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A Conventional Love Triangle?—In Defense of Uncle George in Hemingway's "Indian Camp"

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Since its publication in 1924, Hemingway's "Indian Camp" has drawn a great deal of attention and has been subjected to a wide variety of interpretations. The design of the character Uncle George has aroused as much doubt and perplexity as curiosity and enthusiasm for interpretation, on account of the fact that Hemingway, renowned for his iceberg theory and simple style should involve such a seeming superfluous character in an initiation story of his nephew on whom his influence is barely noticeable. Since 1960s, Uncle George has always been considered to be the father of the newborn baby the Indian woman has delivered and has been claimed to be responsible for the suicide of the Indian husband. Then, is the story simply a conventional love triangle? Or there exists some misunderstanding in this interpretation? If so, it's of great necessity and importance to defend for Uncle George and put the record straight.

Keywords: Hemingway, "Indian Camp", Uncle George, interpretation, defense

Introduction

"Indian Camp" is a short story by Ernest Hemingway that was first published in 1924 in *The Transatlantic Review*. This is the first short story to feature Nick Adams, a recurring and semi-autobiographical character in Hemingway's writing. The story follows Nick as he travels to a native American camp with his father and Uncle George to help an Indian woman who was having a difficult labor to deliver a baby. With no anesthesia or specialized surgical equipment, Dr. Adams performed an emergency cesarean section with a jackknife and sewed up the incision with a nine-foot gut suture, saving the lives of both the mother and the newborn. While Dr. Adams was immersed in the joy of the success of the operation, he unexpectedly found that the Indian woman's husband, who had been lying in the upper bunk due to leg injuries, quietly committed suicide by cutting his neck with a razor.

"Indian Camp" is Hemingway's best collection of short stories and one of his favorites (Hemingway, 1881, p. 180). Since its publication, the novel has attracted extensive attention from readers, and the interpretation of the meaning of the text also varies from person to person. The novel's five main characters, Nick, Uncle George, Dr. Adams, the Indian mother and her suicidal Indian husband, have also become the focus of scholars' research. Among them, the design of the character of Uncle George has aroused people's perplexity and puzzlement, as

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Hemingway is always known for his "iceberg theory" and simple style, while "Indian Camp" is basically an initiation story of Nick Adams, so why did Hemingway make Uncle George, a seemingly superfluous character, appear 22 times in the 1,400-word short story, including different variants of "Uncle George", "George", "he", "him" and "his", which undoubtedly arouses many scholars' interest in research and enthusiasm for interpretation.

Literature Review

Since the 1960s, Uncle George has been considered by many scholars to be the biological father of newborn baby to be responsible for the suicide of the Indian husband. Tanselle (1962) is the first to mention such idea openly, which was set forth by several persons in view of the fact that "Uncle George distributes cigars to the Indians and remains when Nick and his father leave" (p. 101). Thus, they claim that that "the squaw's husband kills himself because of her unfaithfulness" (p. 101). But Tanselle soon denied it as "this interpretation robs the story of any broader meanings and makes of it the conventional triangle" (p. 101).

However, over the next two decades, such scholars as Bernard (1965), Hays (1971), Grimes (1975) and Brenner (1983) and so on picked up the idea discarded by Tanselle. Grimes (1975) holds "Uncle George occupies a central place" in the story, "The fact that he distributes cigars to the Indians on the evening of the child's birth suggests that he may indeed be the father of the child. The bite, then, may be as much an act of rage toward the cause of the birth pains as it is an animal response to the birth pangs" (p. 414). He further explains that the Indian husband's being cuckolded and his witnessing the terrible painful birth of his wife are the leading causes for his suicide. "It is no wonder, then, that he remains in the Indian camp when Nick and the doctor leave" (Grimes, 1975, p. 414). Brenner (1983) who is convinced of Uncle George's paternity in "Indian Camp," holds that the Indian husband is brave, whose "suicide aims to inflict a strong sense of guilt on Uncle George, becomes a dignified act that affirms the need to live with dignity or not at all, and lays at the feet of another treacherous white man the death of yet one more of the countless, dispossessed native Americans" (p. 239).

