

"The Battler"

Comprehension

- 1) How does Nick end up on the railway tracks, and what is he angry about?
- 2) What are your first impressions of Ad and Buggs? Is it usual for these two to travel together?
- 3) What are the central conflicts that drive the story? What is Nick's role?
- 4) Hemingway always has Bugs refer to the other two characters in the story as "Mr. Francis" and "Mr. Adams," not as "Ad" and "Nick." What does this show about Bugs' place in society at the time? What other evidence can you find for this?
- 5) Who is the hero of the story, Ad, Bugs or Nick? Provide evidence using what you know about the Hemingway Code.

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Close Reading & Analysis

Extract 1

1 Three or four miles of swamp. He stepped along the track, walking so he kept on the ballast between the ties, the swamp ghostly in the rising mist. His eye ached and he was hungry. He kept on hiking, putting the miles of track back of him. The swamp was all the same on both sides of the track.

5 Ahead there was a bridge. Nick crossed it, his boots ringing hollow on the iron. Down below the water showed black between the slits of ties. Nick kicked a loose spike and it dropped into the water. Beyond the bridge were hills. It was high and dark on both sides of the track. Up the track Nick saw a fire.

He came up the track toward the fire carefully. It was off to one side of the track, below the railway embankment. He had only seen the light from it. The track came out through a cut and where the fire was burning the country opened out and fell away into woods. Nick dropped carefully down the embankment and cut into the woods to come up to the fire through the trees. It was a beechwood forest and the fallen beechnut burrs were under his shoes as he walked between the trees. The fire was bright now, just at the edge of the trees. There was a man sitting by it. Nick waited behind the tree and watched. The man looked to be alone. He was sitting there with his head in his hands looking at the fire. Nick stepped out and walked into the firelight.

Questions:

- 1 Where is the story set? Where does Nick find himself, and why? How does he feel?
- 2 How does Hemingway use the setting to reflect Nick's mood and state of mind?
- 3 How does the fire contrast with the setting and Nick's situation? Why is he cautious to approach the fire, nevertheless?

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Extract 2

- 1 The man looked at Nick and smiled. In the firelight Nick saw that his face was misshapen. His nose was sunken, his eyes were slits, he had queer shaped lips. Nick did not perceive all this at once, he only saw the man's face was queerly formed and mutilated. It was like putty in color. Dead looking in the firelight.
- 5 "Don't you like my pan?" the man asked.
Nick was embarrassed.
"Sure," he said.
"Look here!" the man took off his cap.
He had only one ear. It was thickened and tight against the side of his head. Where the other
- 10 ear should have been there was a stump.
"Ever see one like that?"
"No," said Nick. It made him a little sick.
"I could take it," the man said. "Don't you think I could take it, kid?"
"You bet!"
- 20 "They all bust their hands on me," the little man said. "The couldn't hurt me."
He looked at Nick. "Sit down," he said. "Want to eat?"
"Don't bother," Nick said. "I'm going on to the town."
"Listen!" the man said. "Call me Ad."
"Sure!"
- 25 "Listen," the man said. "I'm not quite right."
"What's the matter?"
"I'm crazy."
He put on his cap. Nick felt like laughing.
"You're all right," he said.

Questions:

- 1 What do we learn about Ad in this passage? What are Nick's first impressions of him?
- 2 How does Ad describe himself, and why is Nick surprised at his honesty?
- 3 What exactly does Nick imply when he says: "You're all right," and why does he feel "like laughing"?

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Extract 3

- 1 "Hello!" Bugs answered. It was a negro's voice. Nick knew from the way he walked that he was a negro. He stood with his back to them, bending over the fire. He straightened up.
"This is my pal Bugs," Ad said. "He's crazy, too."
"Glad to meet you," Bugs said. "Where you say you're from?"
- 5 "Chicago," Nick said.
"That's a fine town," the negro said. "I didn't catch your name."
"Adams. Nick Adams."
"He says he's never been crazy, Bugs," Ad said.
"He's got a lot coming to him," the negro said. He was unwrapping a package by the fire.
- 10 "When are we going to eat, Bugs?" the prizefighter asked.
"Right away."
"Are you hungry, Nick?"
"Hungry as hell."
"Hear that, Bugs?"
- 15 "I hear most of what goes on."
"That ain't what I asked you."
"Yes. I heard what the gentleman said."
Into a skillet he was laying slices of ham. As the skillet grew hot the grease sputtered and Bugs, crouching on long nigger legs over the fire, turned the ham and broke eggs into the
- 20 skillet, tipping it from side to side to baste the eggs with the hot fat.
"Will you cut some bread out of that bag, Mister Adams?" Bugs turned from the fire.
"Sure."
Nick reached in the bag and brought out a loaf of bread. He cut six slices. Ad watched him and leaned forward.
- 25 "Let me take your knife, Nick," he said.
"No, you don't," the negro said. "Hang onto your knife, Mister Adams."

