

“Teaching ‘The Big Two-Hearted River’: A Cognitive Approach to Leading Students into the Swamp”

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Abstract

The focus of this essay concerns the overlapping, potentially illuminating and educational contexts specific to Hemingway’s “The Big Two-Hearted River.” These contexts fall broadly into four categories: 1) those related to the intra- and extra-diegetic levels of the narrative and, specifically, the story of the protagonist’s fishing expedition; 2) those tied to the narrative’s creation, including those specific to Hemingway’s life and work; 3) those more elusive and yet no less important theoretical ones, including formalism, poststructuralism, ecocriticism, and, more recently, those that fall under the umbrella of cognitive-ecological understandings of literature; and, finally, 4) those contexts specific to contemporary environmental literature courses.

Teaching Environmental Literature to Science-Minded Students

There are commonly three groups of students enrolled in my environmental literature course, each with its own agenda and correlative methodology (and, to some extent, ideology). First, there are the humanities students, who are predominantly English majors and often trained in post-structuralism and cultural criticism; as such, these students unknowingly tend to resist close reading and jump whenever possible to the extradiegetic levels of narratives, assuming in so doing that everything inside the text is analogic and nothing – or little of anything – is it rooted in reality. Next, there are the social science students: with one foot in the academy and the other in society, they often tend to view literature as an extension of culture that has little, if any, connection to the ontological, actual world beyond the book; and when they do identify connections, social science students’ first inclination is to then argue that “nature” is merely an extension of culture, and “culture” the flipside of nature. Incongruously, their second inclination is to view landscape literature as set essentially in actual worlds rather than in what Marie Laure Ryan refers to as “textual actual worlds” (556) and Jerome Bruner “Possible Worlds.” In consequence, social science students tend view literary texts as thinly-veiled calls to action and provocations for political change. Finally, there are the students in the STEM programs. These students, because of their training in the scientific method, are often inclined to search when reading literature

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for evidence of tangible landscapes and equally veritable characters; in consequence, they commonly reject the notion that a literary text presents readers with a storyworld replete with gaps, one governed by different laws and logic and that, in turn, requires diverse and imaginative ways of navigating this type of illusory, though often similar time/space.

To address the needs and to validate as well as complicate the inclinations of all of the above students, I turn for help when teaching Environmental Literature to Ernest Hemingway's "The Big Two-Hearted River." Using this seemingly straightforward and yet fantastically complex narrative in the context of this environmental studies elective, I seek at the outset of the term to address the proclivities of all my student readers; I use it, for instance, to reinforce the importance of close, formal reading, while simultaneously employing it to introduce to the students the distinction between our world and fictional spaces, drawing somewhat heavily when doing so on Dorrit Cohn's concept of the "signposts of fictionality." Then, I move in the direction of proposing that the storyworld is an actual-possible place with an actual possible character (Ryan 556), one who – through Hemingway's artful, measured use of such literary tropes and techniques as metaphor and focalization – models how the evolved human mind functions in context. (Nick, it should be noted here at the outset, simulates how humans consciously and unconsciously negotiate the natural world; at the same time, Hemingway re-presents for his readers a parallel world of para-logical guessing, or, put another way, of tapping into cognitive skills developed through evolution in order to interpret/negotiate this text/storyworld).

This approach to teaching the text – with its emphasis on formalism first followed by evolutionary cognition and storyworld-theory second – helps students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds enter into the many critical conversations associated with landscape literature while enabling them to make connections between this and other types of texts and issues specific to literary studies and environmental cognition.

When analyzing "The Big Two-Hearted River" in this manner, the students can with help and encouragement begin to see, almost literally, why critics disagree so vehemently about such issues as the importance of biography (Hemingway's wound, for instance) and symbols/metaphors, including the swamp. They can also begin to appreciate how a blended Darwinian and cognitive approach proves to be the most useful one for those wishing to understand what occurs inside the storyworld (and inside the mind of the protagonist) as well as outside of it, in the minds of the readers reading it in an environmental literature course in the 21st century.

