

Why Uncle George?—On the Role of This Seemingly Superfluous Character in Hemingway’s “Indian Camp”

HUANG Li-hua

Guangzhou College of Technology and Business, Guangzhou, Guangdong 510800, China

Hemingway’s “Indian Camp” is a short story first published in 1924 in *The Transatlantic Review*, and then in his short story collection *In Our Time* in 1925. It is considered to be one of Hemingway’s favorites and the best of the collection. However, it also sparked considerable controversy for the involvement of the seemingly superfluous character Uncle George. Since 1960s, Uncle George has always been considered to be the biological father of the newborn baby the Indian woman has delivered and has been claimed to be responsible for the suicide of the Indian husband, which has been falsified by the previous paper of the author. Therefore, it’s of great necessity to explore the role of Uncle George to manifest the significance of this figure. Through close reading of the story, it can be found that Uncle George is a helpful assistant of Doctor Adams, a powerful foil of other protagonists and a useful supporter of the reliable narrator.

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Introduction

Ernest Miller Hemingway (1899-1961), winner of the 1954 Nobel Prize for Literature, is famous for his “tough guy image”, “iceberg theory” and “telegraphic dialogue”. As the founder of the journalistic novel and the representative of the Lost Generation of American writers, Hemingway is regarded as the spiritual monument of the American nation and one of the most famous novelists in the 20th century, who plays an important role in the history of American literature and even the world literature.

“Indian Camp” was first published in 1924 in *The Transatlantic Review* and then in 1925 in *In Our Time*, a collection of semi-autobiographical short stories featuring Nick Adams. The novel mainly tells the story of young Nick, along with his father, Dr. Adams, and Uncle George, who went to the Indian camp to help an Indian woman out of a difficult birth. In an emergency, Doctor Adams did a caesarian operation with a jackknife without anesthesia, and sewed up the incision with “nine-foot, tapered gut leaders” (Hemingway, 1972, p. 19). After the success of the operation, Doctor Adams mounted the upper bunk with a lamp in his hand to check the Indian father, who had a bad cut on his foot three days before and had been lying quietly in bed during the operation, only to find that the husband had unknowingly cut his throat with a razor. Obviously, this an initiation story of Nick Adams who witnessed both birth and death in a single day, provoking his thinking about life and death.

Taking both the plot and theme of the story into account, we may find it weird for Hemingway to have designed such a seemingly superfluous figure as Uncle George, who appears repeatedly in 18 sentences in the 1453-word long 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. Why does Hemingway make him appear in the text repeatedly? Is this a kind of foregrounding? Why did he design this character? What is the significance of this character? Where did he go after the Indian man killed himself? A majority of the readers have been overwhelmed by these doubts and questions, who have been constantly exploring and excavating the deep textual meaning hidden under this huge iceberg for possible solutions. Therefore, it's of great necessity to explore the role of Uncle George to manifest the significance of this figure.

Since 1960s, the most common interpretation is viewing Uncle George as the biological father of the newborn Indian baby, who cuckolded the Indian husband, and thus should be responsible for the suicide of him, as, however, has been falsified by the author in her "A Conventional Love Triangle?—In Defense of Uncle George in Hemingway's 'Indian Camp'" (Huang, 2022, pp. 634-640). Through close reading of the text, it can be found that Uncle George is a helpful assistant of Doctor Adams, a powerful foil of other protagonists and a useful supporter of the reliable narrator.

On the Role of Uncle George

Uncle George as a Helpful Assistant of Doctor Adams

"What makes his use of Uncle George in "Indian Camp" effective... is that here he is able to transmute his personal dislike for his real-life uncle in such a way that it contributes to, rather than interferes with, the narrative" (Lam, 2013, p. 42). In fact, Uncle George has served several important functions in the story. The importance of the role of Uncle George lies above all in the necessity of him as a helpful assistant of Dr. Adams.

