Wings of Fire: **Volume 4 (2026), No. 1**

The Tragedy in "Big Two-Hearted River": Lost to the Subconscious

SAM FEDER
Muhlenberg College

Critics argue about the unstated meanings of Ernest Hemingway's "Big Two-Hearted River" and how to interpret the ending: will protagonist Nick Adams ever fish the swamp?

Feder, Sam. 2026. "The Tragedy in 'Big Two-Hearted River': Lost to the Subconscious." *Wings of Fire*. Volume 4, No. 1.

Throughout his career, Ernest Hemingway worked on his writing technique, which gets shorthanded as "the iceberg theory" or "the theory of omission," from Hemingway's own assertion that, as with an iceberg, most of what a good writer says should be unsaid and unseen beneath the surface. Hemingway's minimalistic style has led many readers to speculate on what his stories are *really* about and what themes Hemingway has left unsaid. Specifically, in his two-part short story, "Big Two-Hearted River," scholars have long theorized what a simple fishing narrative could mean behind the face-value plot. Critics largely agree on the general meanings of the symbolism used throughout the story: the burned town of Seney, river and swamp, fishing and trout. These symbols show one thing for certain: Nick Adams is experiencing an inner turmoil that he is trying to escape. But what does this all mean, and how should this final line be read: "*There were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp"* (Hemingway 199)? Many scholars have speculated upon the narrative's purpose: is it an escape from urban and societal pressures (post-war or not), a spiritual journey, or even Hemingway's take on what it feels like to be a writer? The implications of these readings are crucial to understanding Nick's character development and the narrative's conclusion. Ultimately, the outcome is more tragic than it appears; by deciding not to fish in the swamp, Nick understands that he is not yet ready to face his subconscious; rather, he continues to believe "there were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp", but this day will never come.

Before fully addressing whether or not "Big Two-Hearted River" is a form of avoidance or a way to maintain stability in a healing journey, the various symbols throughout the piece and the roles they play must be taken into account. Across multiple articles, critics emphasize the following group of symbols: Seney, river, swamp, the act of fishing, and trout. There is significant value in understanding the main interpretations of "Big Two-Hearted River" as a whole to better understand the trajectory of the ending. A few critics take these observations even further and focus very closely on the implications of these symbols. For instance, the discussion of boy and food culture and its influence on Nick provides insight into how much he has (or has not) grown in society's eyes and plays a substantial part in characterizing him. Additionally, the ritualistic tendencies of Nick during his camping, cooking, and fishing expedition tell the reader more about his emotional and intellectual state throughout the narrative. Finally, the deleted ending of "Big Two-Hearted River" provides further context and

perception of Nick's psychological state by the end. By considering these viewpoints, the way the ending should be read becomes clearer.

To begin, the first widely explored symbol is the town of Seney, Michigan. When Nick arrives, he finds the town completely burned down and desolate. All the buildings that once stood "had left no trace… even the surface had been burned off the ground" (Hemingway 177). This is the first impression that Nick receives when he returns. The incinerated "town of Seney suggests destruction and possibly death… [and] by extension, the town is a symbol of Nick's own state of mind–an objective projection of his damaged psyche" (Green 307-308). Whether the burned town is read as a representation of Nick's damaged mind, an allusion to the war, or something entirely different, it is generally agreed that the presence of destruction is potent. The two main symbols in "Big Two-Hearted River" are the river itself and the swamp further downstream. Some critics read the river as "a symbolic river of memory, which Nick 'fishes', and the swamp as emblematic of the lower depths of Nick's unconscious mind, which he is not ready to fish" (Adair 144). Many view the river and Nick's traversing of it as a symbolic representation of him going back into his memories, but *what* specific memories are still debated upon. Finally, there's the symbolism of fishing and trout. Many see the fishing as "represent[ing] Nick's inward confrontation of his destructive knowledge and fear" (Green 308). The struggle when Nick hooks a trout symbolizes the internal battle within himself. Thus, "Nick's battle for control of the fish symbolizes his struggle for control of his thoughts and emotions" (Green 311). With all of this in consideration, the consensus seems to be that Nick is using this camping and fishing trip as a way to escape something. But that "something" is left unsaid by Hemingway and is left up to interpretation, which many have taken upon themselves to unearth. Still, as Ryder Lamb has argued, "the Modernist uncertainty with language and struggle with an ambiguous reality is expressed through a feeling created by [Nick's] relationship with the physical world" (Ryder Lamb 11). So, while the importance of these symbols is recognized, how Nick has grown, if at all, from this experience is still unknown; there are still parts of the iceberg that are underwater, especially regarding the ending.

