

The End of Something

Short Story by ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Connect to Your Life

Troubled Romance This story depicts a young couple whose relationship is ending. Their troubles raise the question, *Why do people fall out of love?* In a small group, discuss various answers to this question and come up with a list of possible reasons. Share your list with those of other groups. Then, as you read the story, try to find out why the couple breaks up.

Build Background

The Nick Adams Stories “The End of Something” is one of a series of Hemingway stories about the character Nick Adams. The stories, which are semiautobiographical, trace the life of this character through his youth in northern Michigan, his adolescence on the road, his days as a soldier in World War I, his postwar return to Michigan, and his married years in Europe. In this story, Nick is a young war veteran struggling to make sense of his life and the end of his love for a young woman. The story is set in Hortons Bay, a resort town on Lake Michigan, where Hemingway himself spent his childhood summers. Like Nick, Hemingway returned to the Hortons Bay area during the summer of 1919 to recover from his war wounds. Although the events of the story are fictional, Nick’s pain, loneliness, and disillusionment with the world of adulthood were problems that Hemingway and other young men confronted upon returning from the war.

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS STYLE **Style** is the distinctive way in which a piece of literature is written. Style refers not so much to what is said but how it is said. Word choice, sentence length, tone, imagery, and the use of dialogue all contribute to a writer’s style. One of the hallmarks of Hemingway’s straightforward style is his simple, clipped dialogue. As you read “The End of Something,” note the repetitions and omissions in the characters’ speech that resemble real-life conversations.

ACTIVE READING MAKING INFERENCES The scenes in “The End of Something” consist almost entirely of **dialogue** between the main characters—Nick and Marjorie. As they speak, the narrator gives little direct information about how they feel or think. Hemingway’s sparse style challenges readers to fill in the gaps. You will need to make **inferences**, or logical guesses, to discover the suggested meanings behind the characters’ spoken words. Their remarks provide you with clues about their relationship.

READER’S NOTEBOOK To help you make inferences as you read, create a chart like the one shown and fill it in with moments of Nick and Marjorie’s dialogue that seem meaningful. Then consider what their comments reveal.

Dialogue Clues	What They Reveal
Nick’s comments	
Marjorie’s comments	

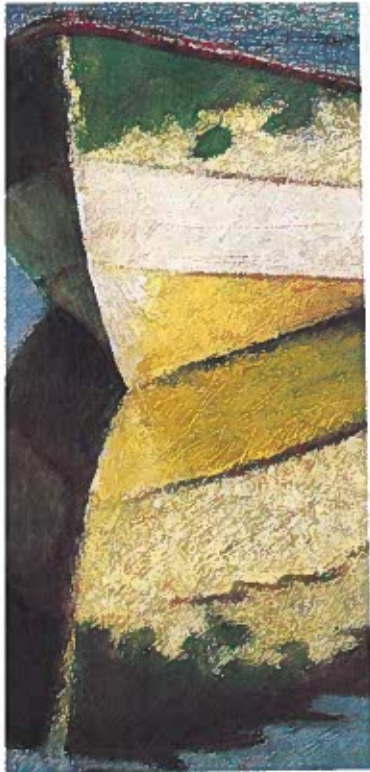


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The End of Something

Ernest Hemingway

In the old days Hortons Bay was a lumbering town. No one who lived in it was out of sound of the big saws in the mill by the lake. Then one year there were no more logs to make lumber. The lumber schooners came into the bay and were loaded with the cut of the mill that stood stacked in the yard. All the piles of lumber were carried away. The big mill building had all its machinery that was removable taken out and hoisted on board one of the schooners by the men who had worked in the mill. The schooner moved out of the bay toward the open lake carrying the two great saws, the traveling carriage that hurled the logs against the revolving, circular saws and all the rollers, wheels, belts, and iron piled on a hull-deep load of lumber. Its open hold covered with canvas and lashed tight, the sails of the schooner filled and it moved out into the open lake, carrying with it everything that had made the mill a mill and Hortons Bay a town.

