

Indian Camp



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Hemingway was born and raised in a well-to-do suburb of Chicago to a physician father and a musician mother. In high school, he developed an affinity for writing, and edited his school's newspaper and yearbook. Upon graduation, he took a job as a reporter for *The Kansas City Star*, and left after six months to join the Red Cross Ambulance Corps in WWI. While driving on the Italian front, Hemingway was seriously injured and received a Silver Medal of Bravery. Returned from war and still not 20 years old, Hemingway took a job at the *Toronto Star* and moved to Chicago, where he met his first wife, Hadley Richardson. The two married in September 1921 and moved to Paris, as the *Star* hired Hemingway as a foreign correspondent. In Paris, Hemingway met a dynamic group of writers and artists, among them Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound, and James Joyce. Hemingway wrote and published "Indian Camp" in Ford Maddox Ford's *The Transatlantic Review* around this time. In 1926 he began his career as a novelist, publishing [The Sun Also Rises](#). The following year, he divorced Hadley, and married Pauline Pfeiffer, with whom he had been having an affair. The two left Paris in 1928 and moved to Key West, Florida. Hemingway spent the next decade travelling and writing until, in 1937, he became a correspondent in the Spanish Civil War, where he met the journalist Martha Gellhorn. Upon his return in 1939, Hemingway traveled to Cuba, where he lived with Gellhorn and began work on [For Whom the Bell Tolls](#), a novel inspired by his experience in Spain. As WWII began, Hemingway returned to Europe. There, he met another journalist, Mary Welsh, whom he married in 1946 after divorcing Gellhorn. In the following years, Hemingway's health began to deteriorate, due to a spate of accidents and his alcoholism. In 1954, he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature. Beset with pain and suffering bouts of paranoia, Hemingway shot himself at his home in Ketchum, Idaho in 1961.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The "Lost Generation" is a term—coined by Gertrude Stein but popularized by Hemingway—that literary scholars have used to refer to the generation of American writers who came of age during WWI. Their experiences with the horrors of WWI disillusioned many of these artists and left them skeptical of traditional value systems, like religion and patriotism. As in "Indian Camp," many of the Lost Generation's works concern themselves with the fundamental themes of birth and death, highlighting the impact of the war on their work. More than just

a retrospective scholarly grouping, the Lost Generation was an actual community. Many of these writers and artists lived in Paris during the economic boom of the 1920s, forming friendships that influenced their work. It was both the intellectual tradition generated by WWI and the expatriate community that Hemingway formed with other members of the Lost Generation that were most influential to his work.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Hemingway took cues from diverse types of writing—not just literary fiction—to forge his unique style. His experience as a journalist contributed to his habit of writing in short, declarative sentences, a style that set Hemingway apart from some of his experimental modernist contemporaries. Modern poetry also had a profound impact on Hemingway's writing, especially that of his friend and collaborator Ezra Pound. Pound was a leader in a poetic movement called Imagism, which favored simplicity, clarity, and precision. Hemingway credited Pound with teaching him more "about how to write and how not to write" than any other living writer. One of Pound's most famous poems, "In a Station of the Metro," bears some similarity to Hemingway's work for its brevity, plain-spokenness, and clarity. Hemingway was also a vital part of a community of expatriate American writers who gathered in Europe in the years following WWI. These other writers, like F. Scott Fitzgerald and James Joyce, were dubbed the "Lost Generation" by Gertrude Stein. Many of their works explore similar themes about breaking from historical tradition and trying to find new ways to make meaning.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Indian Camp
- **When Written:** 1923-1924
- **Where Written:** Toronto, Paris
- **When Published:** 1924
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short Story
- **Setting:** Native American Camp in Michigan
- **Climax:** A baby is born through C-section
- **Antagonist:** Death
- **Point of View:** Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Art Imitates Life: Just before Hemingway began work on "Indian Camp," his first wife, Hadley, gave birth to their first son. When Hadley went into labor, Hemingway was on a train

returning to their Toronto home from New York. Hemingway's biographer has argued that his feeling of helplessness on the train, unable to support his wife through birth, served as inspiration for this story.

Revisions: Hemingway's first draft of "Indian Camp" was entitled "One Night Last Summer" and was 29 pages long. The final draft, published in Ford Maddox Ford's *Transatlantic Review*, had only seven pages.



PLOT SUMMARY

Nick Adams, the young protagonist of "Indian Camp," arrives at a lakeshore with his father and his uncle where they meet several Native Americans. The Native Americans row them across the lake and lead them through the woods until they come to a small shantytown—a Native American encampment—and enter the first building, where a woman is very sick.

Inside the lamp-lit shanty, the mother lies on a bed screaming. She has been in labor for two days. Many of the older women in the village are helping her, while many of the men stay out of earshot of her screams. The father lies on the bunk above her, smoking a pipe and nursing a wound on his foot. The room smells very bad.

Nick's father is a doctor, and he doesn't have any anesthetic to ease the woman's pain. He instructs the older women to boil water and uses the water to sanitize his hands and his equipment. He describes the problem with the birth (the baby is being born in breech, which means bottom-first instead of head-first) and suggests that he might have to operate.

