

The Importance of Hemingway's "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife"

Charles J. Nolan Jr.

Charles J. Nolan, Jr., a professor of English at the U. S. Naval Academy, is the author of Aaron Burr and the American Literary Imagination as well as a number of articles in, among others, The Hemingway Review, the South Atlantic Review, Studies in Short Fiction, The Mark Twain Journal, The Chaucer Review, and College Literature. He has served at different times as department chair and as president of the Faculty Senate.

When Hemingway wrote "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" sometime in late March or early April 1924 (Smith 61), he surely had no idea just how important that story would be in understanding his work. Published first in the *Transatlantic Review* and then in *In Our Time* (62), the piece is one in a number of Nick Adams stories that Hemingway wrote in the 1920s and 1930s documenting the growth of his first major protagonist. In this short work, we see what Nick's parents are like and what the nature of their relationship might mean for his development. Although we do not see Nick himself until near the end, there is no doubt that the piece reveals a significant aspect of his background. The story is important as well to aspects of Hemingway biography, to what has long been called the Hemingway hero, to gender and to racial relations (Caucasian-Indian) in the Hemingway canon, and to father-son dynamics in Hemingway's work.¹

The story itself, neatly divided into three separate scenes (Grebstein 5-6), depicts the character of each of Nick's parents. In the first part, Doctor Adams quarrels with Dick Boulton, a "half-breed" whom Nick's father has hired to cut up some logs lost from the logging booms that were towed to the mill (CSS 73). Dr. Adams "always assumed" that no one would ever come back for the logs even though he knows that the lumbermen might return for them. Boulton, bringing his son Eddy and another Indian, Billy Tabeshaw, with him, insults the doctor by accusing him of stealing the logs. At first, Nick's father temporizes and denies, but when Dick won't drop the charge, Dr. Adams tells Boulton to leave. It becomes clear, though, that Dick wants a fight in order to avoid working off a bill he owes Nick's father, or so the doctor believes. But when Dick challenges him, Dr. Adams, knowing that Boulton will easily trounce him, turns away and walks angrily back to the cottage.

The second scene takes place inside. Evidently hearing her husband's entrance, Mrs. Adams, lying down in a darkened room, asks Dr. Adams if he is going to return to work. When he tells her that he isn't, she asks if there is any problem. Dr. Adams indicates that he has had a quarrel with Dick Boulton, information that leads her to reply rather sanctimoniously that she hopes he hasn't gotten angry, quoting the bible to make her point. In his own bedroom, the doctor makes no comment as he sits on his bed cleaning his shotgun, pumping the shells

in and out. Mrs. Adams continues to question him about his contretemps with Dick; in the process she shows how removed from reality she truly is. She can't believe, for example, that Boulton would try to pick a fight to avoid paying his bill. In addition, she questions her husband as a mother would a child (Benson 8). It is no surprise to readers aware of psychological dynamics, then, that, when the doctor leaves, he lets the screen door bang—unconsciously—though he apologizes immediately.

In the final scene, which takes place in the woods, Dr. Adams finds his son leaning against a tree, reading. As his wife has asked, the doctor dutifully tells Nick that his mother wants to see him; but when Nick indicates that he prefers to go with his father instead, Dr. Adams agrees, putting Nick's book in his pocket and following his son farther on into the woods where Nick knows they can find black squirrels.

Even though Hemingway indicated at one point that the story documented his discovery of his father's cowardice (Young, *Reconsideration* 33n), it is a mistake, of course, to read Hemingway's life in his fiction, as some earlier criticism has done. It is also undeniable, however, that Hemingway used his experience as the basis of his art. At some level—the deepest emotional level—many of his protagonists' lives are his own. In this story, the character portrayal of Doctor and Mrs. Adams has resonance in the relationship between Clarence and Grace Hemingway, as any number of biographers, beginning with Carlos Baker and running through Michael Reynolds, have shown us. Paul Smith notes: "To read Reynolds's *Young Hemingway*, especially chapters 3-5, along with this story is to see how close it comes to an explicit presentation of his parents' characters, the dissolution of their once happy family and their marriage" (63).² Certainly, however, there is no one-to-one correspondence—Mrs. Hemingway was, for example, a Congregationalist, not a Christian Scientist (Baker 11)—but the impact of his parents' relationship on Nick's development echoes the effect that the tension between Dr. and Mrs. Hemingway had on the young Ernest (Reynolds 102-03). Nick's choice to go with his father at the end of the story suggests, then, that—at this point at least—Nick holds his father in high regard, though in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* a later Hemingway protagonist, Robert Jordan—an adult version of Nick—will reject his father for his sloppy sentimentalism and cowardice. The parallels—again, at the emotional level—between these characters and Hemingway are hard to discount. Ultimately, the story is suggestive of Hemingway's life without being totally biographical.