The one-story bunk houses, the eating-house, the company store, the mill offices, and the big mill itself stood deserted in the acres of sawdust that covered the swampy meadow by the shore of the bay.

Ten years later there was nothing of the mill left except the broken white limestone of its foundations showing through the



Canoe (1957), David Park. Oil on canvas, 36" × 48", Thomas C. Woods Memorial Collection, Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

swampy second growth as Nick and Marjorie rowed along the shore. They were trolling¹ along the edge of the channel-bank where the bottom dropped off suddenly from sandy shallows to twelve feet of dark water. They were trolling on their way to the point to set night lines for rainbow trout.

"There's our old ruin, Nick," Marjorie said.

Nick, rowing, looked at the white stone in the green trees.

"There it is," he said.

"Can you remember when it was a mill?" Marjorie asked.

"I can just remember," Nick said.

"It seems more like a castle," Marjorie said.

Nick said nothing. They rowed on out of sight of the mill, following the shore line. Then Nick cut across the bay.

"They aren't striking," he said.

"No," Marjorie said. She was intent on the rod all the time they trolled, even when she talked. She loved to fish. She loved to fish with Nick.

Close beside the boat a big trout broke the surface of the water. Nick pulled hard on one oar so the boat would turn and the bait spinning far behind would pass where the trout was feeding. As the trout's back came up out of the water the minnows jumped wildly. They sprinkled the surface like a handful of shot thrown into the water. Another trout broke water, feeding on the other side of the boat.

"They're feeding," Marjorie said.

"But they won't strike," Nick said.

He rowed the boat around to troll past both the feeding fish, then headed it for the point. Marjorie did not reel in until the boat touched the shore.

They pulled the boat up the beach and Nick lifted out a pail of live perch. The perch swam in the water in the pail. Nick caught three of them with his hands and cut their heads off and skinned them while Marjorie chased with her hands in the bucket, finally caught a perch, cut its head off and skinned it. Nick looked at her fish.

"You don't want to take the ventral fin² out,"

he said. "It'll be all right for bait but it's better with the ventral fin in."

He hooked each of the skinned perch through the tail. There were two hooks attached to a leader³ on each rod. Then Marjorie rowed the boat out over the channel-bank, holding the line in her teeth, and looking toward Nick, who stood on the shore holding the rod and letting the line run out from the reel.

"That's about right," he called.

"Should I let it drop?" Marjorie called back, holding the line in her hand.

"Sure. Let it go." Marjorie dropped the line overboard and watched the baits go down through the water.

She came in with the boat and ran the second line out the same way. Each time Nick set a heavy slab of driftwood across the butt of the rod to hold it solid and propped it up at an angle with a small slab. He reeled in the slack line so the line ran taut out to where the bait rested on the sandy floor of the channel and set the click on the reel. When a trout, feeding on the bottom, took the bait it would run with it, taking line out of the reel in a rush and making the reel sing with the click on.

Marjorie rowed up the point a little way so she would not disturb the line. She pulled hard on the oars and the boat went way up the beach. Little waves came in with it. Marjorie stepped out of the boat and Nick pulled the boat high up the beach.

"What's the matter, Nick?" Marjorie asked.

"I don't know," Nick said, getting wood for a fire.

They made a fire with driftwood. Marjorie went to the boat and brought a blanket. The

1. **trolling**: a method of fishing in which a line and baited hook trail along behind a slow-moving boat.
2. **ventral fin**: fin on the underside of a fish.
3. **leader**: short length of line by which a hook is fastened to a fishing line.

evening breeze blew the smoke toward the point, so Marjorie spread the blanket out between the fire and the lake.

Marjorie sat on the blanket with her back to the fire and waited for Nick. He came over and sat down beside her on the blanket. In back of them was the close second-growth timber⁴ of the point and in front was the bay with the mouth of Hortons Creek. It was not quite dark. The fire-light went as far as the water. They could both see the two steel rods at an angle over the dark water. The fire glinted on the reels.