Against this backdrop and before discussing in detail this interdisciplinary line of inquiry into the narrative, I want to turn here – as I would were I teaching this text – briefly to the academic discussion surrounding "The Big Two-Hearted River"; I will then come back around in my analysis to the reasons for employing this hybrid methodology, one that draws somewhat heavily upon the branch of narrative theory that followed hard upon what David Herman denotes as "The Second Cognitive Revolution."

"The Big Two-Hearted" Biographical Symbol Hunt

Although formalist readings of "The Big Two-Hearted River" often devolve into a game of symbol hunting and connecting the dots between analogies and their referents – the burnt town of Seney stands for despair and thus serves as an analogue for the war; the blackened grasshoppers correlate with what it means to overcome obstacles; and the trout holding steady in the stream symbolize determination, etc. – they nonetheless can embolden students to attend carefully to the signs and signifiers in the story. When prodded, readers tend to find it rewarding, moreover, to discover that the

seemingly simple text conceals a dense, almost ecological web of intra-textual connections, relationships that gradually emerge and multiply as one reads and rereads the narrative.

By thus encouraging students to look thoroughly at the words, we can underline for them the fact that, at some essential level, fish are both fish and “fish,” water is water as well “water” (with all of the literary, figural meanings attached to that loaded symbol), and all other such words have value in and of themselves as well as in a more elusive, semantic and cognitive context, including that of Nick’s mind, with its implicit memories and inclinations, not excepting those associated with his desire as an emerging, hesitant writer to pursue the big ideas at the risk of failing tragically. This notion, then, that there is a there there, that what is in the actual text has value and thus deserves to be addressed and considered, takes on still greater importance in this type of land-based literary studies course. It likewise validates the inclinations of all the students in the course.

That said, despite any pleasure one might inspire among students when teaching in this way – of helping them identify and interpret the story’s many interrelated tropes in service to the story’s theme – this emphasis on the text’s parts nonetheless nonetheless runs counter to many students’ preferences, as most studying environmental texts (as well as other issues-based works) want to move much more quickly from the text (with its homodiegetic character situated in the storyworld) to the place specific to its original context (when it was written) and/or its current context (when its read and discussed). And this predisposition is not necessarily problematic, as there is much to learn about how the text means by analyzing the contexts in which it was written and is now being received. The problem is, however, that many – and possibly even most – historical and biographical readings of “The Big Two-Hearted River” reduce the text to yet another semiotic game of connect the dots, one that too often entails making tenuous links from what is inside the narrative to that which was or is outside of it. And although these discussions and debates can be both numerous and lively (from a teacher’s perspective perhaps), they can encourage also superficial readings of the actual work and, in so doing, reduce literature to a mere platform, a sort of jumping off point for discussing real-world (as opposed to storyworld) concerns. For this reason, as Fredrik Brøgger, in his essay “Whose Nature?: Differing Narrative Perspectives in Hemingway’s ‘Big Two-Hearted River’” explains, “Reading Hemingway criticism can sometimes turn the most committed contextual scholar into a New Critic,” adding that the “critical interpretations of Hemingway’s ‘Big Two-Hearted River’ are a case in point.

To be sure, one biographical critic after the other seems bent on basing his or her interpretation on extra- rather than intra- textual evidence, regardless of whether such support is taken from Hemingway’s life, from other Hemingway stories, or from the criticism surrounding both. One symptomatic reading, for instance, builds a case for what amounts to a translation rather than an interpretation of the story around an earlier, unpublished draft of the text, one referred to as “The University of Texas typescript,” a text – this critic assures his readers – that will “some day [...] allow [critics] to develop a revised and authoritative edition of the story”; the reason being, he adds definitively, is because this typescript includes evidence that “suggests an alternative reading of the story” based on “the original nine-page interior monologue that Hemingway most emphatically decided not to use as conclusion to his story” (Westbrook 19). This critic then concedes, however, that “There is no smoking pistol in the Texas typescript,” and allows that, “Nowhere does it say Nick realized that the swamp had the following three meanings, and there are no sustained additions or omission, [...] it is clear that Hemingway himself did make holograph changes designed to prepare the text for submission” (Westbrook 19).

