need a map.*



A **black grasshopper** climbs onto Nick's sock. He remembers that he has seen many of these black grasshoppers on his walk up the hill and realizes that they must have turned black from living on the burned land. Though it has been a year since the fire, they are still black. He wonders how long they will stay that way. "Carefully," Nick picks up the black grasshopper to look at its belly, which he sees is black, too, just like its head. Nick speaks "out loud for the first time," telling the insect to "Fly away somewhere."

*The black grasshoppers demonstrate the long-lasting aftereffects of a catastrophic event. They have been completely transformed by the fire that burned down Seney, and still manifest these changes even though an entire year has passed since the fire. These creatures are living proof that healing after a traumatic event is a slow and difficult process. Just like these creatures, Nick, too, has been transformed by his experiences in the war. He recognizes this, which is why he speaks to the insect—one of the two times he speaks out loud in the story—and treats it with such care.*



Nick puts his heavy pack back on and begins to make his way down the hill. This time he doesn't take the road. The fire line stops a little way down the hillside, and he enjoys his walk among the ferns and pines in the "country [that is] alive again." He uses the sun as his guide as he makes his way over to the **river**. He plucks some ferns and puts them under his pack straps, where they smell sweet when they are crushed by its weight.

*While the fire has caused a lot of damage, nature flourishes again beyond the fire line. Nick finds this hopeful and comforting. He enjoys his sense of power and control over the landscape when it is familiar and yields to him easily, like when he plucks the ferns to smell them.*



Soon after, Nick gets tired walking across the hot, “shadeless” plain. He heads toward some pine trees, lays down under them, and takes a nap. When he wakes up, it is close to sunset. His body is stiff and cramped, and his pack feels too heavy as he continues to make his way to the **river**.

Nick reaches a meadow that borders the **river**, and he is “glad to get” there. He watches the “trout rising”—they are leaping out of the water in circles to catch insects. To Nick, it looks “as though it were starting to rain.”

Nick sets up camp on some flat land between two pines. He gets his ax out of his pack and chops down two protruding roots to make enough room for him to stretch out and sleep. He uproots some ferns and smooths the earth down with his hands because he doesn’t want any lumps under the blankets. Finally, he spreads his three blankets down. He does a very thorough job setting up his tent, cutting pegs and a pole for it from the nearby pine trees. He puts some cheesecloth at the tent’s entrance to keep out mosquitoes. Now, his pack is emptier and looks smaller.

The camp already feels “mysterious and homelike,” and Nick is happy as he crawls into the tent. “He had not been unhappy all day,” but it was still “a hard trip” to reach the **river**. Nick is tired after a long day of hiking, and now feels like “nothing can touch him,” and that he is “in the good place.”

*Again, nature comes across as a source of comfort for Nick. Until this point in the story, he has been hot and exhausted from hiking through the burned land, and the pine trees finally give him some reprieve and the opportunity to rest.*



*When Nick finally reaches the point at the river where he decides to set up his camp, he is greeted by nature at its most benevolent. Rather than the scorched town of Seney, which connotes only loss and death, Nick instead reaches to a meadow which is abundant with greenery and life. The trout that are leaping out of the river to catch insects look like rain to Nick, and given that rain typically symbolizes cleansing and rejuvenation, suggesting that Nick feels revitalized by the life around him after being surrounded by destruction both in the war and upon arriving in Seney.*



*Clearly, Nick has packed very thoroughly for this trip—including an ax and three blankets to sleep on—and is very particular about how he wants his camp to be. He meticulously carves out a space for himself in the wilderness, cutting roots that are in his way and uprooting plants that might make his bed lumpy, suggesting that he wants to create a semblance of a home for himself in the wilderness. As he goes about taming the area around him with various implements he pulls out of his heavy pack, the pack (which also represents his emotional load) gets lighter. This suggests that Nick’s heart, too, gets lighter as he imposes control over the wilderness. Nick finds great satisfaction in establishing a sense of order, which is understandable given the chaos he’s surely witnessed.*



*Nick feels a satisfying sense of accomplishment after he sets up his camp. He thinks of it as a place where “[n]othing could touch him,” indicating that he does otherwise feel threatened or somehow unsafe—most likely due to his psychological wounds. But by setting up his camp so meticulously, he feels he has defeated this threat since he is in perfect control of his environment. The quick repetitions of the word “good” in such close succession highlight that Nick is content and safe in the home he has made in nature, away from the stressors he is avoiding.*



Nick realizes that he is very hungry since he hasn't eaten anything since that morning. He does not "believe he has ever been hungrier." While emptying cans of pork and beans and spaghetti on the frying pan, he says out loud, "I've got a right to eat this kind of stuff, if I'm willing to carry it." But his voice sounds strange to him in the dark woods, and he does not speak again.