Philip Young has long ago traced the development of what came to be called the Hemingway hero, beginning with Nick Adams, through the Hemingway canon.³ Although there has been a paradigm shift in Hemingway criticism in recent years, focusing on issues of gender and sexuality, it remains undeniable that Young's earlier way of reading Hemingway remains a valid and illuminating approach. Among the works published during the author's lifetime,⁴ the story of the Hemingway protagonist begins with "Indian Camp" in *In Our Time* and runs through *Across the River and Into the Trees* and *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Even if Nick were just another of Hemingway's central characters, however, his upbringing and therefore "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" would be important. But as Young pointed out so long ago, "Nick is the Hemingway hero, the first one . . . : the experiences of childhood, adolescence and young manhood which shape Nick Adams shaped as well Lt. Henry, Jake

Barnes, Col. Cantwell, and several other heroes. They all have had Nick's childhood, Nick's adolescence, Nick's young manhood" (54). Though the novels will add depth and dimension to the Hemingway hero's biography, they will not essentially change him; he will grow from his experiences, of course, but his core and psychological history will remain the same. His relationship with women will be affected by what went on at home between his parents, his response to the Indians will be colored by his awareness of how Dr. Adams viewed and treated them and by his own experiences with them, and his shifting attitude towards his father and his later relationship with his son are rooted in Nick's life.

Although some have argued that Nick witnesses his father's humiliation at the hands of Dick Boulton⁵ and although some also believe that he overhears the discussion between his parents that follows, close readers of the story should conclude, I believe, that neither is the case. Still, as we see, Nick is old enough to prefer his father's company to that of his mother, and that detail suggests his general awareness of the problems at home. It is not surprising, then, that as Nick grows up—and as he becomes Frederic Henry, Jake Barnes, Robert Jordan, Colonel Cantwell, and David Bourne—his views of his mother will have an impact on how he sees and deals with other women. In "Now I Lay Me," for example, an adult Nick's uncertainty about the salubriousness of marriage is clearly based on the remembrance of his mother's destruction of his father's prized Indian stone axes and arrowheads, so it is perhaps not surprising that Frederic Henry—another grown-up Nick—would pick such a compliant woman as Catherine Barkley. Though feminist critics have rightly overturned the erroneous view of Hemingway's women characters as either bitches or goddesses,⁶ it remains true that Catherine is still able to say to Frederic, "I want what you want. There isn't any me any more. Just what you want" (*Farewell* 106). Catherine, of course, is way ahead of Frederic in her knowledge of life, given what has happened to her fiancé and what she has learned from the experience of losing him, so her willingness to attend to Frederic's needs occurs within that context.

For Jake Barnes—Nick again—the situation is more complex. Horribly and genitally wounded, Jake has a relationship with Brett that seems the opposite of that of Frederic and Catherine. Brett's dominance is undisputed—she eventually turns Jake into her sexual procurer—and, in her general control of him, she is much more like Mrs. Adams than Catherine, albeit it is her sexuality that gives Brett such power. Though Brett's marital history and life experience provide some excuse for her behavior, she is Circe-like in her control of men (*Sun* 148). However much he might chafe against such dominance, the Hemingway hero—Nick and therefore Jake—has been prepared for Brett's control by what he has seen and experienced at home. Robert Jordan, on the other hand, the next in the line of Hemingway heroes who are Nick psychologically, is more like Frederic than Jake in his choice of women, especially since he sees his father as a coward, in part, for not having stood up to his wife—"that woman" (*For Whom* 339), Robert calls his mother.⁷ Like Catherine, Maria seems willing to serve her lover in every way possible: "I will do anything for thee that thou should wish" (349). But unlike the relationship between Frederic and Catherine, which is essentially one between equals, that between Robert and Maria is clearly weighted in Robert's favor. He is, after all, a university teacher whose vision of the world is much broader than that of the younger and uneducated Maria. Of course, it is true that her treatment at the hands of the Falangists has given her a kind of experiential knowledge that may partially redress the power balance between them; still Robert seems much more aware of the situation they are in than she does. His musings about a possible future with her as his

wife back in Montana suggest the fantasy-like quality of their time together and her essentially fantasy-like nature. With Richard Cantwell, a fifty-year-old Nick, and Renata in *Across the River and into the Trees*, the compliant woman is again in evidence. Though Renata is a well-educated Venetian and though she has her own rules that she will not break even for her lover, the age and experience level between the two is great enough to make him the dominant partner. Colonel Cantwell, wounded in the same way (in the leg) and in the same place (Fossalta) as Frederic Henry, is badly scarred both physically and emotionally by life; the relationship that he has with Renata helps to heal him before his ailing heart gives out. In essence, her job is clearly to serve him in what turn out to be his final days. Even David Bourne, a Nick who belongs chronologically to the 1920s and whose gender-bending and sexually experimental relationship with the destructive Catherine in *The Garden of Eden* comes as a surprise, ultimately prefers a more traditional role with Marita (“I’m trying to study his needs”). In all of these cases, the Hemingway hero’s relationship with the woman he loves springs from what Nick learned at home. Whether she is dominant or submissive, the protagonist is psychologically familiar with the dynamics of his response to her because of what he saw happening between the doctor and his wife.

