

Misinterpreted Figure in Hemingway's "Indian Camp"

—Doctor Adams

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Since the publication of Hemingway's "Indian Camp" in 1924, many scholars have considered Doctor Adams to be insensitive, cold-hearted, ethically immoral. Some others labeled him as a racist and a sexist. After a scrupulous and strenuous close reading together with extensive reviewing and analyzing of relevant references, the author of this paper finds that Uncle George has always been misinterpreted over the time. This paper aims to point out the misunderstanding, misinterpretation or even distortion in the previous researches, in an attempt to defend for Doctor Adams and put the record straight.

Keywords: Hemingway, "Indian Camp", Doctor Adams, misinterpreted, defend

Introduction

Doctor Adams is a character in Hemingway's short story "Indian Camp", which was first published in 1924 in *The Transatlantic Review* and in 1925 in a collection of short stories, *In Our Time*. Doctor Adams, together with his brother George and his son Nick, was sent to an Indian camp to help an Indian woman who was having a hard time giving birth. Due to the critical condition, Dr. Adams performed an emergency cesarean section on the woman with a large jackknife without anesthesia or professional surgical equipment, and closed the incision with nine feet of catgut, ultimately saving the lives of both the mother and the newborn. While Dr. Adams was basking in the success of the operation, he accidentally found that the woman's husband, who had been lying in the upper bunk due to a leg injury, had quietly cut his neck with a razor.

Many scholars regard Doctor Adams as insensitive, cold-hearted, ethically immoral. Some others labeled him as a racist and a sexist. Through close reading of the text and related literature, the author finds that this figure has been misinterpreted by people. This article is intended to defend Dr. Adams, point out some serious misunderstandings and even misinterpretations in the existing research, and try to correct some of the previous interpretations.

The Image of Doctor Adams

Before the publication of "Indian Camp", Hemingway edited out about a third of the first part of the novel, which Philip Young later published as "Three Shots" in *The Nick Adams Stories* (1972). Through a close reading of the text of "Three Shots" and "Indian Camp", it is not difficult to find that Dr. Adams is a very loving father

and caring brother, but also a relatively professional doctor, he is broad-minded, calm, and is able to rise to the occasion.

Doctor Adams as a Loving Father and Caring Brother

From the perspective of a combination of stylistics and narratology, Lamb made a detailed study of Hemingway's "Three Shots" and "Indian Camp". In his 80-page paper, Lamb uses the word "insensitive" three times and "insensitivity" twice to describe Dr. Adams. Lamb comments that "He has left his young child all alone in the woods and is separated from him by an entire lake when he hears the warning shots, and it does not even cross his mind that there might possibly be genuine cause for concern. For all he knows, Nick is presently being devoured by feral dogs!" (Lamb, 2013, p. 23). According to Sanford, the campsite where Nick, his father and Uncle George were staying was probably Brevoort Lake in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where young Ernest had fished with his father and his Uncle Tyley in 1908 (Sanford, 1962, pp. 90-92) "near his parents' summer house in northern Michigan" (Pavloska, 2000, p. 59). They must have frequented there before. From Nick's description, we can infer that the campsite was quite safe and peaceful; moreover, his father had left a rifle with him to warn them with three shots in case of emergency, "There was no noise anywhere. Nick felt if he could only hear a fox bark or an owl or anything he would be all right. He was not afraid of anything definite as yet"; it was death, something indefinite that he was afraid of, which had made him obsessed with since a church service a few weeks before (Hemingway, 1972, pp. 13-14). Therefore, it is not the latent danger from the environment but his obsession about death that has made him fearful.

