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The Intensity of the Inevitable: The Motif of Tension in Ernest Hemingway's *In Our Time*

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Abstract

In Ernest Hemingway's short story cycle *In Our Time* (1925), the motif of tension, both physical and emotional, can be traced throughout the text. Such pressures manifest in the form of various people, places, and objects, and ultimately pushes characters like Nick Adams to a crossroads. *In Our Time* begins with Nick as a young boy confronted with the mysteries of death, but as the cycle continues, he confronts various figures who offer him pieces of lived experience. Characters like Bugs in "The Battler" and Marjorie in "The End of Something" show Nick what it looks like to live by a code and prepare him to navigate the trials to come. As life begins to weigh heavily upon Nick as depicted in "Cross Country Snow," he must decide whether he will allow the world to break him or if he will emerge from life's obstacles stronger and wiser from having suffered. The cycle concludes with Nick Adams having become "stronger at the broken places" as he demonstrates a posture of grace under pressure.

Keywords: Ernest Hemmingway, American Literature, Short-story cycle *In Our Time*, Modernism, "The Battler," "Cross-Country Snow," "The End of Something"

In Ernest Hemingway's short-story cycle *In Our Time* (1925), the theme of the text explores the growing pains characters face throughout the cycle. Whether the characters are ready or not, change comes and pushes them forward. Each story in the cycle deals with individuals struggling to reconcile with the unfolding of events in their lives or the traumas of their past. While these events, past, present, and future, may be troubling for the characters to confront, this short-story cycle shows what happens when a character decides to take courage and move toward progression after the world inevitably breaks them.¹ In a letter to F. Scott Fitzgerald, Hemingway famously defines courage as one showing "grace under pressure" (Baker 200). The cycle also expresses what happens when one stays in his brokenness and caves under pressure. Pressure and the intensity of progression are illustrated through the recurring image, thus a motif, of physical tension throughout the cycle, but particularly in "The End of Something" and "Cross Country Snow." In these stories, physical objects are used to create tension to mirror the conflict the characters face, thus setting up the individual and often their relationships for motion.

While it is not always immediate that one can point out the progression or decline in a character, it is clear when the physical description of a landscape is creating a hostile or progressive environment. In "The End of Something," the story begins with a description of an old and deserted lumbering town that depleted the supply of lumber. Because of the lack of resources, the town was deserted and, as Marjorie puts it, in "ruin" (32).² As a result, the laborers and equipment were removed from the town and placed somewhere new where logs could be found. Robert Paul Lamb suggests that this opening image Hemingway creates is a way of instantly grasping control of the tone that will play out through the story. Lamb says that Hemingway establishes "a controlling tone through a central opening image," which in this case is the old lumbering town in ruins (141). Lamb notes that Hemingway makes his readers feel a sense of loss, which Lamb refers to as "present absence." Hemingway presents "something that once was, engages the reader, and then snatches it away so that the reader can feel its absence" (142). Hemingway describes the town briefly, then quickly "snatches" it away before the conclusion of the story's first paragraph. Lamb argues that the image is supposed to suggest the tone; therefore, the tone would be the ruins, implying that everything will come to an end like the town. Since this story is about Nick and Marjorie, the tone for their relationship is inherently set up for ruin. Laura Gruber Godfrey comments that this "parallel of setting to human drama gives depth to the story, for the setting not only serves as a dramatic backdrop for the love conflict between Nick and Marjorie, but also—in its dismantled, 'ruined' state—parallels the drama itself" (52). Godfrey's idea that Nick and Marjorie will eventually fall apart can be extended to encompass the force that sets the downfall into motion. Tension is reflected in the opening paragraphs where the tone is set. Objects of tension can include the "sound[s] of the big saws in the mill," the boats "open hold covered with canvas and lashed tight," and the description of the bug machinery's mechanical movements (31). While this

¹ Like many Modernists who were disillusioned by the state of the world after World War I, Hemingway capitalized on brokenness and frequently used the road to recovery as a subject in his stories. He famously wrote in his novel *A Farewell to Arms*, that "the world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places" (216).

² Marjorie states, there's "our old ruin," which immediately assigns a sense of ownership to the location (32). She and Nick are seemingly accustomed to being amongst the ruin of the old town. Perhaps this suggests that she is used to their relationship being in such a critical condition.

story's tone sets up the relationship for ruin, the tension accompanying the central opening image sets Nick and Marjorie's fate into motion.