As Daiker points out, "there is no evidence in the story that the Indians speak or understand English"; that's why Dr. Adams only addressed to Nick and Uncle George rather than any Indians in the shanty (Diker, 2016, p. 58). Therefore, effective communication between Dr. Adams and the Indians would be rendered impossible, thus the existence of Uncle George makes it more convenient for Dr. Adams to communicate with him. In fact Uncle George did help a lot, for example, he helped pull back the quilt of the Indian woman before the operation, and held the woman still with three Indian men during the operation. Even if the Indians might not understand English, with Uncle George's demonstration, the other three Indians would know what to do and followed suit. After the operation, the Indian man was found to have committed suicide and Dr. Adams asked him to take Nick out of the shanty. It is because of Uncle George's help and cooperation that the operation can proceed smoothly and the story can keep moving forward.

Uncle George as a Powerful Foil of Other Protagonists

According to Smith, "George's obvious dramatic function in the story is to offer comic relief" (Smith, 989, p. 40). Daiker argues that "George is indeed a comic figure, but he is much more than that" (Daiker, 2016, p. 60). He believes that "George's significance lies in his serving as a powerful foil for his brother, Dr. Adams. The contrasts begin as Dr. Adams and Uncle George travel across the lake in separate boats" (Daiker, 2016, p. 60). For example, Daiker thinks Uncle George's offering of the cigars to the two Indian men is not only

"laughably inappropriate", but also "useless in a medical emergency, contrasts with the doctor's bringing useful items for the anticipated operation" (Daiker, 2016, p. 60). Here's another example, after he was bitten on the arm by the Indian woman, George's hateful words "Damn squaw bitch!" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 18), reveal him to be "both a racist and a sexist"; whereas "Dr. Adams never uses profanity" (Daiker, 2016, p. 61), but refers to the woman respectfully as "an Indian lady" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 18). The third contrast is that Dr. Adams is aware of the needs of others, while George is not (Daiker, 2016, p. 60). After the operation is over, Uncle George looks at his arm again, and Dr. Adams says "I'll put some peroxide on that, George" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 19), George makes no response even without showing his thanks. Then later on when Dr. Adams wants to share his excitement and joy with George about the success of the operation by saying "That's one for the medical journal, George" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 19), Uncle George, instead of showing his congratulations, was looking at his bitten arm again and responded with angry sarcasm, "Oh, you're a great man, all right" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 20). That's why Daiker concludes that "George's repeatedly looking at his arm is Hemingway's sign that he sees only himself and his hurts, not others and their needs" (Daiker, 2016, p. 61).

Uncle George serves as a powerful foil not only for his brother but also for other protagonists, namely, the Indian woman and her husband. In contrast with the Indian woman's pain from labor that has lasted two days and the pain from the caesarian operation without anesthesia, and the Indian husband's pain from the foot badly cut by the axe for three days, and his pain from the neck cut by the razor, Uncle George's bite is nothing serious at all. That's why the young Indian man who has rowed Uncle George across the lake laughed at him twice. "But the laughter also indicates both that the Indian thinks little of George and that the injuries are not serious. But, for self-absorbed George, they are all important" (Daiker, 2016, p. 61). The screaming of the Indian woman, the silent suffering of the Indian husband, and the cursing and the repeated examination of the bitten arm of Uncle George stand in sharp contrast with one another.

Uncle George as a Useful Supporter of the Reliable Narrator

After the suicide of the Indian husband, Uncle George is nowhere to be found. The whereabouts of Uncle George are open to different interpretation. Some think he left; others think he stayed. Scofield pointed out that critics "have suggested that there is significance in the absence of the accompanying uncle from the end of the story" (he leaves because he is disgusted with his brother's callousness) (Scofield, 2006, p. 143). But Scofield feels that "the main point seems to be to convey the boy's unevaluated raw experience of the events: he turns away from watching his father, but makes no conscious criticism of him (though our attitude may, importantly, be different)" (Scofield, 2006, p. 143). Flora also feels the same, "Hemingway does want the reader to question the character of Dr. Adams, and that Nick is too young to do this, so we need Uncle George in the story" (Flora, 1977, p. 77). In this sense, Uncle George serves as a moral judge of his brother.