Some time later, Nick's Father begins the procedure. Uncle George and three male villagers hold the mother down while Nick's father performs the surgery. The mother bites Uncle George, causing him to call her a "squaw bitch." Eventually, Nick's father successfully delivers a baby boy. Throughout the procedure, he enlists Nick's help and tries to demonstrate his process, but Nick is unable to watch. After the delivery, Uncle George congratulates Nick's Father for performing the surgery with a jack knife and remarks that Nick's Father is a great man. Nick's father announces that he will return in the morning with a nurse.

With the surgery complete, Nick's Father goes to check on the husband in the top bunk. He finds that the husband has slit his own throat with a razor, the bed pooling with blood. Immediately, Nick's Father orders Uncle George to take Nick out of the shanty, but it's too late: he's already seen the dead man.

Now outside the shanty, with day breaking, Nick's Father apologizes to his son for bringing him along on this trip. Nick then asks his father a series of questions about what happened

in the shanty. Nick's Father responds to each question with short, deflating answers: normally deliveries are easier; the husband must have killed himself because "he couldn't stand things;" most people don't kill themselves; and dying must be "pretty easy."

As Nick sits back in the boat, his father rowing him away from the camp, the narrator makes observations about the beautiful morning scene at the lake. When the story comes to an end, the narrator notes that Nick, with his father steering, "felt quite sure that he would never die."



CHARACTERS

Nick Adams – Nick is the young protagonist of the story, brought along by his father and Uncle George on a trip to a nearby Native American encampment to care for an "Indian lady" who has been in labor for two days because her child is being born in breech position (meaning bottom instead of head first). The narrator doesn't make clear how old Nick is, but his childlike questions throughout make it seem that he is years from reaching puberty. Nick a curious boy who idolizes his father as a paragon of strength and wisdom. The trip begins as an occasion for Nick to learn about some of life's realities, but things quickly go awry as it becomes clear that the Indian woman will need to be given an emergency cesarean. At some point during the procedure her husband takes his own life, leaving behind a bloody scene which Nick glimpses despite his father's attempts to shield him from the sight. Nick leaves the "Indian camp" shaken. On the trip home, he retreats into his father's arms, believing that he will never die.

Nick's Father – Nick's father is a doctor who travels to an "Indian camp" to help deliver a baby. He brings his son Nick along on the trip, hoping to teach him lessons about life and work. He's a decisively masculine figure, and reacts to his world with self-assurance, stoicism, and grit—and not a small amount of male chauvinism. Regarding the pained screams of the woman in childbirth, Nick's father says that he doesn't hear them "because they are not important." Ultimately, Nick's father's emotionally distant behavior both supports and undermines his goals; it helps him successfully perform a complex operation in an intense situation, but prevents him from empathizing other people, leading him to treat the Indian woman and her husband without care and to put Nick through a traumatic situation, exposing him at a young age not only to the gruesome realities of a complicated birth, but to the even more gruesome realities of death and suicide.

The Indian Woman – The Indian woman is the reason for Nick's father's trip to the "Indian camp." She has been in labor for two days and requires medical attention because her child is being born in breech position (meaning bottom instead of head first). She is subjected to great pain throughout the story,

both in enduring a complicated childbirth and a surgery without anesthetic. Her screams echo through the camp. In the face of great pain, she demonstrates strength, and is ultimately able to survive the operation, successfully delivering a baby boy with the help of Nick's father. Her husband, however, commits suicide at some point during the operation.

The Indian Woman's Husband – The husband of the Indian woman who, when Nick and his father arrive in the shanty, lies prostrate in the bunk above her, nursing a serious axe wound on his foot and smoking a pipe. The story presents the husband as a hapless bystander. He's deeply pained by his wife's screams, but is unable to offer her the help she needs. All he can do is stay nearby and witness Nick's father's callous yet effective treatment of her. This condition wears on him and, near the end of the story, he slits his own throat with a razor for reasons that remain unknown to the reader, though Nick's father hypothesizes glibly that it was because he "couldn't stand things."

Uncle George – Uncle George largely spends "Indian Camp" assisting Nick's father in his operation. He's an affable man who gets along with the Native American men and, like Nick, greatly admires Nick's father, flattering him with compliments and calling him a "great man" after he successfully performs the operation. Uncle George lets his prejudice show during the operation when he calls the Indian woman a "squaw bitch" after she bites him.

birth and death, Hemingway suggests that these two fundamental aspects of human life cannot be fully understood—and that to acknowledge their gravity requires a sense of awe, and even the impulse to look away.

The story establishes the similarity between birth and death by depicting both as painful, bloody, and violent. The woman's birth is complicated because her baby is born in breech position (i.e., bottom-first instead of head-first), and for days she has been in terrible pain. While her screams are excruciating, Nick's father suggests that this pain is a natural part of the birthing process: "All her muscles are trying to get the baby born," he tells Nick. "That is what is happening when she screams." Furthermore, since she can't deliver the baby naturally, Nick's father operates on her with his buck **knife**, and without anesthetic. This leaves her in such pain that three men must hold her down, and she bites Uncle George. By the time the woman is stitched up, she is "pale" and "quiet"—it seems that her pain was so extreme that it left her unconscious, not even aware that her baby has finally been born. Similarly, when the birth is over and Nick's father checks on the woman's husband in the top bunk, he finds a grisly scene: "His throat had been cut from ear to ear. The blood had flowed down into a pool where his body sagged the bunk." Although the reasons for the man's suicide will never be known, it seems plausible that the pain he felt watching his wife give birth overwhelmed him and led him to suicide, explicitly linking the violence and pain of birth to the violence and pain of death.

