

ANALYSIS

“The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” (1925)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

CONFLICTING INTERPRETATIONS

“Dr. and Mrs. Adams are Dr. and Mrs. Hemingway, and the depiction of Dr. Adams sitting silently in his bedroom in Michigan with a shotgun on his knee while his wife unsparingly rebukes him for his lack of Christian charity chillingly foretells the tragedy that would soon overtake the house of Hemingway.... Dr. Hemingway, it turned out, simply thought of ‘The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife’ as a fanciful story decked out with recognizable details. ‘I have read your article on “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” in the Dec. no. of *Transatlantic Review*,’ he wrote his son. ‘I know your memory is *very* good for details and I surely saw that old log on the beach as I read your article—I got out the Old Bear Lake [Walloon Lake] book and showed Carol & Leicester the photos of Nic [Nick] Boulton and Billy Tabeshaw on the beach sawing the big old beech log. That was when you were 12 yrs old.’”

Kenneth S. Lynn

Hemingway

(Simon & Schuster 1987) 257, 256

“‘The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife,’ the next story in *In Our Time*, plays a satiric counterpoint to ‘Indian Camp’ and extends Hemingway’s inquiry into history, cultural relationships, and masculine authority. Structurally, the two stories have much in common. Both stories begin by a lake, though in ‘The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife’ three Indians arrive in the doctor’s garden to perform a task for him, rather than three whites arriving at the Indian camp; instead of a pregnant woman in the dark cabin, the doctor’s wife lies in the cottage ‘with the blinds drawn’; and the story ends, like the first, with a moment of camaraderie between Nick and his father. The medical triumph the doctor wishes to write about in ‘Indian Camp’ is transformed now into a possibly true but certainly weak excuse for his humiliating encounter with Dick Boulton: ‘Well, Dick owes me a lot of money for pulling his squaw through pneumonia and I guess he wanted a row so he wouldn’t have to take it out in work.’ This time the medical journals remain ‘unopened.’ Most important, the easy mastery the doctor demonstrated in the Indian camp abruptly disappears during the confrontation with Dick.

Why his authority disappears is of great interest. Most obviously, the doctor backs down because he is outmatched by the superior strength of Dick Boulton. The ‘big man’ Dick Boulton supplants the ‘great man’ of ‘Indian Camp’ in a story that is replete with Dick’s dramatization of his phallic power. Wielding no fewer than three axes, Dick, secure in the pertinence of his name and in his knowledge (as the doctor admits) that he bears the ‘tools,’ slights the doctor’s manhood: “‘Don’t go off at half cock, Doc,’ Dick said.” Dick Boulton draws attention to an impotence that Hemingway, along with many other writers of his generation, saw as endemic to a sexually frustrated white civilization overcommitted to the kind of cold-blooded technical expertise that the doctor exploited in ‘Indian Camp’...

‘The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife,’ however, turns out to be much more complex, for the doctor’s humiliation is born originally of a moral blow to his self-esteem. Arguably the logs are ‘stolen,’ as Dick suggests. The real point is that they symbolize a centuries-old expropriation of Indian land, of which the doctor’s garden, fenced off from the surrounding wilderness, is one example. Even the mark of the scaler’s hammer in the log shows that it belongs to ‘White’ and McNally, which gives rise to a double irony: The mark exposes the historic truth of Boulton’s remark that ‘You know they’re stolen as well as I do,’ in the sense that White has stolen from the Indian, but the immorality of the act comes home to the doctor only in the idea of a white stealing from White. Manifest Destiny—the idea that whites had a moral and God-granted right to possess the lands of people less civilized than they—now rebounds ironically against the doctor. In ‘Indian Camp,’ the doctor relied on the superiority of Western know-how to support a symbolic

appropriation of the cabin space. In 'Doctor's Wife,' with the fact of appropriation suddenly evident, the moral superiority of white culture is shown to be mere covering for an aggressive exploitation of natural resources. Tellingly, Boulton's first action with the log is to have the obscuring dirt cleaned off: 'Wash it off. Clean off the sand.... I want to see who it belongs to.'