This tendency to go outside “The Big Two-Hearted River” in search of clues, missing pieces, and smoking guns may be attributed to Hemingway’s use of his ice-berg principle, an approach to writing that seems

to require readers to search outside the narrative for additional information, or, to stick with the metaphor, to discover the size and substance of what's beneath the story's surface. The penchant to jump from the text to its contexts may likewise be a consequence of the fact that Hemingway himself was an extraordinarily intriguing figure living at an equally interesting time, both of which critics seem ever eager to learn more about. Add to this list of enticements the idea that so much of his fiction seemed, if not biographical, then drawn at least indirectly from his own life experiences, and you have what appears to be an out-and-out insistence on historical and biographical criticism at the expense of a formal, close reading.

Thus sanctioned by this interpretive environment and related methodology, some have pursued with laser focus the meaning of, or the referent for, the swamp, for instance, or, similarly, some evidence in the text of Hemingway's war wound and its effect – physical or psychological – on Nick.

As a case in point, William Adair in his 1999 essay "Big Two-Hearted River: Why the Swamp is Tragic" writes that "in terms of landscape and action," there seems to be [...] evidence for thinking that Nick's imagined fishing in the swamp suggests to him his winter fighting in the swamps of Porogrande rather than his wounding at Fossalta" (586). Then, nearer to the end of his reading, Adair concludes his case by asserting that "Emotionally, [Nick] is [thus] not ready to fish the swamp—in imagination, to fight again at Portogrande," which, by extension, leads to the seemingly axiomatic conclusion that "the landscape of this fishing story suggests specific places in Nick's time at the war. And the evidence seems to suggest that fishing the swamp would be for him a psychological re-enactment of the winter fight around Porogrande" (587). Adair's symptomatic reading turns, of course, on the phrase "the evidence seems to suggest"; this evidence comes not from the text nor directly from Hemingway's life and thus from reality but instead from a constellation of sources brimming with conjecture about these facets of the text and the imagined, unreal backstory of the fictional character, Nick.

Indeed, much of what has been written on Hemingway and the "Big Two-Hearted River" fails to serve the needs of environmental literature students wishing to understand it and their experience of it better, but I do so also because – recently – one can sense in the academic discussion a certain searching, almost desperate quality. In "Fishing for Stories: What 'Big Two-Hearted River' is Really About," Robert Paul Lamb, for instance – after surveying the landscape – asserts boldly that, while this may be "magnificent fiction," it "is nevertheless textually indecipherable. Thus," he concludes when making allowances for his predecessors as well as what will then follow in his own analysis, "critics have been forced to go outside the text, and the meaning they find in the story, as Professors Young and Lynn have shown, therefore depends upon what extratextual evidence they employ" (164).

Another form of critical casting about, so to speak, is represented by the tendencies among teachers and critics alike to impute motives and provide backgrounds for Hemingway's fictional characters. As Brøgger mentions, by doing this – by taking this tact – "such scholars have constructed a text different from the one we actually read" (20 Svodoba).

This tendency among Hemingway scholars to cast about in search of motives and clues embedded in the writer's background may well be tied (that is two fish-lit puns, in one sentence, by the way, for those keeping track) at some level to an instructor's commendable desire to meet the needs of resistant, hesitant readers, those not wishing to wade into the thicket that is this complex and involved text. To this end, teachers will follow the lead of their students and come at and/or deviate from the story by discussing everything but the actual words on the page and, by extension, how the work means. But I would argue that a worthwhile reading of the "Big Two-Hearted River" – and, more than that, an

instructive teaching of it – must begin, at the very least, with a close reading. Then, rather than looking outward for still more evidence that supports this kind of reading, we can look deeper, into the embedded, representative and very human consciousness of Nick, a consciousness that is spread out in the material and literary contexts of the narrative. Following this methodological route allows us and our students to see dramatized what is otherwise ineffable, though still real, which is to say the evolved human consciousness in an environment – it is a consciousness that is fully (and grudgingly) alive and at work in the natural world of this most natural of environments.