One particular critic has focused very specifically on the symbol of food. Eijun Senaha has noted the peculiarity in Nick's consumption of canned and processed food and how it relates to masculinity in the 1920s. Senaha explains that, "through camping and outdoor cooking, boys could prove their manhood… thereby approximating the 'ideal man'" (Senaha 49). "Big Two-Hearted River," when analyzed with this particular concentration, gives more insight into Nick and why he might be on this trip. It should be noted that "for boys, outdoor activity became essential to proving their manhood" (Senaha 56). However, even though Nick is participating in such things, he still relies solely on processed foods. He doesn't eat any of the trout he caught and instead turns to a can of pork and beans, canned spaghetti, tomato catchup, sliced bread, coffee, a ham sandwich, canned apricots, sugar, buckwheat flour, apple butter, condensed milk, and other sandwiches. The act of catching and cooking food is a way to prove masculinity, but Nick doesn't do that. Instead, "he liked to open cans," emphasizing his lack of maturity and drive towards surviving off the land (Hemingway 186). Senaha describes food as a means for boys to navigate a path towards idealized manhood, but "although Nick seems to be enacting the boy myth, in reality he is one of the many boys in America who are weak and lack proper coping strategies" (Senaha, 62). Nick is just *playing* the part. Although food in cans represents "nonperishable food for the military," Nick does not portray himself as militant (Senaha 60). He's childish and relies on the food he has already packed beforehand. The rise of modern food culture in the 1920s has greatly influenced how boys were prepared to enter manhood. Instead of roughing it, "preserved and/or processed foods… provided boys like Nick Adams with a fragile, ready-made manhood" (Senaha 62). This aspect of Nick's character and his dependence on modern food technology, argues Senaha, destroys the romanticism of the myth of masculinity. In this reading, Nick is clearly falling short when it comes to being a man. He would not be able to fish in the swamp and, because of these circumstances, will never. Instead, he plays pretend in the role of a man while, in actuality, he continues to avoid his unsavory memories behind a facade of manhood.

From a ritualistic perspective, Nick's way of meticulously preparing meals, whether canned or not, shows his ability to practice mindfulness as ritual. Instead of viewing Nick as an immature boy unable to access his underlying feelings, in ritual, Nick can experience a hopeful surrender to something greater than himself. In "Big Two-Hearted River," Nick prepares his first meal at his camp in a tedious way:

> He started a fire with some chunks of pine he got with the ax from a stump. Over the fire he stuck a wire grill, pushing the four legs down into the ground with his boot. Nick put the frying pan on the grill over the flames. He was hungrier. The beans and spaghetti warmed. Nick stirred them and mixed them together. (Hemingway 184)