The opening lines of "The End of Something" immediately set a scene of progression and motion by presenting a pivotal situation where the people of the lumber industry had to choose to stay and lose profit or move to a new location: "[the boat] moved out of the bay toward the open lake" (31). By using the description of an open lake, an image of a new horizon with new opportunities is suggested. The sense of moving from one environment where the land is less fruitful carries into the plot of the story where the main protagonist, Nick, is at the point in his young life where he must expand his horizons to continue to grow, to mature. This transitional period can be as pressing as the old, noisy logging town in its prime and as hard as walking away from a significant other, but change comes even if one is willing or not. It is unclear as to where this journey will take him, but the surrounding environment alludes to change. Moments like these are those in which Laura Gruber Godfrey says the place frames the narrative more than the characters (51). Godfrey comments that before Hemingway makes his readers aware of Nick and Marjorie's relationship coming to an end, the text depicts a lumbering mill being dismantled, which "was once the lifeblood for [the] entire town" (52). The mill's downfall foreshadows the degradation of Nick and Marjorie's relationship before either of the characters even enter the dialogue.

The ruins of the old lumber town described at the beginning of "The End of Something" can also actively suggest an opportunity for new growth amongst the ruins. If the focus shifts from the perspective of the lumbermen to the abandoned town itself, there is a very similar, yet forebodingly different story presented. While the boats sailing away to new lands suggests that Nick will move on to somewhere new, the second growth promises that something will leave him in ruins and give him a need to regrow. Paul Smith points out that Joseph DeFalco has said that "Nick and Marjorie figure in a pattern of images of 'second growth' and become 'participants in the great cycle of existence.'" Smith says that DeFalco notes that "Nick grows in awareness of the emblematic nature of the scene, implying 'death and waste...before a renewal may occur'" (52). Although the lumbermen stripped the land of profitable wood, there is new vegetation slowly appearing. Ten years after the abandonment of the town, a "swampy second growth" began to show through as "Nick and Marjorie rowed along the shore" (31). Despite the cruelty the land endured, it still managed to revive itself. The revival of the land gives a message of hope; however, the second growth depicted in the landscape is also suggestive that while trauma may come for Nick, change and healing will come--even if it takes the entire short-story cycle to do so.³ DeFalco's reading supports the prophetic nature of the second growth and renewal after destruction, and suggests that the process is cyclical; however, Smith points out that DeFalco does not suggest that the beginning segment can fully depict the dramatic development by the end of the story. Smith says DeFalco claims that both Nick and Marjorie are changed by the end of the story: "nothing that may describe them at the beginning of the story can adequately describe them at its end" (52). While DeFalco has a point that the beginning clues cannot fully encompass what is to come for Nick and Marjorie, it can also be argued that

³ Laura Godfrey mentions the profound concept that "logging was an industry that created its own landscapes" (56). If one considers the parallel between Nick Adams and the landscape, this notion seems to act as a message of accountability for Nick. Nick's choices he will have to make soon will ultimately sculpt his own landscape.

the point is not to know what is to come, which is exactly how Hemingway ends the story—a state of unknowingness. The foreshadowing utilized with the image of the second growth poses as a mere warning, not a specific destination. Change and hardship are promised by the opening imagery, but the story's cyclical nature maintains a paradoxical state of unknowing yet certainty. While it is clear change will come, it is not specific how, which creates a tension of anticipation. Despite the pessimism that accompanies inevitable destruction, the image of the second growth serves as a symbol of hope. The landscape's description ultimately foreshadows what is to come for Nick in the story: he will lose a fruitful source in his life, Marjorie. Despite this initial loss, he can find a way to heal and regrow himself just as the trees did in the old lumber town. As tensions rise in the short-story cycle, he will have to continue to rebuild each time the world strikes him down.

A scene of metaphorical physical tension is illustrated in the beginning of "The End of Something" by describing the tense movement of the lumber machine in specific language that foreshadows the events to come for Nick. The boat moved toward the open lake, "carrying two great saws, the traveling carriage that hurled the logs against the revolving, circular saws and all the rollers, wheels, belts, and iron" (31). In this short and complex segment, an intense environment is created by using words like "hurled" and "against" because both words carry the connotation of resistance. It is also significant that the logs were being hurled against "revolving" and "circular" saws because these words suggest a cyclical concept. When combining the concepts that the logs are being forcefully set into a cyclical movement, a parallelism to maturation is created. The inevitability of change is reflected in the initial tone of the opening lines when the story's landscape begins in such a chaotic yet natural manner. The noise and downfall of the mill create chaos, but the interest in nature and natural resources like lumber suggest it is a cyclical and an inevitable process. Horst Kruse explains that the story's cyclical movement "implies that the course which Nick's love for Marjorie has taken is a natural one and as relentless as it is inevitable" (156). Whether Nick is ready to grow up or not, the cycle of maturing throws him into the next stage of life. In the plot of the story, Nick is faced with this inevitable motion into early adulthood. He is moving away and moving on from his first love, Marjorie. Moving on will be as heavy on Nick as the "wheels, belts, and iron," but it is necessary for Nick to continue to grow up. Although Marjorie tries to pull him closer, the next stage of his life pushes him farther from her. Nick copes with the weight of this loss by refusing to eat and lies face down on the beach (35). While his coping mechanisms are arguably somewhat juvenile, he has made his first step toward the end of his adolescence.