The outside evidence we need for this interpretive undertaking – this Darwinian take on “The Big Two-Hearted River” – can be found as much in the fields of psychobiology, cognition, and evolution as they can in the historical studies associated with the text’s time period or the biographical ones connected with Hemingway’s life. Hence, I would argue that we do not need to lift Nick, or the swamp, or the river, or the woods, or Seney up out of the world of the narrative; nor do we need to introduce into the work and our discussion of it boat loads of extra-textual biographical, historical, and textual information in order for the narrative to be edifying and illuminating. Instead, if we examine narratologically in the context of an environmental literature or, more generally, environmentally studies course, we can let the character of Nick be Nick (and not Hemingway) in the world of “The Big Two-Hearted River” and while still appreciating how he performs our innately, representative – albeit artistic – ways of thinking and, by extension, living in the real world beyond the storyworld he unknowingly inhabits.

How, then, do we do this? How, in other words, do we combine the techniques connected with close, formal reading with what we have learned about literature in the years after the cognitive turn in narrative theory – with this relatively new interest in what Nancy Easterlin describes as “Intermental Function, Evolved Cognition, and Fictional Representation.” First off, one would when teaching this text do well to pose (or at least consider) the following questions that Easterlin asks in her article “Loving Ourselves Best: Ecocriticism and the Adaptive Mind.” These include: “What really is or should be the object or objects of study for literary ecocritics? [And, I would add, “for their students as well?”] What is the primary scrutiny for ecocritics? Is it the non-human natural world – itself merely a facet of the totality of environment? Is it the physical world, which constitutes a larger but still incomplete notion of the environment? Is it, Easterlin continues, the physical world as perceived, refracted, and recreated in literary texts? Or is it a special set of relations between these and the human creators and consumers of relevant literary texts?”

Of course the answer, as any student knows when presented with such a long list of excellent questions, is “all of the above”; and we can appreciate why this is so when we look at “The Big Two-Hearted River” through an interdisciplinary lens that brings into sharp focus otherwise overlooked or underappreciated aspects of a text and its relationship to the realities beyond the book, those very internal cognitive ones of the readers as well as the “mind-independent reality” of non-human nature (Easterlin “Loving Ourselves”). As Jerry Keir and Corey Lewis explain, “Literary ecologists who utilize interdisciplinary fieldwork to study the text’s relationship to the referential world will find their scholarship informed by the methodologies of other disciplines, from history, anthropology, and cultural studies to geography, biology, geology, and ecology” (99). But, in this framework of environmental literature that focuses on Hemingway’s work, talk is cheap. So, let us, at last, turn to the short story to see how this text in particular serves as a perfect proving ground for an interpretive approach drawing in equal measure on cognitive psychology (from the social sciences), evolutionary theory (from the hard sciences), and close reading (from our friends in the humanities): it is a blended method meant to help students read certain works of literature well and, in so doing, appreciate how the evolved human mind functions not only when reading (and writing) fiction but also when surviving in nature.