This matter-of-fact description is shown throughout Hemingway's writing. The same conscientious style is shown while Nick is walking with his bag, while he cooks and eats, and while he fishes. Many scholars recognize this style as a way "[Hemingway] analyzes each act into its separate components or gestures and articulates these components chronologically in a series of syntactic units which together 'imitate' the total action" (Green 309). This mirrors ritual. One moment that firmly illustrates the ceremonial elements of Nick's actions is when he makes coffee. Described in the same way as when Nick prepares his food, "making… coffee according to his lost friend Hopkins is a nostalgic as well as memorial process that suggests an initiation story" (Senaha 60). During this, Nick's actions and thoughts intertwine. In the narrative, "[Nick] 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' way" (Hemingway 185). The act of brewing coffee is intertwined with remembering his lost friend, Hopkins. In all of Nick's ritualistic tendencies, "the action unfolds in the pattern of ritual: what is said and done has meaning only in terms of the way it is said and done" (Stein 556). After making coffee and its revival of memories of Hopkins, Nick goes back and forth between recalling moments and characteristics about Hopkins and continuing his cooking and camp-like duties. Right before the narrative splits into Part II, Nick realizes that, "his mind was starting to work. He knew he could choke it because he was tired enough" (Hemingway 187). Part I ends with Nick falling asleep–a deliberate way to evade his unwanted thoughts. It is clear here, and throughout the story, "Nick does not want to think. To keep from thinking, he does things–slowly, deliberately, and with care…" (Green 310). So, ritual, in a way, acts as a tool for remembrance, but also as a way to keep his mind busy with menial tasks rather than brood upon the past. He is unable to go back and change things, but he can give up control to something grander than himself instead of letting himself agonize over things he cannot control. He surrenders himself to spirituality in nature: "the hero's assimilation of the experience is crucial… this occult power cannot be possessed, only used to direct… Nick is under obligation to build his faith on a similar foundation of spiritual security, a belief in the immanence of divine power" (Stein 560). While Nick is fishing and grappling with the idea of fishing in the swamp, he decides against it. This decision is not a failure, but more an admission of what Stein describes as

> the inevitability of defeat, frustration, and death. But at the same time, he senses that this knowledge of mortal destiny is in itself the basis of human dignity… Nick can now return to civilization–to life… he recognizes that the chaos and violence of external human behavior are expressions of primitive desires which man, throughout time, has used ritual to order and to understand. (Stein 561)

It is not as if Nick is unable to muse upon the past because he does just that, but he is also able to steady himself, as the trout do in a wavering stream, in his own mind and hand over control to some kind of higher being through ritual.

Finally, one critic, Robert Lamb, recontextualizes the majority of the generic symbols most common throughout analyses of the story into the topic of writing. He notes how scholars have to look

outwards of the text to cultivate their understanding: "'Big Two-Hearted River' may indeed be magnificent fiction, but it is nevertheless textually indecipherable. Thus critics have been forced to go outside the text, and the meaning… depends upon what extratextual evidence they employ" (Robert Lamb 164). However, a part of the narrative that Lamb brings into the conversation is the ending that Hemingway threw away. In Lamb's interpretation, this ending gives more context for Nick's mental state. In the deleted ending, instead of the second trout and the obsession with the swamp, Nick takes "an abrupt turn into a rambling, free-associative meditation on the lost friendships and activities of youth, his new life as a married expatriate, and the nature of writing and his vocation as a writer" (Robert Lamb 166). Nick is a *writer*. This detail, intentionally eradicated by Hemingway in the final draft, gives a whole new possible world of meaning to the symbols he describes. Lamb recontextualizes all of Nick's actions and relates them to how it feels to be a writer. For instance, "the exhilaration that Nick feels in setting up camp is the joy a writer feels in sitting down to write, on his own, attentive to nothing but the appointed task, free from all social obligation and conflicting demands on time and consciousness, responsible only to himself and his art" (Robert Lamb 171). The entire trip Nick is on, with the added knowledge of the deleted ending, mirrors the journey of writing. In this particular reading, the trout symbolizes Nick's memories: the thing that used to fuel his writing. In fishing, he must "save [memories] from the swift, effacing current of time and fading memory, to catch these trout of his past… before they swim too far downstream to be hooked and reeled into the present" (Robert Lamb 169). Fishing, then, is the act of writing, grabbing ideas, throwing back the ones that don't work, and keeping the ones that do. In deleting the ending, which consists of Nick's ramblings of his own consciousness, it would show what would happen if Nick *did* fish in the swamp when he, perhaps, isn't emotionally ready to. Instead of plunging right into the swamp, "you can avoid the sun's glare by fishing upstream, figuratively avoiding the difficulties of the task by turning away from the material of the past and memory, but this is unsatisfactory. And so you fish in the dark, blinded by the sun's glare, and make do as best you can" (Robert Lamb 178). So, the decision not to fish in the swamp is not a failure and not a surrender to a higher being, but an active decision to aid in Nick's growth. He is not able to fish in the swamp, to face those memories, *yet*, but he will get there one day.