Questions:

- 1 What do we learn about Bugs in this passage? What is unusual about Bugs' and Ads' relationship, and how does it contrast with Bugs' position in society at the time?
- 2 Why does Bugs advise Nick to "hang onto [his] knife"? What reasons might Nick have for following Bugs' advice?

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Close Reading & Analysis

Extract 4

- 1 "I can wake him up any time now, Mister Adams. If you don't mind I wish you'd sort of pull out. I don't like to not be hospitable, but it might disturb him back again to see you. I hate to have to thump him and it's the only thing to do when he gets started. I have to sort of keep him away from people. You don't mind, do you, Mister Adams? No, don't thank me,
- 5 Mister Adams. I'd have warned you about him but he seemed to have taken such a liking to you and I thought things were going to be all right. You'll hit a town about two miles up the track. Mancelona they call it. Good-bye. I wish we could ask you to stay the night but it's just out of the question. Would you like to take some of that ham and some bread with you? No? You better take a sandwich," all this in a low, smooth, polite nigger voice.
- 10 "Good. Well, good-bye, Mister Adams. Good-bye and good luck!"
- Nick walked away from the fire across the clearing to the railway tracks. Out of the range of the fire he listened. The low soft voice of the negro was talking. Nick could not hear the words. Then he heard the little man say, "I got an awful headache, Bugs."
- "You'll feel better, Mister Francis," the negro's voice soothed. "Just you drink a cup of this
- 15 hot coffee."

Nick climbed the embankment and started up the track. He found he had a ham sandwich in his hand and put it in his pocket. Looking back from the mounting grade before the track curved into the hills he could see the firelight in the clearing.

Questions:

- 1 What has happened to Ad preceding this extract, and why is he unconscious?
- 2 What further details do we learn about the nature of Ad and Bugs' relationship in this passage?
- 3 As a prize-fighter who is outcast after he has sustained too many injuries, Ad travels somewhat aimlessly with Bugs, the man who is variously labelled as "a Negro" or a "nigger" by a racist society. Why does Hemingway pair such unusual, contrasting characters in his story? What lessons might Nick take away from this experience?

A Brief Guide to Hemingway's "The Battler"

Superficially, little happens in "The Battler," which was initially titled "A Great Little Fighting Machine." Although the story is little more than a vignette, it is touching in its simplicity and is remarkably psychologically sensitive and penetrating. Three unremarkable people come together by accident. Out of this brief chance encounter emerges a touching story of loyalty and camaraderie similar to John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* (1937), in which George takes care of the mentally challenged Lenny. Ad is not mentally challenged; rather he is addled by the injuries he sustained in his fighting career. The character is based on two prizefighters whom Ernest Hemingway knew—Ad Wolgast and Bat Nelson. Bugs is based on Wolgast's black trainer.

"The Battler" is one of the many Nick Adams stories for which Hemingway gained early recognition. In these stories, Nick is consistently a catalyst rather than a central figure. He enters a situation, causes something to happen, observes it, then departs relatively unchanged. The story unfolding in "The Battler" belongs to Ad and Bugs. The basic conflict is that of a man, Ad, against the world. Life has not dealt him the best hand, yet his salvation comes from the loyal devotion of his friend, a sensitive, courteous, genuinely caring person. Bugs is unfailingly patient, yet he knows the limits that he must impose on Ad to save him from himself.

"The Battler" demonstrates how two men, each bearing his own burdens, can form a symbiotic relationship that enables both to survive. Bugs is called "nigger" and has undoubtedly suffered the humiliation of racial discrimination. Hemingway shows subtly that Bugs understands his place in a society that discriminates against him solely on the basis of his pigmentation. Hemingway always has Bugs refer to the other two characters in the story as "Mr. Francis" and "Mr. Adams," not as "Ad" and "Nick." Although Ad is the former prizefighter, Bugs is the story's strong character. Without him it is doubtful that Ad could continue his hobo existence. It is also possible that if Bugs were not burdened by the responsibility that he has accepted for Ad, he might have a better life for himself. Nevertheless, Bugs is committed to Ad for the long haul. He is uncomplaining, although he is realistic in dealing with Ad.

Nick Adams merely passes through a situation. He stumbles into it without planning to do so, is briefly engaged in it, then, having observed its dynamics, he departs at the appropriate time. The story is thematically tight. Hemingway wastes no words in its telling. He shows more than he tells, revealing character convincingly yet almost incidentally. The result is a story that has remarkable thematic and structural coherence. In this story, as in the other Nick Adams stories, the central character is one of society's rejects.

Society has used and discarded Ad Francis. This is the fate, seemingly, of those who battle against society. Ad's descent began presumably because he passed his manager off as his sister. His eventual marriage to her evoked a public outcry that destroyed the marriage and essentially ended Ad's career. Outraged at the injustice of what happened to him, Ad then became uncontrollably violent, picking fights and eventually ending up in jail. On his release, Bugs rescued him and has devoted himself to controlling him to spare him further difficulties, yet coddling him like a dependent child.