While Hemingway depicts birth and death as similar experiences, Nick and his father react to them differently. Nick's father treats the birth with nonchalance; he encourages Nick to watch each step and he dismisses the woman's screams as "not important." However, the woman's painful birth clearly scares Nick. He asks his father to "give her something" to stop her screaming, and even as he helps his father prepare for surgery, he can barely look at what he's doing. Of the actual surgery, Hemingway writes, "Nick did not watch. His curiosity had been gone for a long time." While Nick's father clearly thinks it's appropriate—and even important—for Nick to watch this difficult birth, he tells Uncle George to take Nick outside when he finds the dead man in the top bunk. However, Nick has already seen it—he had a "good view" of the top bunk when his father "tipped the Indian's head back." These details (compared to the lack of detail in Hemingway's description of the surgery) suggest that Nick looked unflinchingly at death, while he shied away from watching birth.

Perhaps Nick's father treats birth with nonchalance and Nick treats death with nonchalance because neither fully understands the gravity of each situation. When Nick's father tells Nick that the woman is having a baby and Nick says that he knows, his father corrects him: "You don't know," he says. But his follow-up explanation is clinical, as though what Nick doesn't understand is simply the mechanics of labor. It seems



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



BIRTH AND DEATH

In "Indian Camp," a young boy named Nick watches his father, a doctor, surgically deliver a baby without anesthetic. The baby's mother, an "Indian lady," is clearly in excruciating pain, but she and the baby live. Meanwhile, in the course of her labor, the Indian woman's husband dies quietly, slitting his own throat as he lies above his wife in the top bunk. The bloody and painful birth occurs simultaneously with the violent suicide—and both are accomplished with knives—thereby explicitly associating these two experiences and making Nick understand that birth and death are somehow interlinked. However, while Nick has a difficult time watching the birth (a situation his father handles with performative nonchalance), he seems unfazed by the death, and comes away from the experience feeling that he will never die. Through Nick and his father's opposite reactions to

that his father has missed the point that this woman is bringing a human life into the world. Meanwhile, Nick seems to understand the gravity of the situation. Unlike his father, he understands that the woman is in great pain and he seems to share her fear of such a gruesome and dangerous surgery. As a child, Nick has no way of properly understanding the gravity of birth, but he knows enough to look away from it—perhaps because he realizes, to some extent, that he cannot understand. Conversely, Nick's father seems far more aware of the gravity of death than Nick. In the scene after they find the dead man in the top bunk, Nick seems unfazed—and even emboldened—by what he has just seen. He asks questions about birth and death (particularly about death), whereas during the birth the narrator notes that his “curiosity had been gone for a long time.” That Nick doesn't understand death, despite his ability to look at it and inquire about it, is clear at the story's end when he notes that he felt “quite sure that he would never die.” Of course, Nick *will* die, so his experience with death has not led him to understand it. Instead, he is left with a false confidence and a superficial understanding of death, similar to his father's superficial and clinical explanation of birth. In this way, Hemingway suggests that birth and death share a fundamental similarity: both are difficult and painful experiences, and both are not easily understood. To Hemingway, it seems, the appropriate response to such painful and incomprehensible situations is to look away.



GROWING UP

When Nick's father brings Nick along on a trip to deliver a baby, he intends to initiate his son into adult life by teaching him explicit lessons about life and the value of work. However, the trip takes an unexpectedly traumatic turn when the baby's mother requires an emergency surgery and her husband kills himself. In their debriefing afterwards, Nick's father tries to tell his son how to interpret what he saw, but his simplistic answers to Nick's complex questions undermine the lessons that Nick's father initially intended to impart. In this way, Hemingway suggests the complexity of growing up. The experiences that propel Nick towards maturity seem to overwhelm and even traumatize him. Meanwhile, the comforting words of his father, instead of making him more capable of facing the world, leave him less prepared for the difficult realities of life.

Initially, Nick's father teaches Nick as though he were a student, carefully explaining the decisions he makes and the ways in which an adult goes about his work. For instance, Nick's father starts his procedure by telling Nick that the mother is going to have a baby. When Nick replies that he knows, his father insists that he *doesn't* know, and goes on to give a more specific definition of the birthing process, explaining that “all of her muscles are trying to get to baby born.” He seems to be attempting to re-educate Nick, imposing his personal and

highly clinical vision of what birth is. When Nick's father observes that the mother is going to need surgery, however, his teaching becomes more implicit, as he no longer has time for verbal explanations. As Nick's father sterilizes his equipment and his hands, for instance, he leads by example, with Nick watching and taking note of his father's care and thoroughness. In doing so, Nick's father communicates implicitly that calm attention to detail can help adults take on tough situations.

As the birth becomes increasingly complicated, Nick's father's plan to initiate his son into maturity and teach him adult values goes awry. Although Nick's father encouraged his son to watch the surgery, the experience overwhelms Nick and he quickly stops watching, losing all his curiosity about what is happening. This severely limits what he can learn from the situation. Furthermore, after the operation, Nick's father seems to acknowledge that the experience may have traumatized his son rather than educated him, as he apologizes for the “awful mess” that came of the situation. Nonetheless, Nick's uncle George remarks that Nick's father is a “great man” for successfully performing the operation, which shows Nick that other adults ascribe value and respect to the way his father conducts himself, signaling to Nick that he should take his father's advice seriously.