Nick makes a fire and warms his dinner on it, watching with pleasure as it bubbles up. He is getting hungrier. He pours out the food on a tin plate and knows it is too hot to eat right away. He doesn't want to spoil it by burning his tongue. He looks away from the food as he waits for it to cool down. When he finally takes a bite, he says "Geezuz Chrise" in pleasure.

He eats a whole plateful before he remembers that he has bread, and then eats a second plateful with the bread. He enjoys the experience of eating when he is very hungry: "He had been that hungry before, but had not been able to satisfy it." He could have set up his camp earlier and eaten earlier if he'd wanted to, but "[t]his was good."

After dinner, Nick "[can] not remember how he made coffee," though he does remember that he'd argued about it with Hopkins. He decides to bring the coffee to a boil and then remembers that this was the way Hopkins made coffee. He remembers that "[h]e had once argued about everything with Hopkins."

Nick watches the coffee pot boil over and thinks that it is "a triumph for Hopkins." Instead of letting the coffee steep in the pot, Nick uses his hat to hold the hot coffee pot and pours out the first cup right away, just the way that Hopkins used to, because "Hop deserved that." He had been "a very serious coffee drinker" and "the most serious man Nick had ever known." But all that "was a long time ago."

*Nick seems to enjoy the pleasure of delayed gratification. He is completely famished, but he knows this will make his meal that much more enjoyable when he finally gets to it. In this passage, he speaks out loud for the second time in the story, asserting to the world that he can choose what to carry and eat what he pleases. Given that this is only one of two times Nick feels the need to verbalize his thoughts, his assertion here is clearly important to him—perhaps he did not have the choice to eat the quantity or type of food he wanted while he was at war.*



*Nick feels immense pleasure when he finally eats his food, exclaiming "Geezuz Chrise" aloud, suggesting a moment of almost religious ecstasy. The solution to Nick's physical suffering seems easy when compared to his mental anguish—there doesn't seem to be an easy fix for this.*



*Nick had probably been similarly hungry when he was at the war but had been unable to sit down to a satisfying meal. Now, he enjoys his freedom to decide when and what to eat. Once again, the reader's attention is drawn to Nick's decision to postpone eating and setting up camp—he decides not to and enjoys that freedom to choose. Also, Nick uses his hunger and exhaustion to stop his mind from recalling thoughts and memories that upset him.*



*Hopkins is the only other character (other than Nick) who gets more than a passing mention in this story, suggesting that he is important to Nick. Nick had "once argued" with Hopkins about everything, but he seems to no longer do this. The reader does not yet know why the arguments (or the friendship) ended.*



*Once again, the reader's attention is drawn to the fact that Nick and Hopkins used to be friends "a long time ago," yet it's not clear when or why their friendship ended. Since Nick is consciously making his coffee using Hopkins's method, as if in his honor, it is clear that Nick still regards Hopkins positively.*



Hopkins played polo and made a lot of money on an oil well in Texas. They called his girlfriend the Blond Venus, but Hop didn't mind because he was sure they wouldn't call his "real" girlfriend names like that and he was right—they wouldn't. When they were fishing on the Black River, the telegram came for Hop and he "went away." He gave his pistol to Nick and his camera to Bill, and the three of them made plans to go fishing together the following summer on the north shores of Lake Superior. They never saw Hopkins again.

*Hopkins seems to have been a lucky young man, blessed with money, a beautiful girlfriend, and friends who cared about him. However, he "went away" when a telegram came for him, implying that he was likely drafted to fight in World War I. Though Nick and his friends had plans to go fishing together the next year, they "never saw Hopkins again," which suggests that he died in the war. Hopkins's story illustrates that money and good fortune didn't protect anyone from the horrors of war.*



Nick drinks the coffee he'd made in the same way that Hopkins used to. It is bitter, which makes Nick laugh because it seems like a fitting end to the story. His mind is starting to work, but he knows that he can "choke it because he [is] tired enough." He empties the coffee pot, lights a cigarette, and goes inside the tent.

*The coffee that Nick makes using Hopkins's method is bitter, just like Hopkins's story which ends in death. Nick is starting to think about the war, and he doesn't want to, but he knows he is tired enough to "choke" his mind. This strikingly violent word, "choke," draws attention to itself and highlights the sheer effort Nick puts into avoiding and repressing things that upset him.*



The night is peaceful, and the **swamp**, too, is "perfectly quiet." Nick is comfortable on the blanket when a mosquito buzzes in his ear. He strikes a match to find the insect and burns it. Then he settles down again and falls asleep.