Of course, there are other scholars who hold a negative or skeptical attitude towards this view. Philip Young (1965) was the first to refute it; incensed by this early inscrutable interpretation, he wittily claimed that that "he (not Uncle George) was the father," and the reason "the husband cut his throat was that George had passed out all the cigars he had on him before he got to the camp" (p. ii). Both Oliver (2007) and Meyers (1988) argue that there is no evidence in the novel to justify this understanding, the latter questioning, "None of these critics have explained why this extreme Indian man waited so long to act—if he had been cuckold, Wouldn't it be more likely to kill Uncle George than him?" (Meyers, 1988, p. 212).

Hannaum (2001) points out that "The critical controversy over this question was for a time stilled by Philip Young's facetious claim that he had sired the child". But the question is still very much open, as Gajdusek (1998) shows in his article "False Fathers, Doctors, and the Caesarean Dilemma: Metaphor as structure in Hemingway's *In Our Time*" (p. 56). In recent years, some scholars still insist on this view. Williams (2016) is sure that "Uncle George and not the husband is the father of the child could not be clearer". However, Bromwich (2016) regards Williams' comment as "a sharp reminder that the innocent reading of him is always likely to be short-sighted. It remains a question whether a given interpretation adds emotional depth or only an odd and undigested complication" (p. 50).

A Conventional Love Triangle?

Then, is "Indian Camp" really a story of a love triangle based on the presumption of Uncle George as the biological father of the new-born baby? The details of evidence provided by the supporters are summarized by Bromwich as follows:

> Uncle George comes into the story in a few particulars. He goes to the camp ahead of Nick and his father; once ashore, he smokes a cigar in the dark and gives cigars to the two Indians who rowed the boats; along with three Indians, he holds down the screaming woman, and when she bites him on the arm, he shouts a curse ("Damn squaw bitch!"); after the operation, he stands against a wall nursing his arm, and is told by Nick's father to have a look at "the proud father"; he wanders off and Nick's father says, "He'll turn up all right." (Bromwich, 2016, p. 50)

But Bromwich himself does not think "the clues add up" (Bromwich, 2016, p. 50). Through a close reading of the text and related literature review, the following part of the paper is to cite some examples from the story to verify or falsify the above evidence concerning whether it is possible for Uncle George to cuckold the Indian husband.

The first thing we need to talk about is the setting of the story. Before "Indian Camp" was published, Hemingway cut out about a third of the beginning of the novel, which was later titled "Three Shots" by Philip Young and published in *The Nick Adams Stories* (1972). As we learn from "Three Shots", when two Indians sail across at night to ask for help, Nick, his father and Uncle George are staying in a "tent" in the "woods" near a large lake, and their campsite as Sanford speculated 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). "As Hemingway's many biographers have pointed out, Hemingway's portrayals of Native Americans derived from actual first-hand experience with the Ojibwa and Ottawa Indians living near his parents' summer house in northern Michigan" (Pavloska, 2000, p. 59). According to Paul Smith, Hemingway just took what he knew first-hand—"the scene of the Indian bark peelers' camp near the Hemingway cottage at Walloon Lake"—and then "removed it to the Upper Peninsula" (Smith, 1989, p. 37).

Sigal points out that "At least three of the Nick Adams stories—'Indian Camp', 'The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife', and 'Ten Indians'—involve Ojibway or Ottawa Native Americans in upstate Michigan where the Hemingways summered and his father taught him how to fish and shoot" (Sigal, 2013, p. 176). In "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife", Dick Boulton, together with his son Eddy and another Indian Billy Tabeshaw came from the Indian camp to cut up logs for Nick's father. "Dick was a half-breed and many of the farmers around the lake believed he was really a white man" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 22). When Dick accused Dr. Adams of stealing the wood, they quarrelled and almost fought. Neither Eddy nor Billy knew exactly what had happened, and after Dick told them in Ojibwa, "Eddy laughed but Billy Tabeshaw looked very serious. He did not understand English but he had sweat all the time the row was gong on" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 26). In this story, Dick speaks to Eddy and Billy in his native language, but he speaks to Dr. Adams in English. Therefore, in the Indian camp, except for a half-white boy like Dick, who could speak English, the others, like Billy know little or no English.