However, when Nick *does* take his father's words seriously in the final scene, it backfires. As Nick and his father prepare to leave the camp, Nick begins to ask questions about what happened in the shanty, but his father undermines any complex adult lessons Nick might have learned by giving his son simplistic answers. When Nick asks his father about why the man killed himself, for example, Nick's father replies that, “He couldn't stand things, I guess.” This response betrays a lack of empathy for the father's plight, and it also implies that suicide is a result of weakness. Nick also asks his father if dying is hard, to which Nick's father responds, “No, I think it's pretty easy, Nick. It all depends.” Again, this observation seems to contrast with the bloody, self-inflicted death that Nick witnessed, and it's a simplistic response to a particularly complex human phenomenon. At the end of the story, the narrator remarks, “with his father rowing, [Nick] felt quite sure that he would never die.” It seems, then, that Nick's father's dismissive and simplistic attitude towards death has led Nick to a false understanding of death. Perhaps this confidence comes from his increased trust and admiration for his father (“with his father rowing,” Nick feels immune from death), or perhaps it's because Nick's father has unintentionally implied that death comes as a result of weakness, and Nick does not, in this moment, feel weak. Regardless, instead of helping Nick become a mature adult (as the trip was meant to do), Nick's father's pat answers about dying make Nick seem naïve and unprepared to face reality. In this way, Hemingway suggests that such shocking experiences don't necessarily help young people like Nick mature—especially when the understanding that results

from such experiences is so shallow.



MASCULINITY

In “Indian Camp,” Nick’s father tries to demonstrate to Nick the characteristics of adult men. Above all, his words and actions communicate his belief that men ought to face adversity with stoic grit, responding to life’s difficulties with stoicism and emotional distance. While this disposition allows Nick’s father to handle intense emotional experiences (such as performing a difficult surgery), the story also shows that the pressure to live up to masculine ideals can limit a man’s perspective, leading him to callousness and moral weakness.

Hemingway portrays Nick’s father as a masculine archetype, embodying many of the defining qualities of a traditional man: the ability to impose his will on the world and command respect in others. When the Adamses enter the shanty, for instance, the narrator describes its unhygienic conditions, but Nick’s father immediately imposes order, asking for **water** to be boiled to sterilize his equipment and wash his hands, and refusing to touch a blanket once his hands have been cleaned. Beyond cleanliness, he combats the shanty’s chaos by commanding others to carry out an identifiable procedure. He recruits a handful of the villagers as his aides and asserts himself as the person in charge, which results in a successful surgery and birth. From these actions, he earns the respect of others; Uncle George remarks that Nick’s father is a “great man.”

Nick’s father’s unemotional responses are just as important to his masculinity as his commanding behavior, suggesting that men should be reserved and stoic. For example, Nick’s father describes the birthing in a conspicuously clinical manner. While many people ascribe great emotional significance to the phenomenon of birth, he portrays it flatly as a physiological event, explaining that the birth is merely the process of the Indian woman’s muscles “trying to get the baby born.” Nick’s father’s responses to Nick’s questions at the end of the story also suggest that he reacts unemotionally to some of the world’s harsher realities. For example, he tells Nick that dying must be “pretty easy,” and he suggests that the woman’s husband killed himself because he “couldn’t stand things.” This cryptic comment implicitly places blame on the man’s weakness for his suicide. While what specifically he couldn’t stand is never specified, it was presumably witnessing the mother of his child in excruciating pain. Therefore, Nick’s father associates the baby’s father’s extreme empathy and emotion with weakness and a lack of masculinity.

Perhaps unintentionally, Hemingway’s depiction of what masculinity should be also reveals some drawbacks of this perspective. For instance, Nick’s father’s masculine perspective blinds him to the pain the mother is enduring during childbirth. When Nick asks his father to give the woman something to ease her pain, he refuses, saying that he doesn’t even hear her

screams, since they are “not important.” While Nick’s father clearly believes that his stoic calm is admirable and important, his dismissal of the woman’s pain comes off as callous and cruel. Furthermore, after performing a surgery on an unanesthetized woman, Nick’s father still makes the observation that fathers are “usually the worst sufferers in these little affairs.” In this case, Nick’s father’s recognition of the husband’s suffering makes his failure to recognize the woman’s suffering naïve to the point of absurdity, since the obvious reality of the situation is that the woman enduring the surgery must be the worst sufferer, and her grotesque, complicated birth could hardly be called a “little affair.”

In fact, the contrast between the men’s behavior and the women’s undermines the traditional association of masculinity with strength and femininity with weakness, since the men seem unable to acknowledge the woman’s pain, while she herself is perhaps the story’s strongest character. For example, when Nick and his father arrive in the camp, they find many Indian men smoking out of earshot of the mother’s screams, presumably because merely hearing her cries of pain is too much for them to bear. Meanwhile, many of the women from the camp are in the shanty, helping the mother birth her child. Furthermore, when the mother bites Uncle George during the operation, he immediately lashes out, unable to handle this comparatively minor pain, while the mother is wordlessly withstanding an incredibly painful surgery. Finally, just being near the mother’s operation is such an intense experience for the baby’s father that he’s led to kill himself, while the mother survives an emergency caesarian delivery, performed with a **jackknife**.

