

ANALYSIS

“Ten Indians” (1927)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“Most readers of ‘The Indians’ will be aware that part of its meaning centers around a disillusionment in love, presumably a first one. Nick learns from his father that Prudence Mitchell has been unfaithful, and feels that his heart is broken, that he will never recover. But just as the waves during the night have washed the beach, the passage of the night has already erased part of the agony: ‘and he was awake a long time before he remembered that his heart was broken.’ The ending implies that Nick’s heart will not be broken long, for the process of adjustment to the loss has already begun.

But if this is all the reader finds in the story he must feel that Hemingway has been uneconomical in approaching his conclusion; over half of the story deals with Nick’s ride home with the Garners. True, we learn in this first half that Nick has an Indian girl, that he feels ‘hollow and happy inside’ when he is teased about her. The reader might say, and rightly, that this scene intensifies the shock in the scene with the father, but a skillful story writer could prepare for that in much less space. Besides, we must ask ourselves why there is so much discussion about Indians if the story is only what we have said it is so far. We must give the author the benefit of the doubt and examine the story more closely.

Hemingway calls our attention to his title by mentioning three times in the opening sentences of his story that there were *nine* drunken Indians along the road. The tenth Indian of the title must be Prudence Mitchell. The author’s insistence upon the specific number of Indians should lead us to suspect that the title alludes to something—in this case to a popular anonymous counting rhyme called ‘Ten Little Injuns.’ The opening and concluding couplets of one of the versions are:

Ten little Injuns standing in a line--
One went home, and then there were nine.

Nine little Injuns swinging on a gate--
One tumbled off, and then there were eight.

Eight little Injuns tried to get to heaven--
One kicked the bucket, and then there were seven.

.....

Two little Injuns fooling with a gun--
One shot the other, and then there was one.

One little Injun living all alone—
He got married, and then there was none!

The various versions of this rhyme recount the loss one by one of ten Indians and conclude on some variation of ‘and then there was none.’ In his story Hemingway makes the loss centrally a spiritual and moral loss. By her immoral behavior and her unfaithfulness to Nick, Prudence becomes the tenth Indian, as worthless as the nine drunken Indians passed on the road, that is, from the point of view of the white people in the story. Our discussion so far would seem to indicate that the story has two thematic strands, one focusing on Nick’s disillusionment and the other on the degradation of the Indian. To see the relation of these we need to examine the attitudes toward the Indians of the various characters in the story.

Joe Garner shows no sympathy for or understanding of the Indians. To him they are nuisances, physical objects like logs that block the road. He drags the ninth Indian out of the wheel rut into the bushes,

comments matter-of-factly: 'That makes nine of them just between here and the edge of town.' Joe Garner does not realize that the drunken Indians are a by-product of his own white civilization. They are drunk on white men's whiskey, lying in the ruts made by the wheels of the white men's machines, their faces literally in the dirt of white men's progress. Ironically they have been in town celebrating Independence Day, the beginning of a nation that defeated and debased them.

If to Joe Garner the Indians are objects, to Mrs. Garner they are so despicable and incomprehensible that she can only say: 'Them Indians,' which she says twice. As a wife and a mother, as a bearer of standards of morality and responsibility, she can express her disgust only by the epithet, 'Them Indians,' which clearly indicates that she does not think of Indians as individual human beings but as members of a despised race. She obviously does not try to understand. The anonymity of the Indians to the Garners is further indicated by Joe Garner's 'All Indians wear the same kind of pants.' Not even by their clothes may they be distinguished (clothes, incidentally, supplied them by a government as a token of responsibility for the conditions in which they have been placed).

The Garner boys, Carl and Frank, reflect the attitudes of their parents. Frank makes the implied comparison between pulling the Indian out of the road and the killing of a snake, and a few seconds later Carl tells Nick he ought to know skunks because he has an Indian girl, and they smell the same. The attributing of a bad odor to a despised race is a familiar cruelty. Mrs. Garner rebukes Carl for saying something that is 'not nice,' but he, of course, has learned from his parent the feeling state that lies back of the statement. Joe Garner even thinks it is funny and laughs.

