

ANALYSIS

“Indian Camp” (1925)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

The vignette preceding “Indian Camp” is counterpoint: “Everybody was drunk,” contrasts to the doctor in the story who is clearheaded but just as oblivious to his environment as the soldiers getting drunk in combat and going along the road in the dark with a kitchen fire identifying their position to the enemy. Both the vignette and the story take place at night in primitive circumstances and the characters in both are unprepared. The drunk kitchen corporal is just as self-absorbed and unaware of danger as the doctor proves to be. Ironically the only death in either one occurs in the story set in peacetime.

The doctor takes his young son along with him to deliver a baby at the Indian Camp, to teach him about life, which is ironic due to his own limitations. Their companion Uncle George has a humanity that is contrasted to the detachment of the doctor, balancing the presentation of white people in relations with the Indians. Uncle George hands out cigars to the two Indians who row their boats across the lake, as if he is the happy father of the expected Indian baby. He is optimistic, relates to the Indians as equals, and is well ahead of the doctor in crossing between cultures, just as he is in the lead boat. The distance between white civilization and the Indian camp in the wilderness is evoked by crossing the lake in the dark and hiking deep into the forested hills.

In the camp they find an Indian woman in labor for two days now, screaming in agony. Her husband is lying in the upper bunk because “He had cut his foot very badly with an ax three days before.” His physical pain is the *objective correlative* of his emotional pain while listening to the screams of his wife. This Indian has hurt himself by accident, whereas his wife is going to be hurt by the negligence of the white doctor. This implies that Indians are both to some extent responsible for their misfortunes and to some extent victims. The woman is first of all a victim of Nature, since she requires an operation to deliver her baby. Without help from the white doctor, she and her baby would probably die. Contrary to his detractors Hemingway is not a primitive, he believes in civilization.

The doctor explains to his young son Nick why the woman is screaming, in physical terms. The boy asks if he can give her something to make her stop. His father says no, “But her screams are not important. I don’t hear them because they are not important.” Doctors learn to dissociate from feelings in order to function most efficiently, as Hemingway saw his own father do when as a boy he accompanied him on calls occasionally. “The husband in the upper bunk rolled over against the wall.” To him her screams are so important he is about to cut his own throat to stop them, contradicting the stereotype of the stoical Indian. The word “bunk” is a pun on how the husband feels about the white doctor’s indifference to the pain of his wife. His rolling over suggests his stomach rolling over. He is against the wall, there is nothing he can do to help her and he cannot bear her screaming for days.

The doctor explains to the boy that “babies are supposed to be born head first but sometimes they’re not. When they’re not they make a lot of trouble for everybody.” So the baby is merely “a lot of trouble.” As a father, the doctor is setting an example to his son of callous self-absorption, dissociation and racist condescension. Why did he come without any anesthetic? The doctor puts his own head first, yet apparently he forgot to bring his medical bag. Would he have been so careless if the patient were white? As his opposite, Uncle George is emotional when he and three Indian men hold the woman down and she bites him on the arm: “Damn squaw bitch!” Ironically, it is Uncle George who has the most sympathy for the woman. Most of the Indian men in the camp distance themselves from the screaming and the Indians who assist in the operation are detached enough to find humor in the situation.

The boy dissociates himself for a different reason than his father. “He was looking away so as not to see what his father was doing.... Nick did not watch. His curiosity had been gone for a long time.” He is too

squeamish to look at the afterbirth in the basin he holds for his father, who is proud of himself: “He was feeling exalted and talkative as football players are in the dressing room after a game.” The comparison to a football player after a game implies that the father is being adolescent. To the Indian parents this is no game. When the doctor finally expresses feelings, he boasts: “‘That’s one for the medical journal, George,’ he said. ‘Doing a Caesarian with a jack-knife and sewing it up with nine-foot, tapered gut leaders’.” He is not properly equipped, neither professionally nor as a human being.

Looking at his bitten arm, George is sarcastic in response to the doctor: “‘Oh, you’re a great man, all right,’ he said.” His criticism is immediately validated by the discovery that the husband in the upper bunk has cut his throat: “‘Ought to have a look at the proud father. They’re usually the worst sufferers in these little affairs,’ the doctor said. ‘I must say he took it all pretty quietly’.” What an ironic understatement. “‘Little affair’”? The doctor knew better, but he was too self-absorbed to get the husband out of the bunk, if not entirely out of the shanty. That point is made when he tells George to take the boy out of the shanty—too late. The husband in the upper bunk was only inches away from the doctor’s face whenever he stood up straight while operating on the screaming wife. Doc Adams is dissociated from his heart like the doctors in Hawthorne who commit the “Unpardonable Sin.”

Uncle George is so critical of the doctor’s conduct he does not go along with him back to the boats at the lake. He stays with the Indians. Nick asks his father why the husband killed himself. “I don’t know, Nick. He couldn’t stand things I guess.” The doctor is not equipped to be a father either. He can answer medical questions but not one about what matters most. He seems unaware of his own culpability in the suicide, is repressing it, or is unwilling to confess it to his son. As the sun rises, a fish jumps and makes a circle on the water, imaging the circularity in Nature. Nick trails his hand in the water and feels its warmth contrasting with the chill of the morning. He has been exposed to the great opposites of birth and death, spanning life, but he is still too young to understand how they apply to him. And his father is no help. “In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die.” This is the dissociation from death characteristic of the young, who are inclined to feel immortal. Nicky is still naïve in the dawning of his life.

Not yet disillusioned with his father, Nick feels secure with him rowing the boat. Later, by the time of “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife,” he is leading his father. By then his father is contemplating suicide like the Indian husband because “he couldn’t stand things.” That story makes clear *why*, by portraying his oppressive wife. It is no wonder that the doctor dissociates from his feelings in his personal life as well. Still later, Hemingway’s own father killed himself. Most critics have been inclined to insist on the personal origins of the Nick Adams stories and to identify Hemingway with Nick. On the contrary, in this story Nick represents innocent young people in general in the tradition of Realism. Most children have faith in their fathers that is not entirely warranted and then eventually become disillusioned by their limitations. Seeing Nick as Hemingway limits Nick’s significance, whereas seeing him as broadly representative expands the meanings of his experiences toward universality. His name, for instance, places Nick Adams in the long line of American Adams in our literature.

Michael Hollister (2012)