Marjorie unpacked the basket of supper.

"I don't feel like eating," said Nick.

"Come on and eat, Nick."

"All right."

They ate without talking, and watched the two rods and the fire-light in the water.

"There's going to be a moon tonight," said Nick. He looked across the bay to the hills that were beginning to sharpen against the sky. Beyond the hills he knew the moon was coming up.

"I know it," Marjorie said happily.

"You know everything," Nick said.

"Oh, Nick, please cut it out! Please, please don't be that way!"

"I can't help it," Nick said. "You do. You know everything. That's the trouble. You know you do."

Marjorie did not say anything.

"I've taught you everything. You know you do. What don't you know, anyway?"

"Oh, shut up," Marjorie said. "There comes the moon."

They sat on the blanket without touching each other and watched the moon rise.

"You don't have to talk silly," Marjorie said. "What's really the matter?"

"I don't know."

"Of course you know."

"No I don't."

"Go on and say it."

Nick looked on at the moon, coming up over the hills.

"It isn't fun any more."

He was afraid to look at Marjorie. Then he looked at her. She sat there with her back toward him. He looked at her back. "It isn't fun any more. Not any of it."

She didn't say anything. He went on. "I feel as though everything was gone to hell inside of me. I don't know, Marge. I don't know what to say."

He looked on at her back.

"Isn't love any fun?" Marjorie said.

"No," Nick said. Marjorie stood up. Nick sat there his head in his hands.

"I'm going to take the boat," Marjorie called to him. "You can walk back around the point."

"All right," Nick said. "I'll push the boat off for you."

"You don't need to," she said. She was afloat in the boat on the water with the moonlight on it. Nick went back and lay down with his face in the blanket by the fire. He could hear Marjorie rowing on the water.

He lay there for a long time. He lay there while he heard Bill come into the clearing walking around through the woods. He felt Bill coming up to the fire. Bill didn't touch him, either.

"Did she go all right?" Bill said.

"Yes," Nick said, lying, his face on the blanket.

"Have a scene?"

"No, there wasn't any scene."

"How do you feel?"

"Oh, go away, Bill! Go away for a while."

Bill selected a sandwich from the lunch basket and walked over to have a look at the rods. ♦

4. **second-growth timber:** trees that cover an area after the original, "old growth" trees have been cut or burned.



Connect to the Literature

- 1. What Do You Think?** Which character do you feel the most sympathy for? Why? Share your thoughts with a classmate.

Comprehension Check

- How has Hortons Bay changed over the past ten years?
- What do Nick and Marjorie do in the first part of the story?
- Where does the final scene of the story occur?

Think Critically

- 2. ACTIVE READING MAKING INFERENCES** Review the chart you made in your **READER'S NOTEBOOK**. What lines of Nick and Marjorie's dialogue hint at the problems in their relationship? How would you describe the way they communicate to each other?



- what they say to each other
- what they do not say to each other

- 3.** Why do you think Nick wants to break up with Marjorie?
- 4.** How do you think Nick feels at the end of the story?



- his actions after Marjorie leaves
- his remark "Oh, go away, Bill! Go away for a while."

- 5.** How would you describe Nick's attitude toward the natural environment in this story? Support your answer with evidence.

Extend Interpretations

- 6. Critic's Corner** In an article published in the *Kenyon Review*, critic George Hemphill wrote that Hemingway's story fails "because no necessary connection (other than biographical, perhaps) between the end of the boy and girl affair between Nick and Marjorie and the end of the old lumbering days in Michigan is suggested." What is your response to Hemphill's criticism? Do you think a connection between the Hortons Bay setting and Nick and Marjorie's relationship is implied or not? Discuss your ideas with your classmates.
- 7. Different Perspectives** How did the information about Nick Adams presented in the Build Background feature on page 1018 influence your interpretation of the story? Do you think Nick's behavior can be attributed to his experiences as a young war veteran? Defend your view.
- 8. Connect to Life** How does this ending of a relationship compare with breakups you have witnessed or experienced?