A Close, Cognitive Reading

With what reads like an establishing shot, Hemingway situates the reader at a distance from the opening scene, describing as he does the departure of the train “on up the track out of sight around one of the hills of burnt timber” before panning to Nick, who “sat down on the bundle of canvas bedding” amidst the ashes that were all that remained of Seney (163). A brief (of course) portrayal of the burnt over area is followed by a paragraph that begins, “Nick looked at the burned over stretch of hillside where he had expected to find scattered houses of the town and then walked down the railroad tracks to the bridge over the river” (613). This second paragraph, due to its syntax and the effect of how it is focalized with the phrase “Nick looked,” moves the reader’s vantage point from the broad, seemingly neutral position of the establishing shot into – or very nearly so – the time/space of the intra-diegetic protagonist, who was (and practically is) staring down into the river. The line that follows confirms this, reading simply, “The river was there” (163). With this declarative statement, the reader’s perspective moves still closer to the consciousness of the character, though we are at this point in the narrative still looking from a point in time after the events, as indicated by the past-tense “was still there.” However, it should be noted that we have ever so subtly move from a place outside and after the events to one closer to the consciousness of the participating character.

Nick “looks” down into the water and watches the pebbles shift, the currents swirl, the trout “keeping themselves steady,” and, eventually, the even larger trout holding “themselves on the gravel bottom.” In fact, he does quite a lot of looking and watching; in just two short paragraphs, Hemingway uses the words “looked,” “watched,” “see,” and “saw” a total of twelve times, each reinforcing the idea that Nick is not only looking but that the reader’s view on this storyworld is becoming synonymous and simultaneous with the main character’s.

But, this reading of the opening lines begs the question students of all academic stripes are likely to ask at this point, which is to say, So what? What does it matter that Hemingway employs such limited diction in order to provide readers with a view on events approximating that of the main character?

It matters because most theories and, by extension, pedagogical methods for teaching the text overlook this very important aspect of the narrative’s construction and, by extension, its meaning as well as its implications. It matters, moreover, because highlighting the ways that narrative here at the outset insists that it is as much about an ontological world with empirical entities as it is about one character’s consciousness (a character, fittingly, who considers himself a writer, one who converts signs into signifiers) helps readers avoid the duality-trap tied to the notion that texts are either fictional (and thus synthetic) or factual (and thus mimetic). It matters because it makes it possible to teach and read and interpret the text well and, one might be so bold to suggest, accurately, while providing a blueprint for doing the same with other textual-actual and textual-possible worlds. It matters most, though, because it allows a teacher of enviro lit in an enviro literature course to draw all three groups of students into the subsequent reading of the text while at once setting up other issues and conversations.

Returning to the text—

By setting the stage for the ensuing story in this manner, Hemingway has incidentally and adroitly dramatized the notion we are – as upright, sentient and highly evolved creatures – always physically and cognitively navigating our environment. This, thus, turns our attention back out of the text to the critical discussion surrounding environmental literature and its relationship to cognitive studies. As Scott Slovic states of nature writing, “to write about ‘the phenomenon of awareness’ [is to write] about how the

mind sees nature" (351); the problem, however, with this type of writing and the criticism it has engendered, says Easterlin, is that "the implications of [these] observations have not yet generally informed the ecocritical approach" ("Loving Ourselves" 351). So, one must ask, what are the implications in this instance of how Hemingway's text situates its protagonist in a natural setting and – through a mix of diction, focalization, and actual-possible world references? How, in other words, does this situation allow us to see a human mind at work, one that happens to possess a certain literary bent?

To begin with, this interpretive situation enables us to appreciate the reasons we can and possibly should utilize an approach informed by multiple approaches. Much of the discussion associated with cognition and literature focuses on what cognitive scientists refer to as "theory of mind," or what Lisa Zunshine refers to as "mind reading" and what Easterlin calls "intermental function"; these complimentary terms refer to the ways we as a species have learned to survive by making informed, often unconscious guesses about the ideas, insinuations, etc. of our fellow creatures and/or the interactions of characters/creatures in works of fiction and even nonfiction. Other theorists working in this field such as Herman argue that "discursive psychology" is concerned primarily with how our minds and those of characters created in our likeness are "distributed" "across all contexts," which means that "thinking in its most basic form is grounded in particular situations, socially, distributed, and domain specific" (166).