Regardless of whether Hemingway meant for his depiction of masculinity to expose the absurdity and naivety of such rigid conceptions of masculinity, the story makes it clear that these conceptions can be limiting: masculinity leads Nick’s father into cruel dismissal of female pain, and it blinds him to the fact that the story’s women are ultimately its strongest, most stoic characters.



CROSS-CULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

In “Indian Camp,” the Adams family (who are certainly white, though this is never specified) come to an Indian village to assist a difficult childbirth. The complex dynamic between these characters of different cultural backgrounds shows that such encounters often have mixed results. When people share their unique knowledge with people from a different culture, the results can be positive, as when Nick’s father’s medical expertise saves the lives of the Native woman and her baby. On the other hand, when outsiders enter a different cultural space without grace or care, they can humiliate and hurt other people as well as themselves. Nick’s father and uncle, for example, are cruel and dismissive to their hosts because they seem to believe that

Native people are less deserving of respect. The story, then, is something of a parable for European settlers' treatment of native peoples in American history, in which white settlers believed they were bringing civilization to a "New World," but their callousness only brought destruction and suffering for the people who lived there first.

To highlight the cultural differences between white American and Native American culture, Hemingway contrasts Nick's father's medical practices with the traditional birthing practices already underway when he arrives at the shanty. These descriptions paint Western culture as ordered, clean, and effective, while Native culture is portrayed as uncivilized, chaotic, and dirty. For example, Hemingway's narrator takes note of the inadequate sanitary conditions of the shanty when the Adamses arrive, which Nick's father's training in Western medicine leads him to immediately remedy. The first thing he does is fastidiously clean his hands and his tools, and he doesn't begin operating until he has ensured a higher standard of cleanliness. Nick's father also imposes order via a structured hierarchy; he enlists Native Americans as his surgical team, and, with them reporting to him, they are able to perform a successful operation. This depiction suggests that Nick's father has been able to create life-saving order out of hopeless disorganization, clearly indicating a view not only that the birth would have been doomed if not for the arrival of this white doctor, but that the cultural and medical practices in this Native American village are inferior to those of white American culture.

While Nick's father *does* appear to save the woman's life by bringing his expertise to her childbirth, his treatment of his Native patient provokes the reader to consider how his prejudice affects his ability to do his job. Certainly, she would have had a better experience if her doctor had treated her like a human being. For example, it's clear that the mother's screams are extreme enough that they cause deep distress to her husband and to other villagers in the shantytown (who try to stay out of earshot). Nevertheless, the screams don't faze Nick's father. As he prepares to operate on her without anesthetic, he even says that he doesn't "hear [her screams] because they are not important." Furthermore, when Uncle George holds the mother down for Nick's father to operate on her, she bites him, likely due to the pain of undergoing a surgery without anesthetic. Rather than bearing this (relatively minor) pain and empathizing with her distress, Uncle George's first reaction is to call her a "squaw bitch." This reaction discloses a lack of empathy for her situation and is inflected by racial prejudice.

Ultimately, the mixed outcome of Nick's father's intervention (the child is successfully born, but the mother is left sickly and pale and her husband kills himself) illustrates the mixed results of imposing one's culture on another. The story leaves open the possibility that, despite the surgery's "success," Nick's father

and uncle's disrespect and cruelty have demoralized and traumatized the mother, while driving the baby's father to suicide. Readers thus must ask themselves what "progress" means and whether it is even desirable if it causes such distress, but this is a question Hemingway doesn't attempt to answer.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



WATER

Water appears throughout "Indian Camp" as a medium that separates Nick's family from the native people who live in the shantytown. Nick, Nick's father, and Uncle George must cross a lake to arrive at the camp and return from it. This trip evokes the transatlantic voyages chartered by Europeans to the Americas in which white settlers came into contact with native peoples for the first time. This miniaturization of the original voyage encourages the reader to interpret this story as an allegory for the European settlement of the Americas, highlighting the racial and cultural divides that form the subtext of the story. Moreover, within the shanty, water also becomes an index of cultural differences between the Native Americans and the Adamses. When Nick's Father takes over the birthing process, he finds the hygienic conditions in the shanty unsuitable, and orders water to be boiled so he can sanitize his tools to his medical standards. Thus, throughout the story, water highlights the differences (and distances) between Native American communities and white American society more broadly.



KNIVES, AXES, AND RAZOR BLADES

Nick's father and the Indian woman's husband both use blades in significant ways in the story. When Nick and his father arrive at the shanty, the husband is nursing a bad axe wound on his foot from days prior. Near the end of the story, he kills himself by slitting his own throat with a razor. Meanwhile, Nick's Father is able to execute a caesarian delivery using a jack knife. Nick's Father's superior skill with the knife—a skill that allows him to save both the Indian woman and her baby—emasculates the woman's husband in comparison. The husband's use of tools only serves to demonstrate his haplessness. However, Nick's Father's use of the jack knife also suggests his callousness—part of his stoically masculine demeanor—as he operates on the Indian woman without any regard for her pain. Although it remains unclear why the husband takes his own life, there are a number of ways to interpret his suicide: it is possible that Hemingway meant to

suggest that the intervention of a white doctor (and the performance of a caesarian delivery) was felt to be such a physical and cultural violation that the man took his own life; it is also possible that the husband simply felt ashamed that another man had saved his wife's life; a third way of interpreting the suicide is that the man could not bear to see his wife in so much pain. In any case, blades become symbolic of the cultural and personal divide that separates Nick's father from the Indian woman's husband—whether that divide is about race, masculinity, culture, or sensitivity to the pain of others.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* published in 1987.