Back in the cottage, the doctor pumps shells in and out of his shotgun in a masturbatory attempt to regain his lost confidence in his manhood—first to prove that he is a 'man' and, second, to demonstrate his access to the cultural and technological prowess that 'won the West' for white settlers. Having put away the gun, however, the doctor's humiliations continue. Sent on an errand by his wife to find Nick, he must first apologize for slamming the screen door, unlike Dick Boulton, who deliberately leaves the gate into the woods open. But the errand does give him the opportunity to reprise the father-son relationship played so powerfully at the end of 'Indian Camp.' Nick's 'I want to go with you' allows his father to reassert an authoritative role ('His father looked down at him') in a way that is reminiscent of 'Indian Camp': the son sitting/sitting in the stern, the father standing/rowing. But the likeness is only superficial. The doctor's escape into the woods merely points up his inability to confront his wife directly. Moreover, the impetus for their retreat comes from Nick, who 'know[s] where there's black squirrels.' Having lost the authority he possessed while rowing and steering the boat, having forfeited the privileged knowledge Nick once sought, the doctor follows the leader into the woods his child knows better than he."

Thomas Strychacz
"In Our Time, Out of Season"
The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway
(Cambridge U 1996) 64-65

The discussion of "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" by Thomas Strychacz is typical of politically correct literary analysis during the Feminist Period (1970-present). Strychacz claims that (1) the story is a criticism of white men (white women are innocent) for stealing Indian land; (2) this critic blames white men for advancing civilization; (3) he emphasizes the doctor's loss of "male authority," a favorite theme of Feminists; (4) he avoids criticizing the wife, which would offend Feminists; (5) he does not even mention the similarity of the couple to Hemingway's own parents because that would imply criticism of both the wife and Grace Hemingway, with whom Feminist critics have identified; (6) he interprets the doctor's handling of his gun as "masturbatory" rather than evidence that he is contemplating suicide partly because of his wife—a thought as intolerable to Feminists as it was to Grace Hemingway; (7) he makes false statements about explicit facts in the text; (8) he ignores previously published objective analyses; and (9) instead he recommends the subjective Feminist Judith Fetterley, who grossly misreads Hemingway and accuses him of being a "misogynist." Strychacz makes it seem as if the story is entitled "The Doctor and the Indian" rather than "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife."

This story about retreating from realities is preceded by a vignette rendering an historic retreat of Greeks from the Turks. The doctor "always assumed" that the lumbermen would not come for the logs that broke free of their booms and drifted ashore onto his land. "Always" implies that he has been right every time. Most people would claim the right to dispose of debris that invades their property and lies unclaimed indefinitely. Doc Adams has been salvaging logs that otherwise would rot and go to waste, rather than cut down living trees for firewood. He is a conservationist. Dick Boulton has been paid to cut up the stray logs repeatedly and has never complained before. What has changed? "Well, Dick owes me a lot of money for pulling his squaw through pneumonia and I guess he wanted a row so he wouldn't have to take it out in work." Doc has given Dick employment, a lot of credit and his wife's life.

Strychacz bases his interpretation on the moral credibility of the least moral character in the story: Dick Boulton is a "very lazy" dishonest bully. True, legally speaking, the situation is ambiguous. The logs *do* belong to the lumbermen, as Dick declares after cleaning them off: "It belongs to White and McNally." Three times he accuses Doc Adams of stealing the logs from the lumbermen to provoke him into a fight. "Dick was a big man. He knew how big he was. He liked to get into fights." If Doc could have controlled his emotions—"his face was red" like a muleta—he could have let this bull pass by with grace under pressure by replying, "I'm salvaging logs that would go to waste." Instead, he is intimidated, loses control, makes an empty threat and walks away from the bull redfaced and humiliated. Hemingway saw his first

bullfight in 1923, wrote this story in 1924, and calls attention to the metaphor by using literal bullfighting vignettes following this story in *In Our Time* (1925). One of the things he called his mother was Miss Stein, comparing her to the famous Gertrude, who first recommended bullfights to him.