"The Battler" presents how the tension of maturation hurls Nick into adulthood ruthlessly and alone. He is physically thrown from a train by a brakeman when he is caught onboard without a ticket. The brakeman uncoincidentally called him a "kid" just before he launched him from the moving train (53). Even though he has been through his first break up and gotten drunk in the previous two stories, he is still a "kid" facing his first traumatic experience alone in the world; he does not have the influence of his father, mother, Marjorie, or Bill. In this story, Nick finds out what happens when one stays in motion after falling to their hands and knees like he did when he was thrown from the train, and what happens when one stays there (54). When wandering around in the woods, he encounters Ad and Bugs. Ad, who was once "a prizefighter," stays broken after taking all the blows from the world (57). He is violent, quick to anger, judgmental, and described as a "little man" (56). In contrast, Bugs is a

man who has faced many hardships, but he manages to keep moving forward. Nick watches how Bugs is hospitable, slow to anger, and acts as a protector to not only Ad, but now to him as well. John Beall says that although “Bugs may be a caretaker of the ex-boxing champion Ad, to Nick he is neither a nurse, nor mother figure, but the first male mentor to succeed his father in providing him with the protection and guidance, both by what he says and what he does” (42). This short-lived, yet impactful role Bugs plays in Nick’s life supplements for the absence of his father and other familiar influences in the story.

In “The Battler,” Nick is given a thrilling front row seat to the notion of “grace under pressure” by watching the way Bugs conducts himself. After becoming easily angered by Nick, Ad lashes out and holds the young man at knife point. This intense situation meets its end when Bugs strikes his long-time friend in the head with a pan, knocking him unconscious to protect Nick. Despite the fact they just met, Bugs chooses to protect him from his troubled friend. Beall says that in Bugs’s role “as handler of a roving ex-boxer, Bugs exudes self-confidence, grace under pressure, and professionalism” (46). Beall explains that Bugs makes a point to clarify that “he has had to knock Ad out often in the past to check his violence” (46). In the text, Bugs says, “I have seen him like this plenty of times before” (60). Even though he had to knock out Ad, he still treats him with grace by picking him up and carrying him to the fire so that he would stay warm. George Monteiro points out that perhaps Bugs sees Ad through “a lover’s eyes” because of the gentle care and attractiveness he displays for Ad. Monteiro says after all, “he has just ‘tapped’ Ad ‘across the base of the skull’ with a cloth-wrapped blackjack’ that bugs seems to carry with him just for this purpose” (180). Although the treatment Monteiro discusses is undeniably gentle and kind, the care he shows for Ad is not exclusive like an admirer would be. Bugs tells Nick “I didn’t know how well you could take care of yourself and, anyway, I didn’t want you to hurt him or mark him up no more than he already is” (60). After the unraveling of events, Bugs tells Nick that it is best that he leaves before Ad wakes up and realizes what has happened (62). Before sending him on his way, Bugs shows Nick what hospitality looks like by preparing Nick a sandwich so that he can be nourished before he continues his journey. While Nick does not eat the sandwich, he agrees to take it with him. This moment reflects Nick’s progression because rather than refusing to eat like he did in “The End of Something,” he at least agrees to take food with him. While he does not eat it right away, it is a step above refusing to eat and pushing his face in the sand. Like the lessons he takes away from his encounter with Bugs, Nick carries the sandwich with him, keeping it in reserve for when the time comes that he may need it. This interaction Nick has with Ad also shows him what it is like to live “like a gentleman” (61). Before meeting Bugs in “The Battler,” Nick’s idea of manhood was using titles and drinking alcohol with Bill like he did in the previous story, “A Three-Day Blow.” Now that he has met Bugs and seen how a man should conduct himself, he has a better understanding of how he should battle through life.

Shortly after Nick learns how to be a man; he becomes a father. In “Cross Country Snow,” the image of a funicular car and its mechanics are used to mirror Nick’s progression into fatherhood. The system of a funicular car operates on a steep slope that moves two counterbalancing cars on a tight cable attached to a pulley system. As one of the cars ascends, the other descends. The general image of a funicular is tense-- the entire system functions on tension. Olivia Carr Edenfield mentions that Barbra Sanders has stated that the funicular car, “operates under the tension of parallel opposites...the metaphor on which the story operates”