Indian Camp Quotes

“Inside on a wooden bunk lay a young Indian woman. She had been trying to have her baby for two days. All the old women in the camp had been helping her. The men had moved off up the road to sit in the dark and smoke out of range of the noise she made. She screamed just as Nick and the two Indians followed his father and Uncle George into the shanty.”

Related Characters: The Indian Woman, Uncle George, Nick's Father, Nick Adams

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

Prior to this passage, Nick's father only told Nick that they are going to the Indian camp to help a sick Indian woman. In this passage, however, it is clear that the woman is going through a difficult labor, and that Nick's father is there to help deliver the baby. The fact that the men in the camp can't bear the screams, but women have been helping the Indian woman for two days, undercuts the picture of masculinity as powerful and dominant that exists in the rest of the story. Here, it is the women who are strong enough to bear this traumatic situation and empathetically offer their help.

“Listen to me. What she is going through is called being in labor. The baby wants to be born and she wants it to be born. All her muscles are trying to get the baby born. That is what happening when she screams.”

Related Characters: Nick's Father (speaker), The Indian Woman, Nick Adams

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

When Nick tells his father that he believes he knows what's going on—that the Indian woman is going to have a baby—his father corrects him with this clinical, unemotional description of birth. Nick's father offers an interpretation of birth that makes it seem like a simple physical process, consequently removing the mother's desires from the process, or any other emotional aspect of birth. According to Nick's father, it's the muscles that do the work, not the woman, which is an attitude that gestures to his misogyny. Here, Nick's father demonstrates a stereotypical brand of masculinity by trying to teach his son this stoic vision of birth that minimizes emotion.

“Oh, Daddy, can't you give her something to make her stop screaming?” asked Nick.

“No. I haven't any anesthetic,” his father said. “But her screams are not important. I don't hear them because they are not important.”

Related Characters: Nick's Father, Nick Adams (speaker), The Indian Woman

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 68



Explanation and Analysis


This exchange exposes the negative outcomes of Nick's father's stoic, masculine posture. On one hand, Nick's father can't let the Indian woman's screams bother him too much as a doctor. His goal is to deliver the baby and must remain calm and focused in order to achieve his task—a lesson he tries to teach Nick. However, this disposition mitigates his empathy for the mother's clearly unbearable pain. This callousness, perhaps aimed at treating the mother more effectively, also demonstrates a deep disrespect for her wellbeing. It also provokes the reader to wonder if Nick's

father's disregard for her pain is related to disrespect for women or native people. In this way, the lesson he imparts to Nick might serve to hurt his value system, not help it.

“Those must boil,” he said, and began to scrub his hands in the basin of hot water with a cake of soap he had brought from the camp. Nick watched his father's hand scrubbing each other with the soap. While his father washed his hands very carefully and thoroughly, he talked.

Related Characters: Nick's Father (speaker), Nick Adams

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 



Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

This scene demonstrates one of the symbolic functions of water in the story. In several occasions, water acts to separate Nick Adams and his father from the native people in the shantytown. At first, it's a lake that physically separates the Adamses from the camp. Here, boiled water separates Nick Father's medicinal standards of cleanliness required in birthing from the native cultural standards underway before his intervention. In washing his hands and tools, Nick's Father seeks to impose order on a situation on a chaotic situation that he inherited. Importantly, Nick observes that his father washes carefully and thoroughly, suggesting that his work perhaps is suffused with values worth learning. This care is contrasted with Nick's Father's emotional callousness in other parts of the story.

Later when he started to operate Uncle George and three Indian men held the woman still. She bit Uncle George on the arm and Uncle George said, “Damn squaw bitch!” and the young Indian who had rowed Uncle George over laughed at him.

Related Characters: Uncle George (speaker), The Indian Woman

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 68



Explanation and Analysis

Uncle George's outburst in this passage suggests that a blatant disregard for the Indian woman's pain is not limited to Nick's Father. When the mother bites him, Uncle George's reaction isn't to consider that this might be the reflex of someone enduring a major surgery without anesthetic (after all, her screams are “not important.”) Moreover, his slur connotes disrespect for both native people and women, leading the reader to believe that this disrespect might color his disregard for the Indian woman's pain. Yet, the Native American man's jovial response to Uncle George suggests that Indian men also fail to empathize with her pain. Perhaps the men share a disregard for female pain across their cultures.

“Now,” his father said, “there's some stitches to put in. You can watch this or not, Nick, just as you like. I'm going to sew the incision I made.”

Nick did not watch. His curiosity had been gone for a long time.

