

ANALYSIS

“The End of Something” (1925)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

The vignette preceding “The End of Something” is also about the end of something. Set in a garden that has become a battlefield, enemy soldiers coming over the wall are “potted” rather than plants. The setting of the story is a pastoral bay in peacetime where Nick ambushes Marjorie while they are fishing. In both situations the “enemy” is surprised and easy pickings, but the unfairness leaves a bad feeling. “They all came just like that” by analogy suggests that Nick may continue to treat women as he does Marjorie, as if she is an enemy, or he may become disgusted with himself.

The first paragraph is about the end of the mill in Horton’s Bay after the timber runs out. The ruin of the mill is analogous to the romance of Nick and Marjorie: There is nothing left except “its foundations showing through the swampy second growth.” Marjorie calls it “our old ruin,” asks Nick if he remembers when it was productive, and says, evoking romance, “It seems more like a castle.” The romantic phase of their relationship is in ruins and they are now in a phase of “swampy second growth.” Nick says nothing until he rows out of sight of the mill, then he is negative rather than hopeful: “They aren’t striking.” Later, after he returns from the war and goes fishing in “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick is not ready to fish in the swamp. Here his hesitations and negativity convey his reluctance to enter a “swampy second growth” with Marjorie, who fishes for an answer from him until she lands one.

When Marjorie says hopefully, “They’re feeding,” Nick replies, “But they won’t strike.” She has faith and does not give up: “Marjorie did not reel in until the boat touched the shore.” Nick has been teaching her how to fish, but she has become his equal, as indicated when she catches a perch in the bucket with her hands, cuts its head off and skins it. Her grit and tenacity are expressed in the image of her rowing the boat “out over the channel-bank, holding the line in her teeth.” Marjorie has developed her masculine side and attained a psychological balance. She is still feminine in her deference to his expertise, but it is obvious that by now she could fish without him.

Marjorie notices that Nick is acting like something is the matter and asks him, but he does not take the bait: “I don’t know.” They sit on a blanket near their campfire by the lake, where he used to feel romantic. “In back of them was the close second-growth timber of the point.” The point is, he wants out of their relationship. He is afraid of getting stuck in a swamp with Marjorie because he is beginning to resent her. He has lost his appetite and has to be coaxed to eat. When he anticipates that there is going to be a moon, Marjorie responds happily: “I know it.” Resentful, he accuses her: “You know everything. He feels threatened and is unable to accept Marjorie as an equal. Actually, as an immature male, he now feels inferior to her: “You know everything. That’s the trouble.”

Marjorie fights his bull with grace under pressure: “Oh, Nick, please cut it out! Please, please don’t be that way!” His resentment ruins the mood. Ego-centric and insecure, he exaggerates his importance in her life: “I’ve taught you everything.” As if how to fish is all there is to know. Marjorie shows restraint by not saying anything while Nick rants: “I can’t help it... You know everything.” Then she proves herself a Hemingway kind of girl: “‘Oh, shut up,’ Marjorie said. ‘There comes the moon’.” She has gumption and is romantic besides, a balance of masculine and feminine qualities. When he sulks, denying that he knows what is bothering him, she insists on the truth.

Nick is still just an adolescent: “It isn’t fun any more.” Marjorie is already mature: “Isn’t love any fun?” When he says No and sits there with his head in his hands, “Marjorie stood up.” The speed of her departure is conveyed by the leap from her standing up to calling back to him from a distance: “‘I’m going to take the boat,’ Marjorie called to him. ‘You can walk back around the point’.” Nick has been walking *around* the

point throughout the story. Marjorie by contrast is direct and honest. When he offers to push the boat out for her, she makes *her* point: “You don’t need to.”

We last see her rowing away in the moonlight. The full situation is revealed when Marjorie is gone and to our surprise Nick’s pal Bill comes out of the woods. “‘Did she go all right?’ Bill said.” So all along Nick was acting out a scenario planned by the two boys to get rid of Marjorie. “‘Yes,’ Nick said, lying, his face on the blanket.” He lies again: “there wasn’t any scene.” He feels so rotten now that he tells Bill to go away for awhile. Facing Bill is facing his guilt. Nick tricked Marjorie. He took her out fishing as if to revive their romance in a “second-growth,” he pretended not to know what was the matter, he strung her along and then he ambushed her. He dumped her because she learned what he had taught her.

We have seen the end of the mill, the end of their romance, the end of Marjorie’s respect, and the end of his innocence. No wonder he said, “I feel as though everything was gone to hell inside of me.” True love could have been heavenly. The story ends with a sight that makes the reader feel how completely Nick has betrayed Marjorie and that he is now paying the Bill: “Bill selected a sandwich from the lunch basket and walked over to have a look at the rods.”

Michael Hollister (2012)