While in "Indian Camp", except for the conversations between Uncle George, Nick and his father, what we can hear from the Indians is the screaming of the Indian woman in labor. And "there is no evidence in the story that the Indians speak or understand English. That's one reason why it's so vital to recognize the Upper Peninsula as the story's setting… 'Indian Camp' is the only Hemingway story involving Indians in which not a

single Indian is named; that's because the Adamses are total strangers in camp, signaled by the barking dogs who 'rushed out at them'" (Daiker, 2016, pp. 58-59). In the story, dogs are mentioned twice after they arrived at the Indian camp, "a dog came out barking…More dogs rushed out at them" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 17). Obviously, the dogs had caught the scent of strangers and rushed out to bark at them.Therefore, "It is highly unlikely that George would have gone to the Upper Peninsula exactly nine months earlier to impregnate the Indian woman" (Daiker, 2016, p. 60).

Next, let's discuss about why some scholars think Uncle George was "anxious" to get to the Indian camp. The reason they gave was that, after the two boats had started, uncle George's boat was still far ahead of them. But it was important to note that it wasn't Uncle George who was rowing, and he wasn't urging the Indians, because Nick only heard the rowers in the distance and didn't hear uncle George talking to the Indians. Besides, there were two men in Uncle George's boat, but three in Nick and his father's, that's why the Indians, who were working so hard, were still far behind Uncle George's boat. Another detail is that Nick and his father were in a boat from the Indian camp, while Uncle George was in his own boat from their camp: "At the lake shore there was another rowboat drawn up…Nick and his father got in the stern of the boat…Uncle George sat in the stern of the camp rowboat" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 15). If the White represent modern civilization and the Indian represent the primitive tribe that is backward, then the boat of the campsite should also be advanced and faster than the boat of the Indian camp.

Thirdly, let's come to the question why Uncle George gave cigars to the Indians. It is believed that according to the white tradition, the father would send cigars when the son was born and chocolate when the daughter was born, so uncle George was judged to be the father of the child. Starting from the historical and cultural context related to cigars, Lamb (2013), Strong (1996), Strychacz (1996), and Helstern (2000) applied the theory of post-colonialism to explore the deep meaning behind Uncle George's cigar sharing. It is true that the interpretation of the text is inseparable from the specific historical and cultural context, but we should first put aside the theoretical framework, turn to the close reading of the text, respect the meaning of the text itself.

There is one more detail that should not be overlooked that needs to be discussed in particular. At the beginning of story when they are in the boat, Nick asks where they are going, and Dr. Adams says they are going to an Indian camp, where an Indian lady is very sick. After they arrive at the camp, before they step into the hut, the narrator tells us that the woman has had a difficult labor, and the baby hasn't been born for two days. Thus, it is only after they enter the camp that they find out that the Indian woman is trying to give birth and has had a difficult labor. From the above detail, we can infer that Uncle George, his brother and nephew had no idea what the real purpose of their trip was until they entered the hut, nor that there was a baby on the way, so it would be unfair to say that Uncle George was distributing cigars to celebrate the birth of a child. Possibly, cigar smoking might be Uncle George's personal habit, just like the Indian habit of smoking pipes. While waiting for Dr. Adams, he was either passing the time out of boredom or he was tired. From "Three Shots", we know that Nick was already undressing and getting ready for bed when the two Indians went to pick them up. It must be late at night, after rowing across the lake to the Indian camp, it is probably close to midnight, so Uncle George may smoke to relieve fatigue. The cigars he gave the two Indians could be understood as a reward for their labour, as well as as a friendly sharing.