Related Characters: Nick's Father (speaker), Nick Adams

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Nick's refusal to watch the operation any longer signals a turning point in his initiation journey. Nick's father brings him on this medical trip ostensibly to expose him to a chaotic adult situation and demonstrate how one can overcome such a situation through hard work and focus. When Nick refuses to watch the end of the surgery, he is actively retreating from brutal realities. However, it's not the brutality of the scene that causes Nick to look away, it's that his curiosity is gone—a phenomenon associated with adulthood. In this sense, his father's attempt to initiate him into adult life has mixed results. It does seem to divest him of some childlike qualities, but it also moves him into adulthood unable to face trauma.

He was feeling exalted and talkative as football players are in the dressing room after a game.


“That's one for the medical journal, George,” he said. “Doing a Caesarian with a jack-knife and sewing it up with nine-foot, tapered gut leaders.”

Uncle George was standing against the wall, looking at his arm.

“Oh, you're a great man, all right,” he said.

Related Characters: Uncle George, Nick's Father (speaker)

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 69



Explanation and Analysis


This exchange between Nick's father and Uncle George illustrates their insensitive view of the operation. First, the passage reveals that the tools Nick's father operated with weren't standard medical equipment, making the procedure more gruesome in retrospect. Also, the observation that the two men banter like players after a football game exposes that they saw the operation as a sort of game where Nick's Father could demonstrate his skills and his masculinity. Their sporty jocular, combined with the revelation that the surgery was even more gruesome than the reader might have thought, further demonstrates that their masculine posture has made them callous. The men focus on Nick's father's role in the operation rather than realizing that it was likely an extraordinarily painful, emotional, and life-altering experience for the mother.

“Ought to have a look at the proud father. They're usually the worst suffers in these little affairs,” the doctor said. “I must say he took it all pretty quietly.”[...]

The Indian lay with his face toward the wall. His throat had been cut from ear to ear.

Related Characters: Nick's Father (speaker), The Indian Woman's Husband

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Nick's father's statement takes on a tragically ironic twist in this passage when he finds that the father has killed himself. At first, it seems another example of his inability to empathize with female pain—suggesting that the father would suffer worse than someone who had just undergone a surgery without anesthetic. However, the father's death confirms his seemingly ridiculous idea.

Hemingway leaves the father's motivation to kill himself up to speculation. Perhaps he was the only one who truly empathized with his wife's pain, so much so that it led him to take his own life, or maybe it was that Nick's Father had taken control of the birthing of his own son, a process in which the Indian woman's husband was helpless to support. Ultimately, it suggests that the father's suicide was motivated by emasculation, either because he couldn't maintain a stoic disposition or couldn't take care of his wife and child.

“Why did he kill himself, Daddy?”

“I don't know, Nick. He couldn't stand things, I guess.”

[...]

“Is dying hard, Daddy?”

“No, I think it's pretty easy Nick. It all depends.”

Related Characters: Nick's Father, Nick Adams (speaker), The Indian Woman's Husband

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

After witnessing the gruesome events in the shanty, Nick asks his father a series of questions to try to understand what happened. Nick's father's curt, emotionally distant responses confirm the particular lesson he's trying to teach Nick. Nick asks existentially hefty questions about life and death that would, for many people, require equally complicated responses. Instead, Nick's father suggests that one shouldn't bother to understand big questions, but rather should work to shield oneself from emotional vulnerability. For instance, he says that The Father killed himself because he couldn't stand things. He brought his guard down. Nick's Father shows him that, if one keep one's guard up against these sorts of questions, one can move on to another day. However, indoctrinating young Nick into this sort of emotional position might not be the healthiest option.

They were seated in the boat, Nick in the stern, his father rowing. The sun was coming up over the hills [...] In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die.

Related Characters: Nick's Father, Nick Adams

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

This final passage makes it clear that Nick received messy, ineffective initiation into adulthood. Nick's father had the opportunity to introduce Nick to this scene of gruesome birth and death and help Nick to build an empathetic

understanding of the harsh realities of life, in turn building a healthy, adult perspective. Instead, the whole experience seems to have insulated Nick further from the adult world. Here, the tone of the story turns brighter as the narrator observes the natural beauty surrounding the characters. Nick sits back in the boat, in his father's care, believing that he will never die. This rosy, romantic shift shows that Nick has actually regressed to an even more childlike state, unable to process death and suffering.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INDIAN CAMP

Nick Adams, Nick's father, and Uncle George arrive at the shore of a **lake** where "two Indians" are waiting with rowboats. Nick and his father board one boat, while Nick's uncle gets in another. The Indians begin to paddle them across the lake. It's cold, and Nick sits wrapped in his father's arms. The Indian rowing the boat is working very hard, while the boat carrying Nick's uncle speeds ahead into the mist. Nick asks his father where they're going and his father responds that they are headed to the "Indian camp" to see about an "Indian lady [who is] very sick."

When they're on the other shore, Uncle George is sitting smoking a cigar, and gives one to each of the Indians as well. The Indians lead Nick's family across a meadow and through the dark woods by lantern light until they reach a logging road where it is bright enough to see without the lantern. Eventually the group arrives at a grouping of "shanties where the Indian bark-peelers lived," and dogs rush out barking. Then they spot the nearest shanty, where an old woman stands in the door with a lamp.