Strychacz claims that because White is an owner of the logs, the story is about white men stealing land from Indians a century before. On the contrary, Dick Boulton does not claim that Indians own the logs. His accusation that Doc is “stealing” the logs is based on legal ownership in the present. This is why his accusation makes Doc “very uncomfortable.” The name White acknowledges that whites now own logs from land once inhabited by Indians, but Boulton is a blunt man, not a symbolist. He is not expressing an ethnic grievance, he is trying to avoid work by provoking a fight.

The interpretation by Strychacz is based on his assumption that Dick Boulton is an Indian: “...three Indians arrive in the doctor’s garden...” However, in fact, Dick is a “half-breed.” What is more, many locals believe that “he was really a white man.” Hemingway here discourages the reader from attributing Dick’s bad behavior to his being an Indian, whereas Strychacz attributes the worst behavior in the story to an “Indian.” According to politically correct dogma, by picking a fight, Dick is behaving more like a white man than an Indian. And he is the one carrying “three axes.” Yet Strychacz blames the conservationist doctor for “aggressive exploitation of natural resources.”

Doc Adams retreats to his cottage, where he is irritated by the sight of medical journals he should have read but has not even unwrapped. This evasion of professional responsibility is consistent with his evasion of moral responsibility in response to the bull of Dick. These evasions are followed by a third when he denies that he lost his temper. Hemingway discretely differentiates his own mother from the doctor’s wife by making Mrs. Adams a Christian Scientist—an irony implying that she does not believe in her husband and considers him dispensable. Her tone is condescending as she lectures him like a child. Though citing scripture is a stock response suggesting rigid dogmatism, the scripture she quotes in this instance is, ironically, consistent with Hemingway’s moral imperative to control emotions like a bullfighter controls a bull. “He who ruleth his spirit is greater than he that taketh a city.” If he did rule his spirit Doc could have had a moral victory over the bully Boulton on a lesser scale than that of the bullfighter Romero when he gets beaten up by Robert Cohn in *The Sun Also Rises*.

The wife is the temperamental opposite of the bully Boulton, yet she is a bully too. Both of them “ruleth” the Doc. And she “ruleth” her own spirit by hiding in bed in a darkened room with the blinds drawn, closed off from the facts of life—from everything embodied in Boulton—in her own little world. Yet, ironically, she urges her husband, “Please don’t try to keep anything from me.” So he tells her and she refuses to believe him, demonstrating why he keeps things from her. She even denies that anyone would do what the reader has just seen Dick do. She is a pacifist liberal who refuses to face human nature, disrespects her husband and maintains a supine posture of superiority. The balance in the title “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” suggests what Hemingway later says of Francis and Margot Macomber, that “the way they were together now was no one person’s fault.” At the same time, however, the story hints ominously that the doctor is so depressed, his wife might eventually drive him to suicide. She is a genteel man-licker killing her husband slowly and less directly than Margot kills her husband.

The doctor and his wife have separate bedrooms in separate worlds. He sits alone on his bed, loads his shotgun with shells, then pumps them out again—once. He feels violent but does not “go off at half cock.” The shells are “yellow” like he feels. Strychacz calls this single action “masturbatory.” Actually the mood is just the opposite: Doc is feeling impotent, cowardly and suicidal, not sexual. Strychacz argues that by passively emptying his gun Doc is trying to regain his manhood by demonstrating the “technological prowess that ‘won the West’ for white settlers.” This critic believes that the pioneers masturbated their way West. He is as far out of touch with reality as the doctor’s wife. Both take the side of Dick Boulton and accuse Doc of being in the wrong. Their false accusations make them both parallel to Boulton. In reducing the story to manhood and masturbation Strychacz is as crude as Dick.

