J. Andrew Wainwright

The Far Shore
Gender Complexities in Hemingway's "Indian Camp"

There is a common perception of female characters in Hemingway's fiction as one-dimensional figures subservient to his tough, enduring male heroes—figures such as Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms* apparently crawling into Frederic Henry's heart, or Maria in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* feeling the earth move while flat on her back in Robert Jordan's sleeping bag. But before he became "Papa" either in his own or in the public eye Hemingway wrote some short stories in which men do not fare very well when compared to women. These are stories in which the male response to the world does not seem to include what are deemed essential female qualities necessary not only for survival but for self-awareness and a flexible vision of life as well. "Up in Michigan" (1923) is told from the point of view of Liz Coates as she aches for Jim Gilmore, who eventually gets his way with her; but it is Liz's integrity and the strength of her body *and* mind that become more significant than Jim's getting what he wants. It is the young woman in "Hills Like White Elephants" (1927) who possesses a depth of vision, who asks questions, and who recognizes the masks she and her lover wear, not the young man who tries to kill with words. Hemingway was supposed to have been hard on Lesbians—a response on his part to Gertrude Stein's response to him?—but in "The Sea Change" (1931), he handles, with sympathy and without hostility, the emotions of a woman as they shift from her male to her female lover.

As for "Indian Camp,"[1] first published in *transatlantic review* in 1924, when the story opens Nick Adams's father, Doctor Adams, thinks he knows all about where he is going: "There is an Indian lady very sick" (193), he tells Nick. She is sick because of a difficult labour, and Doctor Adams, even though he has been on a fishing trip and does not have his medical supplies with him, has no doubts about his ability to deliver the baby; nor does he treat the situation as anything more than it seems to be. When Nick asks, "Where are we going, Dad?" his

father replies straightforwardly, "Over to the Indian camp" (193). Everything is in its place, there is only one direction in which to head. The word "lady" also suggests that everything is in its proper place, or everyone. Whereas a *woman* is, first of all, "an adult female human being," a *lady* is more closely perceived and defined as "the female head of a household," and as "a woman who is the object of a man's devotion." Indeed, the term woman is "in contrast, explicit or implicit, with *lady*."[2] A *lady* is, of course, also the counterpart to a gentleman (hence, "Ladies and Gentlemen!"), so Doctor Adams's use of "Indian lady" may be taken as ironic; he certainly does not think of Indians as his social and cultural equals, and he would not be caught in a white society without his medicine bag and with only a jackknife and "nine-foot, tapered gut leaders" as operational tools for a *real* lady. Irony, however, is not the doctor's chief concern; rather he has defined this Indian person in a very particular and fixed way as insignificant.

It is especially noteworthy that Hemingway's narrative voice employs the less limiting term "woman" when referring to non-males in the story and is thus separate from the voice of Doctor Adams. When Nick simply says "Oh" to his father's reference to the sick Indian lady it is because he takes his father's expertise, as doctor, for granted, but it is also possible that he is listening to the all-powerful male voice in his life and so has no curiosity about the illness because it is only that of a lady. Nick and his father have already been described by the narrator as being "in the dark" and "in the mist" (193). They both remain "in the mist all the time" (193) when they are in the boat and on the water: a boat is generally *given* a female name, and men usually refer to a *body* of water in female terms——"She's a big lake." Nick, lying back in his father's arm, is resting in the misty dark, and he will not emerge from this protective circle or the darkness until the early morning when he sits alone in the stern with his father rowing. At that time Doctor Adams will no longer be sure about where he and Nick are going, and the destination of all *persons* is included in his uncertainty as well.

Meanwhile, Uncle George plays both the tough, unconcerned male and the jolly, outgoing one when he smokes his cigar and gives one to each of the two Indian guides. First, the association of male cigar-giving and smoking with childbirth celebration suggests the reason why Doctor Adams has been summoned; however, a rigid male attitude towards ladies about to give birth is implied by the image of cigar-store Indians ("Indians cigars"—193); a narrow, white male perception, indeed a carved wooden perception, of the Indian male can be associated with how Doctor Adams, Uncle George and perhaps the Indian men, view their ladies in general.

If cigars are phallic in appearance, they have symbolic overtones as well, in that they are handled and displayed as part of a male ritual regarding the siring of a child. Hemingway provides a countering image immediately, which, if not specifically female, certainly threatens the phallic ritual: drop your cigar in the "meadow that was soaking wet with dew" (193) and it is extinguished. But the men quickly get away from the water and the meadow up to the logging road that offers certainty and direction. Although the young Indian guide blows out his lantern on the road, when the five males come to the Indian shanty-town they are met by "an old woman. . . holding a lamp" (193) and standing in the doorway that leads away from certainty for Doctor Adams and on from "Oh" for Nick.