*Later in the story, the swamp will emerge as a challenge to Nick's peace of mind. But for now, Nick is too exhausted to be troubled by it and it is "perfectly quiet." However, a mosquito has snuck into Nick's tent, which violates his quest for perfect order. It is only by killing it that Nick is able to "settle down" to a good night's sleep, again showcasing his extreme disturbance when his environment is not to his liking.*



## PART II

The next morning, the sun warms up the tent. Nick crawls out and looks around him at the meadow, the **river**, and the green **swamp** that has birch trees in it. The river is clear and smooth. Nick watches a mink cross the river and head into the swamp.

*The river, which Nick finds comforting, is bordered by the dark, unpredictable swamp, which will cause Nick much anxiety. He takes in both of these aspects of nature—these are, perhaps, the "two hearts" of the Big Two-Hearted River.*



Nick is very excited about heading over to the **river** to fish. He feels almost too impatient to eat breakfast, but he knows he must, so he builds a fire to make some coffee. While waiting for the water to boil, he catches some grasshoppers to use as fishing bait. The grasshoppers are cold with dew, and Nick knows they will not be able to hop until they are warmed by the sun. He upturns a log and finds hundreds of them under it. He manages to catch around 50 medium-sized brown grasshoppers, and he puts them in a bottle. By the time he is done catching them, they are beginning to get warm and start to hop and fly away.

*Nick's knowledge of the natural world is impressive, as demonstrated here by his familiarity with the habits of grasshoppers. This is why he loves being in this wilderness he knows so well—he is confident of his expertise (on fishing, setting up camp, and the wildlife around), and this knowledge gives him a feeling of control.*



Nick goes to the **river** to wash his hands and is “excited to be near it.” By the time he gets back to his tent, the grasshoppers are warmed up and are jumping around. The ones in the bottle are also jumping, so Nick puts in a pine stick as a cork, making sure to leave enough of a gap so they can breathe. Nick rolls back the log under which he’d found lots of grasshoppers and knows he’ll be able to find “grasshoppers there every morning.”

Nick makes buckwheat pancakes for breakfast and eats them with apple butter. He packs an extra pancake in his pocket for his lunch, and also makes some onion sandwiches to take with him. After drinking his coffee, he tidies up the camp and thinks that it is “a good camp.” Next, Nick gets his fly rod ready, assembling the reel and line. It is a heavy rod, and Nick has had it for a long time. He fixes the leader and hook onto his rod, and then tests “the knot and the spring of the rod by pulling the line taut. It [is] a good feeling.”

Nick heads to the **river**, holding his fly rod, with the bottle full of crickets dangling from his neck on a strap. His landing net hangs from his belt, and a flour sack hangs from his shoulder. Nick feels “awkward and professionally happy.” When he steps into the water, it is “a rising cold shock.” The water is above his knees, and he can feel the powerful current.

Nick tries to get a grasshopper out of the bottle, but the first one escapes and is snapped up by a trout in the water. A second one also tries to escape, but Nick manages to catch him and thread the hook through its thorax and abdomen. The grasshopper takes “hold of the hook with his front feet, spitting tobacco juice on it.”

*Nick predicted that the grasshoppers would be impossible to catch once they warmed up, and he is proven right—he is indeed very knowledgeable in these matters. He knows he will be able to find more grasshoppers under the same log every day, which establishes that this environment is comfortingly predictable to him, and he is already establishing routines. Nick also comes across as a kind person when he makes sure the grasshoppers in the bottle can breathe. He is using them as bait, so it doesn't really matter to him if they are living or dead, but he takes the trouble to ensure they aren't suffering as long as they are alive.*



*The reader is reminded that Nick is very meticulous and takes pleasure in completing small tasks. His attention to detail suggests that it is important to him to ensure that order is maintained around him. He is thorough with every task at hand, whether he is making a breakfast he isn't even keen on eating or getting his fly-fishing rod ready for the adventure he has been looking forward to all along. Given that Nick's life in the military would certainly have been stressful and regimented beyond his control, these self-implemented routines likely comfort Nick and give him a sense of agency and stability.*



*Nick thinks he is completely prepared for fishing trout, with all his gear at hand. But when he enters the river, the cold water is a “shock,” suggesting that there are elements of nature—and perhaps of life in general—that will surprise even someone like Nick, who is obsessive in his planning. Regardless of one's expectations and preparations, some things, Hemingway implies, will always be an unexpected “shock.”*



*The description of the grasshopper dying on the fishhook is intentionally graphic, as Nick is likely hyper-aware of pain and death given his experiences in World War I. Nick pays close attention to the grasshopper's suffering, and thinks of the insect as a “him,” not an “it.” Nick not only has a deep knowledge of the natural world and these creatures, but also seems to respect and care for them.*



Nick drops the hook into the water and releases the line until it goes out of sight. He feels a tug and reels it in, but the trout he has caught is a small one. Nick dips his hand into the water to wet it before touching the trout to release it back into the water. The trout is stationary after reentering the water, and Nick touches it gently. The fish swims quickly away. "He's all right," Nick thinks. "He was only tired."

