



The Nick Adams Stories

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The Work

Between 1925 and 1933, Ernest Hemingway published sixteen stories about a character he called Nick Adams. Appearing in various collections and arranged in no particular time sequence, the narratives appeared disconnected and incomplete. In 1972, after Hemingway's death, the stories were collected, arranged in the chronological order of Adams' life, and augmented with eight unpublished fragments found after Hemingway's death. From this reorganization emerged a coherent picture of Nick's life from his boyhood in upper Michigan through his adult experiences. Nick Adams' life runs parallel to Hemingway's life.

Nick's formative years bring him face-to-face with meaningless suffering, violence, death, and what Hemingway depicts as the futility of human existence. For example, in "Indian Camp," the boy accompanies his father, a doctor, to deliver an Indian woman's baby. His father uses a jackknife to perform a Cesarean section without anesthetic. The baby is delivered successfully, but the woman's husband is so ravaged by his wife's suffering that he commits suicide.

Later, as an adolescent runaway riding the rails, Nick meets a brain-damaged former prizefighter in "The Battler." The fighter, Ad Francis, is prone to violent outbursts and is kept in check by his companion, Bugs, who subdues him with a blackjack. In "The Killers," Nick is working in a small-town diner when gangsters from Chicago come to murder a local man. The man is resigned to his fate and neither fights nor flees when Nick warns him of danger.

Years later, Nick fights in Italy as a soldier in World War I and is wounded. In "Now I Lay Me" he resists sleep, convinced that if he ever closes his eyes, his soul will leave his body. In "Big Two-Hearted River," Nick returns from the war physically healed but wounded in soul; he searches for solace and deliverance in the rituals of camping and fishing.

Nick Adams is a prototypic Hemingway hero: concerned, reflective, an outwardly impassive soldier and sportsman ravaged in mind and spirit by terrors against which he can mount no defense. He must face evil, futility, and the nothingness of existence alone and unaided. Defeat is inevitable and unavoidable; only defeat with dignity offers hope of redemption. From the character of Nick Adams arise the protagonists of Hemingway's most famous novels. Nick is similar to Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), and Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929).

Suggested Readings

Benson, Jackson J., ed. *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1991.

Gurko, Leo. *Ernest Hemingway and the Pursuit of Heroism*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1968.

Young, Philip. *Ernest Hemingway*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1952.

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