Of course, Nick is alone in the woods, and one would therefore logically presume that these iterations of cognitive, discursive psychology would be of little benefit to those wishing to better understand and interpret the text. However, the opposite proves to be true. In fact, because Nick is in the story (though not, of course, in the narrative) completely alone, "The Big Two-Hearted River" provides the best possible illustration in a fictional context of how our minds function in nature; fittingly, because of the way the text is put together, it also offers us splendid opportunity for practicing a little of our own higher-order intermental functioning of the evolved human flavor. Here's why—

Nick clearly brings with him like Dan O'Brien's character in "The Things They Carried" baggage in the form of discourse from previous experiences. And Hemingway deftly delivers these through his careful use of focalization and free indirect discourse. The text insists that these ideas (bound up as they are in words) inform and shape how he traverses and understands both the external and internal worlds, worlds that continuously and dynamically interact throughout the narrative. Everything Nick does, he does against the backdrop of earlier experiences; and because he is psychologically unstable, he works hard – Hemingway makes clear through the controlled tone of the narrative – to resist his natural, human and decidedly artistic, evolved urge to mix the new, present-oriented experience into a batter that includes the older, extant ones so as to create meaning and order. Nick worries, moreover, as one struggling with post-war stress, that – in this natural but not neutral context – bits and pieces of memories woven into the DNA of words and images will coalesce into some semblance of an inchoate story, a prospect that is as exciting to Nick as it is terrifying, something mirrored by his feelings associated with catching large, elusive trout.

We can thus see evidence of this power of words, spoken or thought, in the scene when he first speaks aloud, which reads as follows: "I've got a right to eat this kind of stuff if I'm willing to carry it," Nick said. His voice sounded strange in the darkening woods. He did not speak again" (167). And when he can also sense his concern and related way of really, actually thinking when he wades into the world of stories for the first time, saying of an anecdote regarding "the coffee according to Hopkins," "It made a good ending to the story," a line clearly but cunningly tempered by free indirect discourse and followed by the more neutral and very illuminating comment, "His mind was starting to work" (169).

We watch as Nick's mind works in ways that are mostly lost him, as he crosses not only the land-mind littered past that surfaces in the present but also the actual landscape across which he so deliberately hikes. Statements such as "Nick kept his direction by the sun" (165), and, "he knew he could strike the river by turning off to his left" (165) and even simply "There was the meadow, the river and the swamp. There were the birch trees in the green of the swamp on the other side of the river" (173) reveal a powerful, interpretive event in process; he may not be making hermeneutic guesses based on facial expressions, body language, and discourse about what other characters are or are not thinking, but he is nonetheless exercising an equally advanced set of evolved cognitive skills. He is surviving in a natural space while wrestling with internal issues and repressing voices from his past.

Conclusion

Regardless of academic background, readers when imagining into existence Nick's fictional but familiar actions and thoughts are truly exercising their own sophisticated capacities as creatures who are products of the land and producers of discourse. And this, it should be noted in this particular day and age, matters a great deal. At a time when fewer and fewer individuals get out of actual-possible worlds and into the ontological real one, and in a course that praises but seldom facilitates or even validates this behavior, "The Big Two-Hearted River" represents the picture-perfect text. This narrative provides fodder, moreover, for responding to those who would contend that there is no actual there there, that all is – in the final tabulation – construct, including even "nature." The notion that every theory is as potentially valid as any other because each is an extension of culture runs counter to what so many of our students in these classes know but cannot explain, which is to say that there is both a "Big Two-Hearted River" and an actual Two-Hearted River, one a result of words, ideas, and ideals, and the other – at some essential level – "a mind-independent reality," to borrow once more from Easterlin ("Loving Ourselves Best").

In closing, David Herman postulates that, here after the second cognitive revolution, we can now claim with confidence that "Knowing and doing, cognition and discourse, are [...] inextricably linked" (161); I would emend this only slightly here in this context of Hemingway's story to say that "Knowing and doing, cognition and discourse and flying fishing are inextricably linked."

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