

Hero without a Code: Hemingway's Nick Adams

Ernest Hemingway created a series of protagonists who became known as “code heroes”: rugged individualists who, in Hemingway’s words, show “grace under pressure” (qtd. in Young 63). They adhere to a stoic code of behavior that, according to Hemingway scholar Philip Young, is informed by their self-knowledge, courage, and honor (63). Nick Adams, the central figure in Hemingway’s closely autobiographical *The Nick Adams Stories*, is “often discussed as the quintessential Hemingway hero” (Schafer). Many readers consider Nick to be the archetypal code hero, whose adherence to a code of behavior distinguishes him from people whose random impulses often lead them to act cowardly (Young 63). A close reading of three key stories reveals that Nick is no larger-than-life code hero, however. He is a different type of protagonist altogether: the Everyman, who is often frightened and bewildered by his human frailties. Nick’s “struggle in the midst of massive fears and uncertainties” (Gajdusek 37) is most evident in his relationships with women. In “The End of Something,” “The Three-Day Blow,” and “Summer People”—stories that explore Nick’s romantic troubles—Nick lacks the characteristic self-understanding, courage, and honor of the code hero. In Nick Adams, Hemingway has created not a superhuman code hero, but a protagonist with whom most readers can identify.

“The End of Something,” one of the only stories in which Hemingway depicts Nick alone with a female companion for an extended scene (Flora 55), provides a convincing portrayal of Nick as the Everyman. As the story opens, Nick and his girlfriend row to a beach on Horton’s Bay, a once-bustling mill town that is now deserted.

Hemingway's description of the town's demise heralds catastrophe for the couple's relationship. While the two fish, Marjorie asks Nick what has been bothering him. Revealing his lack of self-understanding, Nick replies, "I don't know. [. . .] It isn't fun any more. [. . .] I don't know, Marge. I don't know what to say" (Hemingway 204). In a similar exchange with his friend Bill in "The Three-Day Blow," Nick again reveals that he is bewildered by his feelings for Marjorie. While Bill attempts to convince Nick that he did the right thing "to bust off that Marge business" (Hemingway 213), Nick remains confused, barely able to respond to his friend. He tries to explain to Bill why he ended the relationship but admits that he doesn't understand his motivation. "All of a sudden everything was over," he tells Bill. "I don't know why it was. I couldn't help it" (Hemingway 214). Nick's repetition of the phrase "I don't know" in both stories suggests that he lacks the self-awareness of a code hero.

Nick seems frustrated that Marjorie does not share his befuddlement. His frustration surfaces in "The End of Something" when he notes that the moon is rising and Marjorie innocently replies, "I know it." Her simple statement triggers Nick's anger. "You know everything," he tells her. "That's the trouble. You know you do. [. . .] What don't you know, anyway?" (Hemingway 204). Nick's outburst implies that he is irritated by Marjorie's confident self-awareness—a key characteristic of the code hero. In contrast to Marjorie, who seems to "know everything," Nick is struggling to understand his experiences. Lacking self-understanding, Nick is confused by his feelings for Marjorie.

The code hero understands his desires and motivations and therefore acts with confident determination and courage. In "The End of Something," though, Marjorie is

the only character who acts bravely, her strong behavior rendering her “unforgettable in this account of love among the ruins” (Flora 55). As Howard L. Hannum observes, Marjorie is the one who officially ends the relationship: “In his effort to break with Marge, Nick had been unable to go beyond sulking conversation, so that she took the initiative and immediately and decisively rejected him when he said that love wasn’t fun anymore (47).” Marjorie fearlessly confronts Nick about his feelings and remains stoic when faced with his jarring words. Nick, in contrast, is “afraid to look at Marjorie” and sits “with his head in his hands” (Hemingway 204). At the end of the story, Marjorie leaves him dejectedly lying facedown on the beach. Because Nick lacks the self-understanding that Marjorie possesses, he also lacks the courage of the code hero.

Several other stories further illustrate Nick’s cowardice. In “The Three-Day Blow,” which is a continuation of “The End of Something,” readers discover that his friend Bill may have swayed Nick’s decision to end his relationship with Marjorie, a decision that Nick now regrets. When Bill rails against marriage in a misogynistic diatribe, his complicity in jilting Marjorie becomes apparent. Bill not only wants to preserve male camaraderie but he also feels that Marjorie’s social status is too low for Nick, a doctor’s son. After seeing him defer to Bill in earlier conversations, readers can deduce that in ending his relationship with Marjorie, Nick has succumbed to Bill’s persuasion. Instead of acting with grace under pressure, Nick acts with cowardice.

Even in later stories, Nick is more mature but still lacks courage in his relationships. In “Summer People,” he has a brief sexual encounter with his friend Odgar’s girlfriend, Kate. Though Nick knows that Kate loves him instead of Odgar, he is afraid to advance his relationship with her—but not out of respect for Odgar. “Loving

was frightening” (Hemingway 218), he thinks. Nick’s fear of commitment is also apparent in the swimming scene when he thinks, “It was funny how much fun it was to swim underwater and how little fun there was in plain swimming” (Hemingway 221). As Hannum points out, the theme of submergence as a defense mechanism recurs throughout the Nick Adams stories: “Even on the threshold of adult life, [Nick] has not yet learned that submergence merely shelves problems, without solving them for him (47).” The repetition of this theme throughout the story suggests that Nick dislikes swimming on the surface because it requires more discipline and endurance than swimming underwater. Underwater, Nick might also feel that he can temporarily “escape society’s rules about sexual behavior” (Comley 70), which would require him to face his fear of commitment. Nick is “forever seeking a pristine boyhood paradise free from the responsibility of adult, heterosexual relationships” (Strychacz 67).

Not only does Nick lack the code hero’s self-awareness and courage, but he also lacks honor. When Hemingway reveals in “The Three-Day Blow” that Nick may have ignored his feelings for Marjorie and succumbed to Bill’s pressure to end the relationship, readers can interpret Nick’s treatment of Marjorie in “The End of Something” as dishonorable. And in “Summer People,” Nick betrays his best friend when he sleeps with Kate. He then leaves Kate sleeping alone outside and returns to his comfortable bed. Nick is aware that he has behaved dishonorably toward both Kate and Odgar, who “had been nicer to Nick than anybody ever had” (Hemingway 218), but he thinks, “there wasn’t anything you could do, not a thing” (Hemingway 228). As S.P. Jain points out, in his relationships, Nick does not adhere to a set of inviolable rules for instructions as the

code hero would (17). Instead, his human impulses often guide him toward dishonorable behavior.

Cleanth Brooks, Jr. and Robert Penn Warren argue that “the only way [for the code hero] to hold on to ‘honor,’ to individuality, to, even, the human order [. . .] is to live by his code” (qtd. in Schafer). Nick, however, is so bewildered and frightened by love that he is unable to form a code of honorable behavior to guide him in his relationships. To Nick, “relationships with women are too complicated. They lack the nice clean lines of his relationships with fishing or writing,” says Judith Wilt, Professor of English at Boston College. On Horton’s Bay with Marjorie, at the cabin with Bill, and in the woods with Kate, Nick struggles to understand his experiences. The befuddled, frightened, and occasionally dishonorable behavior of the Everyman elicits the empathy of many readers who have faced similar experiences in their relationships. By “subverting the ‘heroic qualities’” (Strychacz 67) typically associated with his protagonists, Hemingway provides readers with a keen reminder that “no code is fool-proof and comprehensive enough to serve as a ready-reckoner” (Jain 19) for the complications that often arise in romantic relationships.

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