When Uncle George's fishing plan was spoiled by Nick's three shots of warning, he broke out into a furious rant cursing and complaining that they shouldn't have brought Nick to camping with them. Doctor Adams comforted Uncle George while defending Nick by saying that "... He's pretty small... I know he's an awful coward... but we're all yellow at that age" Then he asked George to "forget it" as he would "get plenty of fishing anyway" (Hemingway, 1972, pp. 14-15). Back in the tent, Dr. Adams asked Nick, using the nickname Nickie, what had happened. Nick said he might have heard a fox or a wolf. The next morning, Dr. Adams found "two big basswood trees the leaned across each so that they rubbed together in the wind" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 15). The word "found" suggests that Dr. Adams did it on purpose to dispel Nick's fear, and then to reassure Nick that he need not be afraid in the forest, because nothing can hurt him, and when Nick asks, "Not even lightning?" Dr. Adams took the opportunity to teach him the common knowledge of lightning protection in the wild, and successfully diverted Nick's attention. When the Indian husband committed suicide, Doctor Adams's first reaction was to ask George to take Nick out of the shanty, but Nick had already seen it, so Dr. Adams blamed himself by saying, "I'm terribly sorry I brought you along, Nickie... It was an awful mess to put you through" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 20). Here, Dr. Adams used the nickname Nickie again. Thus it can be seen that Doctor Adams is a very loving father, patient, sensitive, and good-tempered.

In "Three Shots," When Dr. Adams went fishing with Uncle George, it is Dr. Adams that was rowing the boat. And in "Indian Camp", on their way to the Indian camp, Dr. Adams sat on the boat from the Indian camp holding Nick in his arms. At the end of the story, Dr. Adams rowed back to their campsite with Nick sitting in the stern of the boat. When the operation started, the Indian woman bit Uncle George on the arm; worrying about the bite, Uncle George looked again and again at his arm. As soon as the operation was over, Dr. Adams

said with concern that he would put some medicine on it, totally ignoring Uncle George's impatient attitude and sarcastic tone in his remarks "Oh, you are a great man, all right," in response to his proud assertion "That's one for the medical journal, George... Doing a Caesarian with a jackknife and sewing it up with nine-foot, tapered gut leaders" (Hemingway, 1972, pp. 19-20). So Dr. Adams was acting as a caring brother, tolerant and kind to George.

Doctor Adams as a Conscientious and Professional Doctor

Doctor Adams has been labeled as a racist trampling on the dignity of Indians, a sexist objectifying the Indian woman, an irresponsible doctor ignoring the screams of his patient, a symbol of white dominance and power, intruding and overtaking the Indian camp. However, through a close reading of "Indian Camp", we may find that Dr. Adams is a very courteous gentleman who refers to the Indian woman as "lady" twice respectfully: "There is an Indian lady very sick" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 16). "This lady is going to have a baby, Nick" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 17), treating her as any other patient regardless of her sex and race. When Nick asked his father to give the Indian woman something to make her stop screaming, Doctor Adams replied that "No. I haven't any anesthetic... But her screams are not important. I don't hear them because they are not important" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 18). Linda Wagner held that "That his father had no anaesthesia (as well as no sympathy) for the woman surely stemmed in part from his reaction against her race" (Wagner, 1975, p. 250). But just as Flora pointed out, "It would appear that twentieth-century orientation has colored Wagner's reading" (Flora, 1977, p. 77).

Boutelle condemns that Dr. Adams "wields a particularly terrifying knife and performs a particularly gruesome type of operation" (Boutelle, 1981, p. 135); while DeFalco charges that he "failed to bring along the proper equipment" (DeFalco, 1963, p. 28). Just as Lisa Narbeshuber comments "Critics have had varied responses... Some defend the doctor's matter-of-fact, impersonal approach as a medical necessity. Others regard it as a sign of callousness, or even inhumanity and racism (Narbeshuber, 2006, p. 15). However, what Doctor Adams has said is beyond reproach, just as Daiker puts it "Medically, Dr. Adams is following the practice, standard since the late nineteenth century, of what sociologist Talcott Parsons has called 'affective neutrality'. It is a form of self-discipline or ego control that establishes emotional distance between physician and patient so as to protect both" (Daiker, 2016, p. 57). If Dr. Adams had allowed his patient's screams "to enter his consciousness, he could have lost his concentration and brought death instead of life to both the mother and the baby" (Watson, 1995, p. 41).