Edenfield says that “for Sanders, the funicular car suggests ‘a human philosophical experience of existing in a state between balanced tensions’” (141). Since Nick has found out he is going to be a father, his life seems to also be functioning between tensions. Edenfield stakes the claim that the tension is derived from Nick “having to give up the freedom of Europe and return to America...the beginning image of the funicular cars sets up the idea of tension, the details of these paragraphs suggest the equal pulls of freedom and restriction” (142) Edenfield’s idea can be extended to point out that he is also being held between his desire to remain in his state of youth and his duty to be a father for his unborn child (142). Nick’s inner struggle with this choice creates an internalized scene of tension, as duty and desire play tug of war inside of him. However, Nick’s character displays Hemingway’s idea of courage and embodies the grace he learned from Bugs in “The Battler” while he is under pressure. Rather than failing to rise to his duties as a soon to be father, he gets off the funicular car and navigates the snow (*IOT* 107). Instead of being pushed out of the funicular car like he was pushed off the train in “The Battler,” when the car stops and Nick is faced with the choice of staying or metaphorically jumping into the situation, Nick takes the courageous leap off the funicular car and onto the steep, slippery slopes. Edenfield explains that the opposition that Nick is facing is illustrated in the opening paragraph and the “stopping action of the car sets Nick into motion, buckling his boots, clamping them ‘into the toe irons,’ making himself ready to move” (142). He fortifies himself and is set into motion.⁴ In terms of fortification, Donald Daiker adds that Nick was sitting in a baggage car in the beginning of the story rather than in the passenger car because the baggage car is empty and gives Nick the open space to wax his skis and ready “himself to jump off at a moment’s notice” (27). The established tension of the funicular car and the movements happening in the beginning of the story unravel through Nick’s pivotal choice to leap into the unknown.

The image of the funicular car in “Cross Country Snow” reappears and applies tension toward the end of the story when George and Nick go out to eat after a day of skiing. In the same way that tension pulls the two funicular cars on a cable, Nick and George visually express their tense emotional disconnect: “they sat at the two tables, smoking and quiet, with their hats off, leaning back against the wall or forward on the table” (110). The positioning of the men mirrors the way the funicular cars are counterbalanced on the cable. Not only are they sitting at two different tables as if they were in two separate cars, but they are also silent and sit in opposite fashions to one another. The physical distance and emotional distance bear a correlation throughout this scene in the restaurant. Edenfield notes that this moment makes it seem as though Nick had already moved away (144). This same tactic of positioning is used when they are walking together but do not walk parallel to one another. One of the men always had to be ahead while the other lagged. George is described as walking behind Nick, “kicking in his heels” (109). He has planted himself into his environment by kicking his heels into the ground and staking his ground rather than walking ahead like Nick. He does the same sentiment when they ski; when Nick asks him to “take it together,” he declines because he would rather Nick go first (108). The reluctance to move forward or even attempt to move ahead of Nick suggests that he is comfortable where he is in life and does not want to keep moving ahead like

⁴ Nick fortifies himself in the same way that he does in “The Battler” when he takes the sandwich Bugs prepares for him and puts it in his pocket to carry with him, much like an arsenal—ready to use when the time comes.

Nick is by becoming a father. While Nick is preparing to become a father, George is stuck wondering when they will get to go have another skiing trip next. Nick knows there “isn’t any good in promising” (112). He cannot say when or if they will get to go skiing again, but he now has more of an obligation to the mother of his unborn child, Helen, than he does to George. However, Edenfield raises the point that while Nick says there is not any good in promising, he also tells George that they have “got to” (*IOT* 188) go skiing again. Edenfield mentions that “Nick and George will go skiing together again because life ‘isn’t worthwhile if you can’t” (146). Whether then men ever go skiing again is not important. What matters is that Nick has come to terms with his new role as a father and is preparing himself to be the father that Helen and their unborn child need him to be.

As Nick grows, he learns how to end relationships when his life pulls him into the next stage. In the same way he had to leave Marjorie behind in “The End of Something” to grow up, he had to leave George behind in “Cross Country Snow” to move to America to be a father. He does not actively want to end these relationships, nor does he want to move to America; however, like Bugs, a man must “just move around” to live like a gentleman (61). Throughout the short-story cycle *In Our Time*, Nick faces transitional moments where he must keep pushing forward even when his relationships tempt him to pull back. This pushing and pulling that Nick endures is expressed through images of physical tension.

In the short-story cycle *In Our Time*, written by Ernest Hemingway, the reoccurring protagonist, Nick Adams, is confronted and broken by the world time after time. Through the influence of those who display immense grace for others when they are under fire, Nick learns how to keep moving even when it seems impossible. The struggles that Nick confronts are mirrored in the physical tensions established in the innerworkings of the stories throughout the short-story cycle. In the short stories “The End of Something” and “Cross Country Snow,” the pressures Nick faces are prominently depicted in the landscape and physical descriptions of objects in the setting. Rising tensions, like the unsteady thrust into adulthood and the weight of being a father, ultimately push Nick and his relationships into a constant and inevitable state motion.

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