The racial dynamics of the story have their impact on the Hemingway protagonist too. Thomas Strychacz and especially Amy Strong have written insightfully on how race and the power relationships inherent in it are treated in this early piece. And although Nick does not witness the argument between his father and Dick Boulton, which the Indian this time wins, he has seen Dr. Adams interact with the Indians before, notably in “Indian Camp.” In that story and at this stage of his development, Nick would naturally and unconsciously adopt his father’s and therefore his culture’s apparent superiority, and that perception carries over to his relationships with Prudie Mitchell in “Ten Indians” and with Trudy Gilby in “Fathers and Sons.” Although in “Ten Indians” it is clear from the context that the Garners and Nick believe that whites are superior—many Indians are drunk, Carl claims that Prudie and the other Indians smell like skunks, and Mrs. Garner uses the pejorative *squaw* even though she corrects her son for talking negatively about the Indians—Nick is pleased “to be teased about Prudence Mitchell” (CSS 254). Of course, her faithlessness while he is in town with the Garners, though it wounds Nick, serves only to reinforce the cultural hierarchy. In “Fathers and Sons,” though young Trudy’s sexuality gives her some power, Nick is clearly the superior one. His boyish, grandiose, but essentially empty threats to shoot, scalp, and throw Trudy’s half-brother, Eddie, to the dogs if he even speaks to Nick’s sister, frighten Trudy and depress her other brother, Billy. Because they think that Nick can follow through with his boasting, their belief reflects Nick’s dominant racial position.

Though “The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” is important to the Hemingway hero’s gender and racial background, the story is central to an understanding of the changing father-son dynamic in Hemingway’s works. We first see it at work in “Indian Camp,” which precedes this piece in *In Our Time*. In that story, Nick’s view of his father, especially during the discussion about childbirth and suicide that follows the main action, is clearly positive. Dr. Adams, apologetic about his son’s having to witness the Indian’s killing himself, tries to answer Nick’s various questions and put the boy’s concerns into some sort of normal context. He is apparently successful because the story ends with Nick, pictured in the boat with his father, as secure and untroubled. Had he seen in the next story his father back away from a fight with Dick Boulton, he might have changed his perspective, but when Dr. Adams finds

his son in the woods, Nick chooses to stay with his father and go searching for black squirrels rather than return to his mother as she has requested.

“Ten Indians” continues an essentially positive relationship between father and son, though Dr. Adams will have to give Nick the painful news that his Indian girlfriend has been unfaithful to him. Still, Dr. Adams treats Nick with sensitivity and kindness, so their basic bond remains unchanged.⁸ In “The Three-Day Blow,” an older Nick—old enough to be rumored to be engaged—tries to deal with the emotional aftermath of his break-up with Marge. In the course of an afternoon of drinking and camaraderie, Nick, who still uses words like *swell* and *gee*, and his friend Bill run at one point through a version of “My father is better than your father.” Although a little dismissive of the fact that Dr. Adams claims never to have taken a drink, Nick still seems to admire his father. In “Now I Lay Me,” Nick, now a soldier unwilling to sleep because of his fear of dying, keeps himself awake by remembering various streams he used to fish, by praying for people he has known, and by trying to recall the events of his life. One of these is a memory of his mother’s cleaning out the basement while his father was away on a hunting trip and her burning everything she felt should not have been there. Unfortunately, her conception of trash included her husband’s Indian arrowheads and pottery, objects that, as we see when he returns, are very important to him. Although Nick makes no direct comment on the incident, he does not agree with his orderly that marriage “would fix up everything” (CSS 282). Clearly, Nick’s sympathy here is with his father.

Not so for Robert Jordan, an older Nick. Embarrassed by his father’s sentimentalism when as a young man Robert went off to college, he is even harsher in his view of his father’s suicide: he sees it as an act of cowardice. Although he later debates the legitimacy of killing himself and is tempted to do so as he lies wounded after the bridge attack, he ultimately does not; he recognizes that even though he will be captured and killed, there is still one more thing he can do for the cause: delay the advancing enemy or kill their officer. Like his grandfather, that Civil War soldier whom Robert admires and identifies with, he will be brave and useful until the end.