Daiker holds that when Dr. Adams and Nick are heading back across the lake to their campsite, "Uncle George vanishes. He disappears without a word of explanation or apology, never to be heard from again... What is important for the story is not where George might have gone but that he has not stayed where he might be needed" (Daiker, 2016, p. 61).

According to Lamb, "Uncle George's absence, revealed later in the passage, is left unexplained. He may have stayed behind to relate the events to the nurse from St. Ignace" (Lamb, 2013, pp. 67-68); he further

explained that "But he has already served his function in the story and will henceforth make his final contribution only through his absence. By using an ellipsis, Hemingway eliminates action unnecessary to the plot so that he can go directly to the dialogue about the significant action just completed" (Lamb, 2013, p. 68). I don't quite agree with Lamb on his further explanation about the importance of Uncle George's absence in that he has served his function and is unnecessary to the plot.

We know that although the narrative voice of the story is that of a third-person narrator, the narrative perspective is that of Nick. Nick's eyes have been following his father and uncle from the beginning of the story. Nick is holding the basin for his father during the operation, but after Dr. Adams picks up the baby, he "was looking away so as not to see what his father was doing" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 19). When his father "put something into the basin" (probably placenta), "Nick didn't look at it" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 19). When his father is sewing up the incision, "Nick did not watch. His curiosity has been gone for a long time" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 19). It is after the operation is over that Nick's perspective is resumed. "His father finished and stood up. Uncle George and the three Indian men stood up. Nick put the basin out in the kitchen" (Hemingway, 1972, p. 19).

The cesarean section was enough to make him uncomfortable and scared. When the Indian husband was found to have committed suicide, there was a moment of chaos. "Nick, standing in the door of the kitchen, had a good view of the upper bunk..." (Hemingway, 1972, p. 20). Nick was just in time to see the bloody, violent and terrifying scene. As a boy, he must have been so frightened that his attention was temporarily distracted from the two men he knew inside the shed. It is after he left the shanty and went into the boat with his father and started the conversation about life and death that Nick began to pull himself together, and realized the absence of Uncle George. If after the discovery of the stunning fact, Nick can still calmly observe the behavior of his father and uncle, then the readers may doubt the reliability of the narrator.

What's more, if Uncle George, who is childish, cynical, and self-centered, had been there with them in the same boat at the end of the story, it wouldn't be possible for Nick and his father to have such a calm discussion about life and death, and Nick wouldn't have gained confidence that he would never die after having witnessed the violence of life and death overnight. Therefore, Uncle George's final absence is of great significance in shaping the narrator's reliability and highlighting the theme of the story. In this sense, Uncle George serves as a useful supporter of the reliable narrator.

Conclusion

It is indeed puzzling for Hemingway, who is good at using the iceberg theory, and famous for his style of economy and conciseness, to involve Uncle George, a seemingly unimportant, even redundant character, in his short story "Indian Camp". Some people think that the importance of Uncle George lies in that he is the father of the newborn Indian baby; some think it is to include Hemingway's uncle who he didn't like in the story; some think Uncle George serves as a moral judge and powerful foil of Dr. Adams; others think Uncle George is a comic character whose role is to provide comic elements.

However, through a detailed reading of the text, we come to the conclusion that Uncle George is not at all a redundant role in "Indian Camp"; on the contrary, he has essential roles or functions in the story. Being a helpful assistant of Doctor Adams, a powerful foil of other major characters and a useful supporter of the reliable

narrator, Uncle George helps push the plot forward, and highlight the novel's themes of pain and suffering and the ways and attitudes in which people deal with it. The absence of Uncle George at the end of the novel is also significant. It not only strengthens the author's role as a reliable narrator, but also leaves room for the meaningful discussion of life and death between Dr. Adams and Nick, which in turn promotes Nick's spiritual epiphany and sublimates the theme of moral growth in the story.

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