The reason Nick wet his hand before touching the fish is because he knows that if trout are touched with a dry hand, the delicate mucus that covers their scales will get disturbed, and this will lead to them getting a fungus attack. When he fished years before in rivers crowded with other fishermen, he had seen lots of dead trout covered in furry white fungus float up to the surface. Nick does not like to fish with others. Unless they are part of your group, "they spoiled it."

Nick wades across the shallow stream to the deeper side, crossing over the logs that have dammed up the water. He knows he will find only smaller trout in the shallows, which he does not want. The deeper water is "smooth and dark," and reaches his thighs "sharply and coldly." On his left is the meadow, and on his right is the **swamp**.

Nick puts another grasshopper on the hook, spits on him "for good luck," and releases the line into the "fast, dark water." Nick feels "a long tug" and then "a heavy, dangerous, steady pull." The line rushes out, and he "[can]not check it." He sees a huge trout leap out of the water by the logs. He lowers the rod to try to lessen the strain on the line, but it doesn't work and the leader breaks. "His mouth dry, his heart down," Nick reels in the slack line with shaky hands. He has never seen such a big trout before, and the "thrill" is "too much." He feels a little sick and wants to sit down.

The leader has broken where the hook was tied to it, so Nick knows the hook is stuck in the trout's jaw. He thinks of "the trout somewhere on the bottom, holding himself steady over the gravel, far down below the light, under the logs, with the hook in his jaw." He thinks the trout would be angry: "Anything that size would be angry."

*Again, Nick is courteous to the creatures around him, whether they are insects or trout. He makes sure to wet his hand before he touches the small trout because he does not want to get it sick by touching it with a dry hand. Nick wants to check on it to make sure it is fine after he puts it back in the river and is relieved to find that it is, suggesting that his experiences as a soldier have made him more conscious of the suffering of other beings than the average civilian.*



*While Nick has a deep knowledge of and reverence for the natural world, he recognizes that many other people don't and prefers to avoid them. These details set Nick apart from other people, suggesting that he is kinder and more sensitive than most, which might be why he seems to be experiencing intense emotional suffering after the war.*



*Nick seems most comfortable in the shallow waters of the river, but he wants to catch bigger trout which favor the deeper water. As he wades deeper into the river, he grows increasingly aware of the presence of the swamp.*



*The big trout that Nick catches and loses demonstrates that nature, like the world at large, is not always as obedient and predictable as he would like it to be. The pull this fish exerts on the line is described as being "dangerous," suggesting that this fish will be unmanageable despite Nick's careful preparations—clearly, Nick cannot always be in control, and this disconcerts him. His disappointment at losing the fish further unnerves him, making him physically ill and weak. This seems like an overreaction, but given the emotional trauma Nick has likely been through, it's understandable that even a minor unexpected event could cause him distress.*



*When Nick thinks of the fish, he vividly imagines it under the water. He seems to feel guilty about the hook in its jaw, and nervous that it might be angry. The big trout seems powerful in these descriptions—definitely more powerful than Nick, who is feeling sick and cannot even stand. Thus, when Nick fails to exert his control over nature, he feels frustratingly powerless and this intimidates him.*



Nick climbs out of the water, into the meadow, and sits on the logs. He does not want to “rush his sensations any.” He lights a cigarette and tosses the match into the water, where a tiny trout tries to get it. Nick laughs. He smokes his cigarette with the sun warm on his back and looks at the **river**, “shallow ahead entering the woods, curving into the woods, shallows, light glittering [...]; slowly the feeling of disappointment left him.” He feels “all right now,” and ties a new hook onto the rod.

Nick enters the water by the logs, where it is not too deep. The **river** cuts into the shore by an uprooted elm, and he casts his line there, between the weeds that grow in the current. He hooks a trout soon after and reels him in. The trout is a good size, and Nick slips it into the sack that hangs from his back. He fills the sack with water and keeps the end of it inside the stream, with the trout alive at the bottom.

