

ANALYSIS

“Cross-Country Snow” (1925)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“This...story is prefaced with a paragraph, Chapter XII, which describes a fatally struck bull who is looking straight at his conqueror in the bullfight, ‘roaring blood...and his legs caving.’ The story itself finds Nick recuperated from his injury, except that he cannot ‘telemark.’ The war is over, and Nick and a friend are skiing in Switzerland. Skiing (like fishing and hunting and bullfighting and drinking) is one of the things that become very important personal indulgences for the Hemingway protagonist now that he is outside society. The trouble here is that by now he is also married. What is more his wife Helen is pregnant, and they have to return to America. Nick doesn’t particularly want to go, although he approves the idea of the baby. He says, somewhat hysterically, that if you can’t ski, life ‘isn’t worth while.’ However, he must go back, and the mixed blessings of the United States and parenthood, is about all the meaning the story has.”

Philip Young

Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration
(Penn State 1952, 1966) 42-43

“The point of ‘Cross-Country Snow,’ which opens with a breathlessly described skiing episode, is something quite different from the statement that skiing is fun. The true function of the opening is to summarize, dramatize, and establish firmly a phrase of masculine living (men-without-women) which is being justly challenged by another phase of living—and in such a way that a state of tension is set up between the two. When a choice is compelled, Nick Adams, one of the skiers, readily accepts the second phase....

The most direct dramatization of the men-without-women theme occurs in ‘Cross-Country Snow.’ Here Nick Adams and his friend George, between whom there is something of a father-and-son relationship, are skiing near Montreux. When they stop for wine at the inn, the obvious pregnancy of their waitress reminds George that Nick’s wife Helen is expecting a child. Both men know that the birth of the child will certainly interrupt and probably destroy their comradeship. ‘Maybe we’ll never go skiing again,’ says George. ‘We’ve got to,’ Nick answers. ‘It isn’t worth while if you can’t.’ George wishes, boylike, that they could make some kind of promise about it. ‘There isn’t any good in promising,’ says young Nick Adams. ‘It’s hell, isn’t it?’ says George. ‘No, not exactly,’ says Nick.

Nick and George are as free and happy as Jake and Bill at Burguete. On the other side, for Nick, is all that involvement with woman, all the approaching domestication, all that half-ruefully, uncomplainingly accepted responsibility which will arrive at the moment Nick’s fatherhood begins. It is not exactly hell. That is the province of *nada*. Nick recognizes, without complaint, that domestic responsibility presents a powerful case. It could, conceivably, cancel out those things in his life that are symbolized by the skiing with a good companion. And really, universally, the opposed relations of men-without-women and men-with-women stop nowhere. The conversational episode in the inn near Montreux is simply the little circle in which they *appear* to do so.”

Carlos Baker

Hemingway: The Writer as Artist
(Princeton 1952, 1973) 121, 133

“‘Cross-Country Snow’ bridges the chasm between Villalta’s potent display and the drunkenness of the ‘ignorant Mexican savage’ in the next vignette, and the story itself describes a similar trajectory. The story begins with one of Hemingway’s purest descriptions of physical action: ‘[Nick’s] skis started slipping at the edge and he swooped down, hissing in the crystalline powder snow...’ In this passage Hemingway’s prose lines enact Nick’s experience with remarkable precision, the repetition of ‘float up and drop

down...up and down' making the sentence rise and sink with Nick's form, while present participles like 'hissing,' 'keeping,' 'turning,' and 'tightening' keep the action tautly present until the long syllables of 'snow,' 'slowed,' 'loss,' and 'speed' bring the action to a smooth halt.

Like George's telemark position, his 'trailing figure coming around in a beautiful right curve,' the images of Nick's skiing constantly recall Villalta fighting with 'his legs tight together, the muleta trailing and the sword following the curve behind.' And, like bullfighting, skiing toward a wire fence with anything less than perfect control invites disaster. This early promise, however, quickly evaporates. Like Luis, who prefers to dance and drink rather than face his responsibilities as a bullfighter, George wishes that 'we could just bum together...and not give a damn about school or anything.' But the story ends in gloom as Nick accepts marriage, fatherhood, and a forthcoming return to the States where the mountains are 'too rocky' to ski. Like Maera and the unnamed narrator of the following vignette, Nick grudgingly accepts new responsibilities."

Thomas Strychacz
"In Our Time, Out of Season"
The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway
ed. Scott Donaldson
(Cambridge U 1996) 80-81

"Nick Adams and his friend George are skiing in Switzerland in this short story, probably just above Montreux, since George mentions that he has to catch a train from there that night. They ride up the mountain on a funicular car that is finally stopped by snow across its track. The narrator then describes skiing down to an inn. They have a bottle of wine and some apple strudel, talk about the German waitress who is unmarried and pregnant, and about George's return to the United States to go back to school.

Nick is married. George asks Nick when Helen's baby is due, and he says, 'late next summer.' The story suggests the biological trap Nick finds himself in., but either it's not much of a trap or Nick is unaware of it. Neither Nick nor Helen wants to go 'back to the States,' according to Nick. When George says, 'It's hell, isn't it.' It isn't clear whether George is talking about not being able to stay in Switzerland or about being trapped by having a baby. In any case, Nick says, 'No. Not exactly.'

The ambiguity here is an important part of the story's tension. They have enjoyed skiing together in Switzerland, and they agree that the skiing isn't nearly as good in the States. George wishes they could make a promise about skiing together again, but Nick says, 'There isn't any good in promising.' They leave the inn, strap on their skis, and the story ends with the narrator stating that, at least, 'they would have the run home together.' Nick is evidently trying to work out his own ambivalent feelings about skiing, going home, and having a baby."

Charles M. Oliver
Ernest Hemingway A to Z
(Facts on File/Checkmark 1999) 67

Michael Hollister (2015)