The callousness of the Garners' attitude toward the Indians is intensified by Hemingway's portrayal of them as a rather typical farm family, hard-working, well-intentioned, and kindly. Mr. and Mrs. Garner are happily married, and the family relationship is good. They are very kind to Nick, take him with them to the celebration and invite him to eat when they return home. At the beginning of the story Nick not only does not share the Garners' judgment of the Indians, but has an Indian girlfriend about whom he feels *proud* to be teased (because he feels sure of her love). His love for Prudence is simple and admirable, the love of a boy for a girl, unconscious of racial distinctions or assumptions of superiority and inferiority. His idealized love seems unaffected by the Garners' depreciation, even by Mrs. Garner's unintentionally cruel remark: 'Carl can't get a girl, *not even a squaw.*'

The attitude of Nick's father about the Indians is a little harder to determine. Obviously he has not encouraged Nick to think of the Indians as objects unworthy of love, for Nick has his Indian girl and the conversation after Nick returns home indicates the father sympathizes with the relationship. Though the father does say at one point in the questionings, 'The Indians were all in town getting drunk,' we need not take this as indicating any identity of his and the Garners' view. Nick obviously reflects his father's view, but with a difference—his father has already had to come to terms with social reality.

In various ways Hemingway suggests that the father has chosen to live where he does and bring up his son the way that he has. The father is reading when Nick approaches the cabin; he is gentle and understanding with Nick (for instance, he doesn't reprimand him for leaving his shoes); he has taught him to be mannerly. Though he lives back in the woods, Nick's father seems to be no backwoodsman. It would seem that one of the chief functions of the short scene about Nick at the Garners' place is to show us that Nick has been brought up with care. Hemingway stresses how well-mannered Nick is. Nick is very careful to thank Mrs. Garner for taking him to the celebration, carries out her request to tell Carl that he is wanted, and thanks Joe Garner also. During his supper at home Nick wipes his mouth on a napkin. Certainly, then, Nick does not have an Indian girl because he has been brought up as a motherless savage....

The Garners seem chiefly interested in the practicalities of life, in conquering and changing nature. Skunks are nuisances that should be killed, roads should be graveled; and horses are to be kept from getting overly tired for they must work tomorrow. Nick and his father live harmoniously in nature and seem to appreciate it as something to be enjoyed rather than used. Instead of attending the ball game Nick's father fishes and walks. In many quietly understated details in the story Hemingway shows us Nick as a sensitive person responding esthetically to the world around him: Prudence is not an object acceptable only as a

means of sexual experience; Nick speaks with pleasure of seeing two skunks hunting on the beach, looks back at the lights of Petoskey, and walks home barefoot with the dew cool on his feet.

The relationship between Nick and his father in the final scene is honest and tender. The father knows that Nick's questions will lead toward the catastrophe of revelation. He does not volunteer any information, knowing how it will hurt his son, but he does not lie. Question by question Nick draws his father out. And the answers lead inevitably into an adult world of betrayal and infidelity—the kind of world that Nick almost compulsively seeks to know and that the father wishes Nick did not have to know. But the reality must be faced, as unpleasant as it is. When the father is finally forced to say, 'She was in the woods with Frank Washburn, I ran into them. They were having quite a time,' he cannot look at Nick. We observe that Nick is so shaken that he does not hear his father say that her companion was Frank Washburn. Several questions later, after having definitely established that his father is not mistaken in his identification and that Prudence has definitely been unfaithful, Nick asks, 'Who was it with her?'

With a tender regard for his son's agony, worse than any physical suffering, the father leaves Nick in order to give him a chance to give expression to his hurt. By the simple understatement of 'he had been crying' Hemingway registers the grief. Nick's final question—'Where were they in the woods'—and his father's answer imply that Prudence has been unfaithful in Nick and Prudence's own trysting place. Considerately again the father suggests that Nick go to bed where he can be alone and suffer his way through to adjustment.

The adjustment will be made easier by much that he has already heard and seen. In the beginning of the story, we recall, it is Nick who remembers that there were nine drunken Indians, and it is Nick who looks 'out from the back seat to see the Indian where Joe had dragged him alongside of the road.' By the time the story opens, Nick has already moved far toward the discovery that he finally makes, but it is his experience with Prudence that makes real what has been only abstractly realized before.

A poorer writer than Hemingway would have had Nick cast off Prudence in his movement toward sharing the values of his own society. But it is Prudence who betrays, who finally shows the same moral irresponsibility as the nine drunken Indians passed on the road home. She is like them. The nine Indians *were* drunk. Prudence is promiscuous. But they are also victims of an environment imposed upon them by Garners, by a white civilization. Nick, in turn, has unavoidably absorbed values which force him to link the tenth Indian with the other nine: 'and then there was none!' But if Nick is betrayed, he also betrays: his failure to remember sooner that his heart is broken symbolizes his reconciliation with an unjust and ugly reality."

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