In all of these readings, Nick is clearly trying to remedy something psychological, but how to approach this ambiguous ending is clearly debated. With the added information provided about the deleted ending, Robert Lamb argues that it provides more context for reading the "actual" ending. However, something that should be emphasized is that Lamb's "actual" ending was *deleted*. So, while it provides some background and historical knowledge of Hemingway's thought process while writing, it doesn't necessarily reveal anything when talking about the actual ending. The ending to Part II of "Big Two-Hearted River" that Hemingway went with is the one that should be focused on, not the ending that could have been. Instead, the ending of Part I should be analyzed alongside the ending of Part II. By looking closer at how Part I ends and the symbolism in the theory of omission, we can explain the ending of Part II and the story as a whole. After all, "two" is in the title and the short story is broken up into two parts–how each part ends must be discussed in tandem. In the previous interpretations, Nick does not mature and face his feelings, accepts guidance from a higher power, or understands that he is not yet skilled enough to face the thoughts that are represented by the swamp. While these readings of the text have value, the text also supports an alternative point of view: at the end of "Big Two-Hearted River," Nick claims, "*there were plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp"* (Hemingway 199). By saying this, Nick seems to understand that he is not fully ready to face certain thoughts (the swamp), but, in fact, he will never truly be ready at all. By combining these theories and symbols while also looking at the ending of Part I versus Part II, Nick proves that while he may claim that he will be ready to fish in the swamp one day, that day will never come.

Part I of "Big Two-Hearted River" concludes with Nick going to sleep to silence his unwanted thoughts of his late friend, Hopkins. The last few sentences of Part I appear right after Nick lights a mosquito on fire. It says, "The match went out. Nick lay down again under the blankets. He turned on his side and shut his eyes. He was sleepy. He felt sleep coming. He curled up under the blanket and

went to sleep" (Hemingway 187). Nick is still clearly avoiding some kind of inner turmoil and tries to remedy it by going to sleep. However, his ritualistic thoughts, interpreted as such earlier by Stein, look glaringly obsessive rather than spiritual. He turns in the blanket on his side, then curls up, and mentions his intention of sleeping three times. He does not appear entirely comfortable, despite the cozy blanket, and is far away from building "his faith… on spiritual security" as this part comes to an end (Stein 560). Additionally, the fact that Nick *sleeps* reveals a lot, again, in Hemingway's theory of omission. When people sleep, they dream, even if they don't remember it in the morning. It is widely understood that dreams are connected to the subconscious, in other words, the deepest part of the personal iceberg. This sleep, an unknown and forgotten dream, symbolizes the very swamp Nick is unable to brave. Still, Part II continues the narrative. The story does not end with Nick going to sleep. Part II opens with, "In the morning the sun was up, and the tent was starting to get hot. Nick crawled out under the mosquito netting stretched across the mouth of the tent to look at the morning… there was the meadow, the river, and the swamp" (Hemingway 187). When Nick wakes up the next day, everything is the same as when he went to sleep. He has done exactly what he had intended: use sleep to escape his thoughts and lock them into his subconscious. So, the ending of Part II is the more evolved form of the ending of Part I, but still has the same outcome. Nick grows just a little bit more, enough to say that he will fish the swamp another day, but not stay true to his word.