Then, why did the Indian woman bite Uncle George during labor? Some scholars think it is because she hated him for getting her pregnant and for causing her so much pain during labor. Scholars who interpret from a feminist view believe that the Indian woman was trying to resist male domination and gender discrimination. Scholars who analyze it from the perspective of post-colonialism believe that she fought against the occupation of her territory by white people and racial discrimination. However, for a woman who has been tortured by labor for two days and two nights, there is no time for her to consider such a complicated and profound problem. We know that the Indian woman probably doesn't understand English, let alone difficult medical English for anesthesia and cesarean section. Several strangers come to her home, one of the white gets hold of her tightly with the help of several other Indian men, she doesn't know what they are going to do to her, she is apparently startled, but subconsciously she knows her fellowmen won't hurt her, but she is afraid the white stranger would hurt her and her baby, so she bites him out of an instinct for self-protection.

Finally, we'll turn to the question of "When did Uncle George go? "(Hemingway, 1972, p. 15) after the suicide of the Indian husband is discovered. Some think he left; others think he stayed. Most people who think of Uncle George as the father hold that he stays behind to take care of the Indian mother or help out with the funeral of the dead husband. Nevertheless, the Ojibwa tribe in the Indian camp should have their own customs about the dead, and it is impossible for them to need the intervention and help of strangers from another race. To some extent, "Indian Camp" is a story about the moral growth not only of naive adolescent Nick Adams, but also of childish, self-centered Uncle George, who cursed the Indian woman and repeatedly looked at his arm bitten by her with self-pity, and who sneered at his brother's complacence after the successful cesarean operation. Uncle George must have been so shaken by the sight of an Indian man taking his own life in such an extreme way that he probably went to drink to drown his nerves, just as what Oliver (2007) has claimed, "He disappears, after the operation, probably to get drunk" (p. 214).

Conclusion

The idea that Uncle George is the biological father of the new-born Indian baby has been controversial since Tanselle put it forward in 1962. Although Philip Young, one of Hemingway's leading experts, refuted it as early as 1965, it is still supported by some scholars today. Through the close reading and detailed analysis of the text, we can summarize the findings as follows.

The fact that none of the Indians spoke English, and that none of their names were mentioned, together with the rushing out and barking of the dogs when they went ashore, proves that they were new to the Indian camp. On the one hand, Uncle George took their campsite boat, and there were only two people on board, so it was faster; on the other, it is the Indian man who rowed the boat, Uncle George did not urge him, so there is no suggestion that Uncle George was in a hurry to get to the Indian camp. What's more, they had no idea there was a baby on the way until they entered the hut, so it would be unfair to say that Uncle George was sharing the cigars to celebrate the birth of his child.

When the Indian woman was suddenly held down by a stranger and three Indian men, she was so frightened that she bit Uncle George probably out of instinct for self-protection. After the Indian man committed suicide, Uncle George, as an outsider, could not stay behind to deal with the internal affairs of the Indian tribe. Uncle George, who had always been so self-centered and childish, must have been shocked to see such a bloody, violent,

horrible scene of an Indian man committing suicide, and he needed time to digest it, so he probably went to drink to calm his nerves.

To sum up, we can conclude that Uncle George could not be the father of the new Indian baby. Therefore, "Indian Camp" can't be a story of conventional love triangle. When we are interpreting a literary text, we should pay attention to the close reading of the text and find clues and evidence from the text. But when information given by the text is quite limited, especially when reading Hemingway's works created by the iceberg theory, we must combine the background of the story, with clues from other stories in the same collection, because we cannot interpret literary works without taking its historical context and cultural context into consideration. As Professor Shen Dan (2018) said, when conducting literary criticism, we should "combine internal research with external research, conduct rigorous analysis of works, and pay attention to the context of creation and interpretation of works, as well as the intertextual relationship between a work and related works" (Shen, 2018, p. 11). And "literary writing is characterized by uncertainty, and literary interpretation is also a matter of opinion… But any interpretation is just an interpretation effort" (Shen, 2018, p. 12). It is hoped that the author's interpretation efforts can, to some extent, correct some misleading interpretations of Hemingway's "Indian Camp" by scholars at home and abroad, especially the role of Uncle George, so as to enrich the existing research results.

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