Literary Analysis

STYLE Before becoming a novelist and short story writer, Hemingway earned his living as a journalist. "The End of Something" reflects the simple, direct **style** of a newspaper reporter—short sentences, close attention to detail, unadorned descriptions, precise language, detached point of view, and matter-of-fact tone. Note the conciseness of the following paragraph about Nick and Marjorie's breakup:

He was afraid to look at Marjorie. Then he looked at her. She sat there with her back toward him. He looked back at her. "It isn't fun any more. Not any of it."

Hemingway's ear for authentic-sounding dialogue is also a keynote of his distinctive style.

Cooperative Learning Activity In a small group, rewrite a passage of the story and include Nick's feelings and thoughts. Share your rewrite with the class, and discuss differences between Hemingway's style and that of your rewrite. Do the additional details add or detract from the story?

Writing Options

1. Personal Ad What do you think happens to Nick and Marjorie after the end of their relationship? Write a personal ad that either Marjorie or Nick might send to a local newspaper, describing the kind of person she or he would like to meet. Read your ad aloud to the class.

2. Advice Letters Write a letter from Marjorie to an advice columnist, asking for advice about how to deal with Nick and their crumbling relationship. Then write the columnist's response to Marjorie.

3. TV Script Imagine that you and a small group of your classmates are head writers for a TV soap opera called *Hortons Bay*. Write the script for an episode based on this story.

Activities & Explorations

1. Story Illustrations Imagine that you have been asked to illustrate "The End of Something" for a collection of Hemingway's stories. Choose one scene from the story, and draw or paint it.

~ ART

2. Survey of Romantic Breakups What is the best way to end a relationship? Conduct an informal survey of ten males and ten females in your school or neighborhood. Record their responses, and report your findings to the class.

~ PSYCHOLOGY

	Male	Female
1		
2		
3		
4		
5		
6		
7		
8		
9		
10		



Ernest Hemingway

1899–1961

Other Works

The Nick Adams Stories; A Farewell to Arms; Death in the Afternoon; The Sun Also Rises; For Whom the Bell Tolls; The Old Man and the Sea

The Faces of War War punctuated Ernest Hemingway's life and career, from the World War I passages of *In Our Time*, his first book of short stories, to his journalistic accounts of chasing German U-boats with his yacht in the Caribbean during World War II. Hemingway found war the ultimate theater, where an artist could observe human nature and what he called "grace under pressure."

On the Frontlines At the age of 18, with the onset of World War I, Hemingway volunteered as a Red Cross ambulance driver, serving on the frontlines. After three weeks, he was severely wounded. He had a lengthy recovery in an Italian hospital and a love affair with an American nurse. What he experienced during that momentous year—the closeness of death, courage, physical and emotional

pain, and romantic love—informs many of his novels and short stories.

The Lure of Adventure Other events of Hemingway's adventurous life also found their way into his fiction. In his highly acclaimed novel *The Sun Also Rises*, he depicted the members of what Gertrude Stein had dubbed the "lost generation"—young people, like himself, who were disillusioned by World War I and living a rather aimless life abroad in the 1920s. His desire for action led him to serve as a war correspondent during the Spanish civil war of the 1930s and during World War II. Out of these war experiences came a highly successful novel, *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and a much criticized one, *Across the River and Into the Trees*. An avid sports enthusiast, Hemingway also wrote about bullfighting in Spain, big-game hunting in Africa, and deep-sea fishing in Florida.

Tragic Ending In 1953 Hemingway won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Old Man and the Sea*, and in 1954 he received the Nobel Prize in literature. However, the final years of his life were not happy. Suffering from the effects of alcoholism, injuries sustained in two plane crashes, and an emotional breakdown, he committed suicide in 1961.