It is clear that Nick will not actually do as he says and fish the swamp another day when Senaha's analysis of food and boyhood/manhood is taken into account. He is not mature enough to be considered a man, and his expected boyhood experience and growth are tainted by the processed food industry. Before Nick even fishes in the river, it's said that "Nick felt awkward and professionally happy with all his equipment hanging from him" (Hemingway 190). All of his camping and fishing equipment felt "awkward" as if he is not meant to be carrying these things. He does not belong in this kind of environment or situation. He eats canned food and canned apricots that "were better than fresh apricots," he uses mosquito nets, and he snuggles up in a blanket (Hemingway 186). He is not living off the land or surviving only on nature, but merely role-playing as a man. With that in mind, the narrative never shows Nick cooking or eating any of the trout he catches. Instead, he only "laid the trout on the sack spread out on the log, rolled them up in it, tied the bundle and put it in the landing net" (Hemingway 199). Here, Nick is still just playing the part of a "man." He cleaned the fish and tied them up in a bundle. This is exactly what happens by the end of Part I, but in the form of sleeping. When Nick decides to go to sleep, he is essentially tying up the thoughts he wants to avoid, and by waking up the next day completely unaware of a dream, he is still locking away unwanted thoughts into a "landing net," and throwing them over his shoulder so he doesn't have to face them. He can claim he caught the trout, but he is unable to truly confront them once he has them.

Even after Nick is satisfied with his two trout, he rests before filleting them. He eats his onion sandwiches, smokes a cigarette, and looks out at the river and the swamp. During this moment, with his catch secured, one can argue that he has successfully performed the ritual of manhood as well as conquered some part of his subconscious. As Nick sits, looking towards the swamp, "he wished he had brought something to read. He felt like reading. He did not feel like going into the swamp" (Hemingway 198). Even now, in his triumph, he is still trying to escape into distraction. Instead of reveling in the healing properties of nature, Nick wishes for a distraction *from* his distraction of nature. Lamb Ryder explains this seamlessly:

> For Nick, reading implies a mental escape. Though it seems this trip, too, is an escape for Nick, where he felt he could leave behind… a reality. Nick's desire to remove himself from the dark, 'tragic' feeling of the swamp, from the physical world, with an escape into language seems to symbolize an escape from the truth… It is only an escape, a deterrent from the indescribable feelings that exist in life. (Lamb Ryder 12)

Still, Nick is running from something within himself, digging himself deeper into recognized avoidance, which makes it even more difficult to, one day, fish in the swamp. Dry, shaded, eating, and with a couple of successful catches, Nick is still expressing his discomfort with just *thinking* about fishing in the swamp. Staring at the dark waters, "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" (Hemingway 198). The use of the word "impossible" is crucial to understanding this interpretation. Nick often makes these explicit statements about fishing in the swamp, that it's "impossible," "would not be possible," "he did not feel like," "Nick did not want to," and "did not want it" (Hemingway 198). These statements show Nick's certainty in his aversion to traversing the swamp and how he will never take on that task. He claims that, "in the half light, the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it. He did not want to go down the stream any farther today" (Hemingway 198). This is how Nick consistently lies to himself about his future confrontation with the swamp. He constantly makes undeniable declarations about his revulsion to fishing the swamp, but then quickly adds on a few words to imply that he will eventually. The previous quote continues: "Nick did not want it. He did not want to go down the stream any farther today" (Hemingway 198). In just one word, "today," Nick completely devalues his previous statements. By haphazardly adding words such as "now" and "today" after explicitly and consistently saying he does not want to, it is clear that the distinction Nick makes is irrelevant. It doesn't matter if he does not go into the swamp "now" or "today" because his real intent is to never venture out there. To try and distract himself *again*, Nick decides to fillet his two trout, another way in which he evades any unwanted leaks from his subconscious into his consciousness.