Nick now has “one good trout” and doesn’t care about catching many more. The stream is shallow and wide, with trees on both banks. Nick knows there will be trout in the shadows cast by the trees on the water. The biggest ones will be closest to the bank. Nick walks along the stream, looking for deep pools close to the shore and finds one by a beech tree. He worries that his line will get caught in the branches of the tree but decides to try it anyway. He immediately hooks a big trout but struggles to reel it in against the current. He manages to get it into the net and puts it into the sack with the other trout.

Nick wades over to sit on a hollow log, making sure to hang the sack in the stream so the two trout are in the water. He eats his sandwiches and drinks some water. Then he lights a cigarette and sits smoking and looking out at the **river**. “Ahead, the river narrow[s] and [goes] into a **swamp**,” which looks “solid with cedar trees, their trunks close together. [...] It would not be possible to walk through a swamp like that.”

*This episode further reveals the extent of Nick’s emotional trauma—a small setback is enough to trigger a massive reaction in him. He needs to leave the scene of the episode to try and calm down and give himself time to process his emotions. He observes unthreatening, benevolent nature—the light on the shallow water, a tiny trout—which comforts him.*



*Nick manages to catch a big trout. He makes sure that the fish he catches is comfortable, filling the sack with water and ensuring that it stays underwater so the trout can breathe. Nick’s erratic emotions do not distract him from his basic kindness.*



*Nick’s deep knowledge of fishing and the river are the highlight of this passage. He is successful in catching the second trout because he is so well-versed in their habits. Despite Nick’s trepidations, he doesn’t feel completely out of his element in the shallow waters of this stream, so he decides to give it a try anyway and succeeds in catching his second big trout. Although he is undoubtedly sensitive and dependent upon certainty and control, it’s clear that Nick is also able to be courageous and push past his discomfort when he wants to.*



*Just as before, Nick makes sure the two trout he caught are comfortable in the water before he eats his lunch. Afterward, he looks at the river, which then flows into the swamp. The swamp seems impenetrable to him, hinting at the anxiety that it will come to induce in him.*



Nick wishes he had brought something to read. He does not want to go into the **swamp**. He would not like to wade in the water “deepening up under his armpits; [...] in the fast deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing [is] a tragic adventure. Nick [does] not want it.”

*While looking at the swamp, Nick wishes for a book—perhaps to escape thinking about this mysterious area. While Nick hasn't yet entered the swamp, he is imagining what it might feel like to go in there. The descriptions are sensory and physically uncomfortable: feeling the water “deepening up under his armpits” and seeing the “half light.” He uses a rather melodramatic word, “tragic,” to describe the fishing in the swamp. Perhaps the real tragedy he fears is that he will lose the control that is so important to him—this probably reminds him of his time at war when he had no control over his life or actions. In this sense, the swamp symbolizes the repressed traumas and emotions that Nick is too afraid to face in himself, for fear of losing his tenuous sense of stability. Nick fears that the water in the swamp is too deep, its trees are too close together, and it is too dark—it seems like a claustrophobic nightmare. Similarly, his own painful experiences seem too dark and deep in his mind to confront. Fishing in the swamp will be a test of his mental stability, and Nick is not convinced that he is up to the challenge.*



Nick pulls out one of the trout from the sack and whacks it against a log to kill it. He does the same with the second. They are “fine trout.” He cleans them, “slitting them from the vent to the tip of the jaw.” Both the fish are males. Their insides are “clean and compact,” and Nick tosses them ashore for the minks to find.

*Nick kills the two trout he caught in the most humane way recommended by seasoned fishermen. His knowledge of fish and fishing comes through in the easy manner in which he cleans them, and his competence and ease here is a stark contrast to the trepidation he feels about the swamp.*



Nick washes the trout in the stream. They still have their color, and when he holds them under the water, they look like live fish. He rolls them up in the sack and puts them in the landing net. While heading back to camp, Nick looks back and notices that he can just about see the **river** through the trees. He thinks there are “plenty of days coming when he [can] fish the **swamp**.”

*When Nick washes the trout in the stream, they look like they are alive—a trick of perception, of course, since they are in fact dead. As Nick heads back to camp, he turns for one last look at the river. His final thought in the story is an optimistic one, with Nick thinking that he has a lot of days to fish in the swamp. Though the thought of entering the swamp that day filled him with deep anxiety, he seems to think that in a few days, he will be ready for the challenge. Given that the swamp symbolizes Nick's unresolved traumas, his optimism about fishing there implies that although he is too afraid to face his emotions now, he knows that one day he will be ready to do so.*





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