Inside the shanty, a young Indian woman lies on a wooden bunk. The woman is in her second day of labor. The camp's older women have been trying to help her birth her child, while the men have moved out of earshot of her screams. Her husband lies on the bunk above, smoking a pipe and nursing an open foot wound he got from an **axe**. The narrator notes the room smells bad.

Nick's father orders **water** to be boiled. He turns to Nick and explains that the Indian woman is going to have a baby. When Nick replies that he knows, his father argues that he doesn't. He offers instead a specific description: that she is in labor and all her muscles are trying to get the baby born, causing her to scream. Nick then asks if his father has anything to give the mother to stop her screams. His father replies that he doesn't have anesthetic, but he doesn't even hear the screams because "they are not important."

The opening scene establishes this story as a journey narrative. The Adamses cross a body of water into foreign, native territory, much like European settlers in colonial America. Nick is surrounded by the care of older male figures, his family and the rowing Indian, suggesting that he could be making a journey to join the ranks of the adult men.



Uncle George quickly develops a friendly rapport with the Indian men, highlighting a sense of mutual understanding despite their cultural difference. Their sharing cigars and traveling through the woods sets a tone of masculine camaraderie that shifts as the Adamses enter a feminine, domestic space in the shanty.



The birthing process is in a state of disarray—the conditions seem unsanitary and the labor is difficult. Nevertheless, the women in the camp are able to withstand the gruesome scene, while most of the men avoid the shanty, demonstrating weakness of some of the male characters.



Nick's father takes control of the situation, ordering boiling water presumably to use as disinfectant. He also offers Nick a naturalistic description of birth—it's not a monumental emotional moment, but merely a physical process. In doing so, he tries to teach Nick to react stoically to intense situations at the risk of an empathetic view of the mother's pain.



The older women signal that the **water** has boiled. Nick's father pours half of the water into a basin, using it to scrub his hands with soap. He places several things unwrapped from a handkerchief in the other half. Nick watches his father prepare and observes how "carefully and thoroughly" he washes his hands. While washing, Nick's father explains that the birth is difficult because the baby is in breech (turned feet-first).

Later, Nick's father begins a Caesarian section to deliver the baby. Uncle George and three Native American men hold the Indian woman down. During the operation, the mother bites Uncle George, causing him to yell "damn squaw bitch!" at her.

Throughout the surgery, Nick holds the basin of water for his father. After a long procedure, Nick's father successfully delivers a baby boy. However, Nick is unable to watch the surgery, despite the fact his father is instructing him while performing it.

The mother is exhausted following the surgery; her eyes are closed, she's pale, and doesn't know if the baby is alive or not. Meanwhile, Nick's father is triumphant after the successful delivery. He informs the mother that he will be back with nurses in the morning. Uncle George proudly congratulates Nick's father for performing a C-section with a **jack knife** and remarks that he's a great man.

Nick's father remarks that they should check the father because "they're usually the worst sufferers in these little affairs." When he reaches for the father's blanket, his hand gets wet. Upon further inspection, Nick's father finds that the Indian woman's husband slit his throat with a **razor** and the bed is pooling with blood. Nick's father asks Uncle George to take Nick out of the shanty, but it's too late: Nick has already seen the father's head.

Now outside the shanty, Nick's father apologizes to his son for taking him on the trip. Nick, trying to reflect on the events in the shanty, asks his father a series of questions about birth and death. Nick's father responds with a level of stoicism and calculated remove. Ultimately, he asks his father if dying is hard, to which he guesses that it's pretty easy.

In his cleaning ritual, Nick's father brings some order to a chaotic situation through care and thoroughness. Again, this is an intended lesson for Nick about how a man can exert control over his surroundings. He also imposes a Western medical standard for birthing over the traditional one underway.



Uncle George exposes his lack of empathy and racism toward the mother. Instead of understanding the bite was a reaction to her pain, he immediately lashes out with a racial slur.



Eventually, the birth becomes so traumatic that Nick can't stand to watch, suggesting that he is not as desensitized (or insensitive) as his father is. Despite the birth's success, the lesson that Nick's father is trying to teach appears to get botched.



Uncle George's congratulations carry some irony. It supports Nick's father's intended lesson (that good work is a reflection of good character) but it disregards the poor state the mother is left in post-surgery. The two men are only able to acknowledge the successful birth, not the woman's suffering.



Once again, Nick's father's statement illustrates that he fails to empathize with the mother, and he belittles her suffering by calling labor a "little affair." However, he's strangely correct in his claim that fathers are the "worst sufferers." Perhaps Nick's Father's rash commandeering of the child's birth left the father feeling helpless and doomed, driving him to take his life.



When Nick witnesses more intense trauma than anticipated, his father is unable to respond to his emotional needs. However, although Nick's father models an emotionally detached and stereotypically masculine response, his earlier request that Uncle George take Nick out of the shanty, as well as his apology to Nick for taking him on the trip, suggests that Nick's father does understand that this trauma is too much for his son to bear.



As Nick's father rows his son back across the **lake**, away from the camp, the narrator notices beautiful details about natural world in the morning. The story finishes with the narrator observing that Nick, sitting in the boat with his father rowing, felt quite sure that he would never die.

It seems that Nick received the opposite of the intended lesson. Instead of learning how an adult can handle the trauma of birth and death, Nick retreats into childlike obliviousness.





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