With his catches in the landing net, Nick goes back to his camp. One symbol that was not examined in detail earlier was that of Nick's pack. He carries this heavy burden with him all the way to his camping spot. Once he is settled, Nick "hung the pack up on the nail. All his supplies were in the pack. They were off the ground and sheltered now" (Hemingway 184). Again, this moment can be brought back into conversation with the endings of Part I and Part II. The pack represents a heavy burden Nick carries, and then, suddenly, he is rid of its weight. In fact, he hangs it up, and it's "off the ground," off his back, and "sheltered". Just like how Nick believes he is sheltering his thoughts and protecting himself, he is actually just hanging everything up and forgetting about it. In the context of the ending of the whole narrative, Nick is, once again, carrying a "pack" in the form of these trout and bringing them back to camp. One can speculate that he is returning and going to cook the trout, but "he liked to open cans," so who is to say he won't just heat another can of pork and beans or spaghetti because it's what he knows (Hemingway 186)? Nick is comfortable here, and he finds comfort in the thought that there are "plenty of days coming when he could fish the swamp," but he will continue to say this until there aren't any more opportunities. Senaha explains how "Nick is in the process of recovery or rebirth… Nick is wrapped in a blanket… Nick leav[es] the tent (womb)... but the newly born Nick… does not yet possess the strength to survive alone" (Senaha 53). In other words, every day Nick restarts his growth. He sleeps, is born again, and forgets any progress he might have made in navigating his psyche the previous day.

With "Big Two-Hearted River" being split into two parts, it gives the reader autonomy in the act of reading itself. It is very easy to understand a world where, after the end of Part II, Nick goes back to his camp just as he arrived the first time. He cooks his canned meals and then goes to sleep, just like in the ending of Part I. Then Part II starts up again, and Nick wakes up, and the cycle continues. Whatever is haunting Nick's thoughts will never fully be faced by him. The three perspectives posed by various scholars have provided substantial evidence and context for this understanding of the conclusion of the narrative. Nick is too immature, and the societal ideal of "manhood" has been shattered in Nick's indulgence and dependence on processed foods, mosquito nets, and blankets. Nick does express ritualistic, even mindful, behavior, but this is overruled by his obsessiveness and avoidance. Finally, Nick does understand he is not yet ready to face certain things in the swamp, but instead of building himself up for that moment, he will never actually fish the swamp. This is especially

clear through his claims which argue strictly against fishing in the swamp and then clumsily adding that he means just *that day* he will not. Even though he spends copious amounts of time explaining why he won't fish the swamp, he still artificially announces his intent to go one day when his mind is already made up. Nick can say he will one day travel into the swamp, but for now and forever, he will return to his camp, eat, sleep, and start all over again in the morning.

References

Adair, William. 1977. "Landscapes of the Mind: 'Big Two-Hearted River.'" *College Literature* 4 (2):144-151.

Green, James L. 1968. "Symbolic Sentences in 'Big Two-Hearted River.'" *Modern Fiction Studies* 14 (3): 307-312.

Hemingway, Ernest. "Big Two-Hearted River: Part I & II." In *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. Charles Scribner's Sons. 210–232.

Lamb, Robert Paul. 1991. "Fishing for Stories: What 'Big Two-Hearted River' Is Really About." *MFS Modern Fiction Studies* 37 (2): 161–81.

Lamb, Ryder. 2009. "Feeling Transcends Language in Hemingway's 'Big Two-Hearted River.'" *Prologue: A First-Year Writing Journal* 1 (1): 11-13. .

Senaha, Eijun. 2010. "Ready-Made Boys: A Collision of Food and Gender in Ernest Hemingway's 'Big Two-Hearted River.'" *The Japanese Journal of American Studies*. 49-66.

Stein, William Bysshe. 1960. "Ritual in Hemingway's 'Big Two-Hearted River.'" *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 1 (4): 555-561.