Some scholars viewed the story from the aspect of culture, namely, white superiority, white dominance and cultural role, etc. Amy Strong argues that "Dr. Adams chooses to envision her body as a territory without agency or voice, a kind of uninhabited land he takes possession of and must get under control" (Strong, 1996, p. 22). Tanselle thinks of Dr. Adams, Nick and Uncle George as "intruders", who, to some extent, should be responsible for the death of the Indian father, who feels guilty and superfluous for he has caused so much pain on his wife, but can do nothing to help her out, "while Doctor Adams and Uncle George, representatives of the complex civilization of the white man and intruders, can successfully take charge in this family crisis. Representative of a less developed culture, he feels more frustration than a white man over the unnatural birth and the necessity for outside intervention. His situation appearing unbearable, he kills himself" (Tanselle, 1983, p.

102). Thomas Strychacz also holds this idea of the white doctor's cultural superiority, thinking that the Indian woman's screams are not important, "What is important, apparently, is to preserve the history of this cultural and racial domination. Immobilized because of an ax wound, the father must bear witness to the white doctor's presumption of cultural superiority" and the "doctor symbolically usurps" the role of the Indian father (Strychacz, 1996, p. 62).

Doctor Adams, his son and brother are not the "intruders" at all. We cannot ignore the fact that it was the Indians who came voluntarily to ask Doctor Adams for help, and the latter had tried his best to save the life of both the Indian woman and her newborn baby under such emergent circumstances and in such dirty environment. As has been pointed out by Huang Lihua, at the very beginning all that Dr. Adams knew was that there was an Indian woman very sick; it was only after they entered the camp that he found out the critical condition of the Indian woman on whom an emergent operation was decided (Huang, 2022, p. 637). As we know, when two Indian men came over the lake to find him, Doctor Adams was on vacation camping in the forest, so he had no medical equipment on him. But he had tried his best and acted as a professional doctor. Doctor Adams ordered some water to be heated, and his operation equipment to be boiled, washed his hands carefully with the soap brought from their campsite, asked George to pull back the quilt of the Indian woman, and after the operation "He bent over the Indian woman" to check her condition, and promised that "I'll be back in the morning... The nurse should be here from St. Ignace by noon and she'll bring everything we need" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 19). From this we can see that Dr. Adams is a competent and experienced doctor, who is able to keep calm and make prompt decisions in case of emergency bringing everything in order and under his control.

Conclusion

In conclusion, rather than an insensitive and irresponsible father, an indifferent and self-conceited brother, Doctor Adams is a sensitive loving father and a tolerant caring brother; rather than a callous and cruel racist, a cold-hearted and inhuman sexist, Doctor Adams is a courteous gentleman showing his due respect to his patient, the Indian woman; rather than an immoral and indifferent doctor, Doctor Adams is a conscientious, competent, professional and experienced doctor, who is able to keep a cool head and make prompt decisions in case of emergency bringing everything in order and under his control. In this sense, But Doctor Adams is just like a "a powerful example of grace under pressure" (Daiker, 2016, p. 65). Some critics studied "Indian Camp" from the historical and cultural context related to the relationship between the white and the American Indians, that is the cultural and racial dominance and superiority of the white. The interpretation of a literary text is indeed inseparable from the specific historical and cultural context, but we should return to the text and respect the meaning of the text not allowing various theories to color our understanding.

When reviewing a literary work, if readers overinterpret the author's intention, they may fall into the trap of "intentional fallacy" (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1946, p. 468); If readers only rely on their own subjective impressions, detaching from the text, but arbitrarily speculating the meaning of it, they may fall into the trap of "affective fallacy" (Wimsatt & Beardsley, 1949, p. 31). "In this view, just as readers' emotional or psychological reactions to a text could be messy and irrelevant to critical interpretation, so too could a focus on an author's stated or inferred intentions lead to a misleading and unclear interpretation of the text" (Harding, 2014, pp. 68-69). "The object of literary criticism must be the text itself, and the author's intention in writing, if it can be discovered,

has nothing to do with the interpretation of the work. Similarly, the emotional response of a particular reader should not be confused with the meaning of the poem, which means what it means" (Zhao, 2011, pp. 29-30). Therefore, when we interpret a literary text, we should pay attention to the close reading of the text and look for clues and evidence from the text. However, when the information given by the text is quite limited, especially when we read the text created by the iceberg theory like Hemingway, we should also consider the background of the story, because the interpretation of literary works cannot be separated from the historical and cultural context that affects the work.

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