The futile dialogue while Doc handles his shotgun builds tension and suspense until he “put the shotgun in the corner behind the dresser”—so that if he loses control of his emotions again it will be out of easy reach to use on himself as his final evasion. His only cure. When she asks him to tell Nick she wants to see

him, Doc does not answer her. He is still angry. He does not face her bull, just as he did not face the bull of Boulton. In bullfighting the cowardly bull is more dangerous than a fearless bull, implying that Mrs. Adams is more dangerous than Boulton. Again Doc walks away. He goes outside allowing the screendoor to slam behind him as a retort to his wife, like the bang of a gun--a final slamming of the door. He knew it would slam, undoubtedly having heard it a thousand times.

But then Doc apologizes, “outside her window with the blinds drawn.” In contrast, reversing gender stereotypes, his wife is insensitive, indifferent and oblivious to his feelings—as Doc was to the Indian mother giving birth in “Indian Camp,” a counterpoint to this story. His wife’s acceptance of his apology makes her seem to be the tolerant, sensitive and charitable one. Doc walks away “in the heat” and into the dark hemlock woods, the word *hemlock* connoting his spiritual death. Cooling off in the woods, he finds Nick reading, which seems to identify the boy more with his mother than with his father, who does not even read his medical journals, except that he is reading in the woods rather than in a darkened room with the blinds drawn. Doc tells Nick that his mother wants to see him, doing as she asked. In the end he is able to rebel against his wife only passively, by allowing Nick to choose for himself.

“His father looked down at him.” Nick still looks up to his father and wants to be with him. Doc takes Nick’s book and puts it into his pocket, affirming experience in Nature in contrast to lying in bed in a darkened room with the blinds drawn. Nick is already more bold than his father, knowledgeable about wildlife and eager to explore. Their roles are reversing. Nick is now leading his father into the dark woods to observe black squirrels, the darkness evoking ultimate death and the sinister challenges of Nature, like the swamp, later, in “Big Two-Hearted River.” Hemingway once said that he killed wild game so that he would not kill himself. Doc is unarmed, but his shotgun is loaded and waiting.

Politically correct critics like Strychacz were all in bed together in a darkened room with the blinds drawn refusing to look at facts and citing instead the scripture of their ideology.

Michael Hollister (2012)

“‘The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife’ teaches Nick something about the solidity of the male sex; more precisely, it presents him with the conclusion that he is completely dissatisfied with his mother. A workman tries to pick a fight with Doctor Adams so that he can more easily avoid paying a large bill he owes for treatment of his wife. The doctor refuses to fight, and Nick’s mother, who is a Christian Scientist and will not believe that a man would do what the workman has just done, quotes Scripture. When the doctor tells Nick that his mother wants him, and Nick wants to go hunting with his father instead, the doctor says, ‘All right. Come on, then,’ and they go squirrel hunting, leaving the doctor’s wife to wonder where Nick is. Nick is still a small boy, apparently (he calls his father ‘Daddy’), but even so it is clear that he cannot stomach his mother’s naïve refusal to face facts.”

Philip Young

Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration
(Penn State, 1952, 1966) 33

“Nick is not witness to his father’s partly deserved humiliation in ‘The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife’ as an arrogant Indian [*sic*] hired hand forces him to back down from a fight. Nor does he hear his mother’s priggish Christian Scientist’s defense of the Indian. But when his father, leaving for a walk, tells Nick his mother wants him, the boy firmly responds, ‘I want to go with you... I know where there’s black squirrels.’ And off they go as the story ends. The genius and intent buried in the tale surface to these final moments when Nick first appears and speaks his only words in the entire story. To that point each parent’s shortcomings have been present and, one suddenly realizes, need not have been, for, like any perceptive child, he has already on like occasions watched, absorbed, and formed his preference. When called upon to choose, he does so unhesitatingly.”

Arthur Waldhorn

A Reader’s Guide to Ernest Hemingway
(Farrar, Straus/Noonday, 1972) 55-56

Michael Hollister (2015)