The "young Indian woman" in labour lies in a *lower* bunk and has been helped by "all the old women in the camp." The men, on the other hand, having phallically performed, have moved away from the complications of childbirth and definitely away from the basic yet profound articulation that is contained in the young woman's screams. Her husband in the *upper* bunk is not smoking a cigar, but a pipe. He cannot move away since he has injured his foot with an axe, which implies the dangers of being male, but also the carelessness. "The room smelled very bad" (194), says the narrator, but the smell emanates from the male pipe and the self-inflicted wound as much as from the odours of the "sick lady."

Doctor Adams orders some water in which to boil his instruments and wash his hands, but this water is purely functional for him and can be contrasted to the life-giving "waters" of the Indian woman that have burst, though of course the unborn child is still protected by the saline solution in the womb. During this stage of the story, when he feels entirely confident, but is also defined and confined by a particular kind of knowledge, Doctor Adams is always referred to as "the doctor" surely Hemingway's ironic appellation designed to parallel the use of "lady." Thus, "This lady is going to have a baby" (194), the doctor tells Nick, and the narrator says, "Just then the woman cried out" (194). Doctor Adams is right to tell his son that he, Nick, does not know what is going on, but, as Hemingway will show, neither does the white medicine man who would deliver his own child into a purely patriarchal society (the term "mother," even in a derogatory sense, is never mentioned in the story). Although he explains part of the primal function of the woman's screams ("All her muscles are trying to get the baby born. That is what is happening when she screams"), the doctor emphasizes to Nick that "her screams are not important" (194). One might approve of this attitude, recognizing that the doctor could not perform at his best if he let the noise get through to him, but in the

story's very next sentence the limited male response to what is going on is underlined: "The husband in the upper bunk rolled over against the wall." It is the old Indian woman who serves to advance events beyond the wall by letting the doctor know that the water, without which he cannot safely operate, is boiling.

Doctor Adams washes his hands thoroughly "with a cake of soap he had brought from the camp," his version of the Indian camp in the woods, the white male sanctuary, and he explains to Nick the possible difficulties with "this lady." One of his problems, though he certainly does not perceive it as such, is that he is not interested enough to enquire about the woman's name. Even if the doctor knew her husband's name, no Indian wife would be known as "Mrs. ——," so she is a squaw, and a "damn squaw bitch" to Uncle George when she bites him. To the narrator, however, even when she is being held down by four men, she maintains the dignity of "the woman." She bites Uncle George as she fights back from her condition of restraint, and a bite can be seen as similar to a scream in terms of primal expression. The young Indian who rowed Uncle George across the water laughs at him, while Nick holds the basin (presumably to contain certain liquid complications). Once the afterbirth has been placed in the basin, Nick puts it in the only room where it belongs in a male-dominated world—the kitchen.

We should not be surprised that Hemingway has the baby be a boy—the result of all Doctor Adams's teaching and Nick's internship is "See, it's a boy, Nick,"—the only fitting product (ironically) of the male expertise and power that have been displayed. Hemingway's irony might be extended to include the fact that although there has been another addition to the power structure, the child does get handed by Doctor Adams to the old woman. Perhaps, given the suicide of the baby's father, the old woman's influence will not quickly fade away. Meanwhile, Nick rejects something of the power structure and this harsh introduction into the world of male perceptions by not watching his father sew up the Caesarian incision; this sewing is done with gut leader, the piece of fishing equipment that leads to the hook and bait with which the doctor captures creatures lesser than himself (where is he described as considering an alternative to a Caesarian delivery?). Indeed, this lesser creature imagery is carried further as the doctor warns Uncle George against infection from the bite he has received from the "lady," saying he will put some peroxide on the wound. Perhaps the Indian woman has broken the surface of Uncle George's complacency and he requires protection. Why does the young Indian male smile "reminiscently" at this reference to the bite? Because as a lesser being himself he enjoyed seeing his 'superior'

wounded (even humiliated) and also because it reminds him of when he had full license to hold down a creature beneath *him*. Significantly, the Indian woman is now described as "pale"; having been controlled by the white male she now assumes his colour (or lack of it) and is entirely within his pale: "She did not know what had become of the baby or anything" (196).