“Father and Sons” is a kind of coda to the father-son dynamics in Hemingway’s works, reflecting as it does Nick’s ambivalence about his father and yet the possibility of some final resolution of his feelings about that important figure in his life. As he rides through the countryside with his sleeping son, he recalls his father’s wonderful eyesight and his introducing Nick to hunting and fishing. But he also remembers Dr. Adams’ unsatisfactory advice about sex: “His father had summed up the whole matter by stating that masturbation produced blindness, insanity, and death, while a man who went with prostitutes would contract hideous venereal diseases and that the thing to do was to keep your hands off of people” (CSS 371). But the recollection of his father’s death—apparently, a suicide—is still very painful. There is also, however, some recognition of the difficulties that led to his father’s end: “He had died in a trap that he had helped only a little to set . . . (370). As Nick thinks about his own sexual experience with the Ojibway girl Trudy Gilby, he also remembers rather guiltily an incident in which he had thought about shooting his father. Dr. Adams had given him some underwear that had shrunk, but Nick felt nauseated when he wore it, so he threw it away and lied about what he had done with it. Punished for lying,

Nick sat in the woodshed with his gun cocked and fantasized about shooting his father. That Oedipal reverie is interrupted, when his own son, who has awakened, asks him about living with the Indians. Startled by the question, Nick shows himself as unable as his father to talk about sex. When the discussion turns to what Dr. Adams was like, Nick is similarly uncommunicative. But when the boy wonders why they never visit his grandfather's grave and is rather insistent about doing so, Nick relents: "I can see that we'll have to go" (377). In that comment lies the suggestion that Nick will eventually resolve his feelings for his father.

Because in some ways Hemingway's work is all of a piece, "The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife" is an enormously useful story in understanding key aspects of the author's world. Our perspective on Ernest Hemingway the man is enriched by our awareness of the troubled Adams marriage, though, of course, all the caveats about life and art need to be remembered. The development of the Hemingway protagonist in his various dimensions and his relationships with women and with the Indians are also prefigured in this story. Perhaps most significant is the insight the piece provides into the painful and ambivalent feelings the Hemingway hero has for and about his father. This early story offers us a way into the life and work of one of our seminal writers who will continue to please and educate us no matter what the changing critical fashions.

Notes

1. Articles in English devoted solely to the story are Arnold; Davis; Fox; Fulkerson; Grimes, "James"; Monteiro; Smith, and Wilhelm. Two articles—one in German, the other in Japanese—I have been unable to read; see Gottschalk and Nakamura.

2. For a contrary view, see Westbrook: "The mother in 'The Doctor and the Doctor's Wife' is fundamentally different from Grace Hemingway . . ." (79).

3. See Young's *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration* (University Park: Penn State UP, 1966) and "Big World Out There': The Nick Adams Stories," *Novel 6* (1972): 5-19 as well as Hemingway's *The Nick Adams Stories* (New York: Bantam, 1972).

4. In 1972 Scribner's published *The Nick Adams Stories*, which includes unpublished material about Nick, and there are a number of posthumous books.

5. Those who believe that Nick sees what happens between Dr. Adams and Dick Boulton include Carlos Baker, *Artist* 134; Bakker 16; Capellan 78; DeFalco, *Hero* 34-35, and “Initiation” 164; Donaldson 296; Fitzgerald 264; Flora, *Short Fiction* 18; Gurko 176; Griffin 222; Hovey 38-39; Montgomery 70; Sojka 73; Williams 32; and Young, *Reconsideration* 33, 135. Burhans 320 and Comley and Scholes 28 are uncertain; Flora, *Short Fiction* 18, suggests probably; but a number of others note that Nick does not see what occurs at the lake: Sheridan Baker 28; Dahiya 29; Flora, “Closer Look” 76, and

Adams 37, 42; Fulkerson 65; Hays 44; Nahal 84; and Smith 64.

6. See, for example, Charles J. Nolan, Jr., “Hemingway’s Women’s Movement,” *HN* 3.2 (1984): 14-22; rpt in *Ernest Hemingway: Six Decades of Criticism*, ed. Linda W. Wagner (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 1987), 209-19. Since the 1980s, there has been an explosion of criticism focusing on sexuality and gender. Two excellent recent studies are those of Carl Eby and Debra Modellmog.

7. It is also important to note that Robert recognizes the impact that his mother has had on shaping him: “I wonder what I would have been like if he [Robert’s father] had married a different woman” (339).

8. There has been some debate about Dr. Adams’ motivation as he tells Nick about Prudie’s betrayal, but it seems clear to me that Dr. Adams is gentle in his handling of such troubling information. For a review of this issue, see Charles J. Nolan, Jr., “‘Ten Indians’ and the Pleasures of Close Reading,” *HN* 15.2 (1996): 67-77, especially 69-72 and note 6.