Immediately after this, although Doctor Adams admits that "The nurse should be here from St. Ignace by noon and she'll bring everything we need" (196), he displays the 'no-women-allowed' attitude of the male athlete in his locker room after a victory. He has used his male tools in a remarkable fashion, extending their territory out beyond the fishing camp (cutting into the natural in much the same way as the Indian men cut the forest back from the road). It is not so much Uncle George's satirical and self-pitying crack about Doctor Adams being "a great man" that emphasizes Hemingway's perception of the doctor at this point, as it is Doctor Adams's own reductive and chauvinistic comment about "the proud father. *They're* usually the worst sufferers in these little affairs" (196, italics mine). This limited view of life's complexities is underscored by the doctor's shock at a male death, one that occurs, in the male vision, because of weakness. For the last time in the story Hemingway refers to "the doctor" as he tries to prevent Nick from seeing this carnage. The doctor cannot sew up the incision made by the Indian husband and father by a razor (a white man's instrument). The mask of Doctor Adams falls away, and he becomes, for the remainder of the story, Nick's father. For a moment, though, his attempt to have Nick removed from the shanty, while he strains with the lamp borrowed from the old woman to see the Indian's condition, is as much an effort to keep Nick from the suicide of a man as it is to defend him from the death of a person. It is the old woman's lamp, however, that allows Nick to *see*.

The question of why the Indian kills himself is never answered directly by Hemingway, but it is not easy to ignore the complications in his life introduced by his axe-wound and another mouth to feed. With these complications goes the fact that he will have to share his wife with someone else, a male rival. The blood from the woman's incision flows like that from his slit throat, but suddenly the quality of her screams (a life-force sound that the doctor insists is not important) must be contrasted with his silence in the face of difficulty.

Doctor Adams himself now enters a territory of complexity over what has occurred, and his lack of control is emphasized by his reference to his son as "Nickie," a name that can denote either male or female. Hemingway, ironically, has Nick call his father "Daddy." This is not ironic because Nick himself does feel younger and smaller in

some ways in the face of what he has witnessed and so retreats to an earlier relationship with his father (this does occur, but is not in Hemingway's scheme ironic); rather the diminutive of "Dad" underlines Doctor Adams's reduced condition. Walking towards the lake, Nick begins to ask questions. At first he seems unable to transcend his father's defining by language when he asks, "Do ladies always have such a hard time having babies?" But when he wants to know about the particular male suicide—"Why did he kill himself, daddy?"—he moves into a larger territory of life and death that unites rather than divides genders: "Do many men kill themselves, Daddy?. . . . Do many women?" (197). In response Doctor Adams seems to imply a qualitative distinction between gender suicides when he says of men, "Not very many," and of women, "Oh, yes. They do sometimes." That is, it would seem that only occasionally do women have sufficient reason for doing so. Or one might read Doctor Adams's two statements in the following way: not very many men — the words themselves are presented negatively — are weak enough to kill themselves, but women sometimes *do*: there is an active, willing involvement in suicide. The doctor, ashamed of what he has seen in the upper bunk, and very disturbed by it, would, at one and the same time, keep suicide as a male prerogative and attribute a female weakness to the act.

Nick further unites gender experience by asking about dying in a *human* sense and forcing his father to speak on behalf of women and men together, while recognizing complexities: "Is dying hard, Daddy?" "No, I think it's pretty easy, Nick" (197). There is no distinction here between the sexes, and a great deal of flexible vision is contained by something the father then says, but which "the doctor" would never have allowed himself to admit about anything: "It all depends."

Nick sits in the boat on the lake, this time not within the protective circle of his father's arm, but rather aware of the widening mandala of nature. The circular sun rises, "a bass jumped, making a circle in the water." As well, the water is "warm" against "the sharp chill of the morning," representative of the Indian woman's life-giving "waters" and blood as opposed to her husband's liquid immersion in cold death. When Nick "on the lake" and "in the boat" feels "quite sure that he will never die" (197) Hemingway has him experience a brief, yet not so innocent triumph over death because Nick aligns himself with the birth rather than with the suicide.

The words "never die" could be construed as having sexual connotations if Nick were to be seen as intending to avoid sexual contact with a woman, thus avoiding the complications of fatherhood and possible suicide. But Hemingway has not constructed his story to lead towards

such a conclusion (whatever relations the older Nick Adams in subsequent stories may have with women). Because of Hemingway's affirmation throughout "Indian Camp" of essential female life-qualities and his criticism of male limitations, it is more likely that Nick senses the possibilities of his becoming a father and having a child himself through whom he, like the Indian woman and man, will live on. If this is so, then Nick must also sense himself rowing while *his* child sits in the stern of the boat, both persons beyond gender rigidities and suicide (with Nick's questions that direct his father's responses, the child has indeed become the father to the man). In fact, Nick's human, if fragile, feeling about immortality suggests an end to all suicide rather than to death itself. What Nick has learned is that in the quality of our beginning should be the quality of our end. And if our beginning is without male domination, it is the sun, not a son, that will always rise.

NOTES

1. The story first apeared in the *transatlantic review* in April, 1924, under the title "Work in Progress," and was then published in *In Our Time* in 1925. All references are to the text as it appears in the Cape edition of 1939.
2. *The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*. Third Edition, Volumes I and II (London: Oxford UP, 1973).

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