

# Surviving literary suicide

By Jeffrey Berman

## Chapter 4

### Hemingway and suicide

#### **Judgement of Manitou**

Hemingway's fascination with suicide appears in his earliest short stories, including his juvenilia. Peter Griffin reports that of the three stories Hemingway published in his high school literary magazine, his favourite was "Judgement of Manitou". The story is about two trappers in northern Michigan whose mistrust and misunderstanding of each other culminate in a homicide and suicide. Pierre is convinced that his partner Dick Haywood has stolen his wallet and sets a trap to murder him. "De tief will tink it a blame sight cooler when he's swingin' by one leg in the air like Wah-boy, the rabbit: he would steal my money, would he!" ( qtd. in Griffin 26-27 ). When Pierre returns to his cabin and sees a squirrel gnawing away at the leather of the missing wallet, he realizes he has made a terrible mistake. He seizes his rifle and rushes madly out to warn his friend before it is too late. Pierre finds the remains of his friend's body, which has been devoured first by a wolf and then by two ravens. As the horrified Pierre takes a step forward, he is ensnared in the crushing bear trap that Dick had come to tend. Pierre's decision to commit suicide seems to be motivated as much by the need for self-punishment – the stern judgment of Manitou, the chief Indian god – as by the wish to avoid slow torture. " He fell forward, and as he lay on the snow he said, " It is the judgment of Manitou: I will save My-in-gau, the wolf, the trouble." And he reached for the rifle" ( qtd. in Griffin 27 )

#### **"Indian Camp": Why did he kill himself, Daddy?"**

The motives behind suicide remain more enigmatic in "Indian Camp" the opening work in the celebrated collection "In our Time ( 1925 ). As young Nick Adams watches his physician-father attend to a woman who has been in protracted labor, her husband lies in the bunk above, disabled by a severe ax cut on his foot received three days earlier. The husband impassively smokes a cigar and never utters a word while his wife screams in pain. Unnerved, Nick asks his father: "Oh, Daddy, can't you give her something to make her stop screaming?" Dr. Adams responds: " No, I haven't any anaesthetic.....But her screams are not important. I don't hear them because they are not important" ( Short Stories 92 ). Performing the Caesarean only with a jackknife and nine-foot, tapered gut leaders as thread, Dr. Adams feels euphoric after the delivery. His postoperative exhilaration suddenly gives way to horror, however, when he glances at the father.

“ The Indian lay with his face toward the wall. His throat had been cut from ear to ear. The blood had flowed down into a pool where his body sagged the bunk. His head rested on his left arm. The open razor lay, edge up, in the blankets” ( 94 )

The reasons for the Indian’s suicide remain obscure. Is the thought of fatherhood so distressing that he cannot imagine continued existence? If he is not the child’s biological father, is his suicide an act of revenge against a wife who has dishonoured him? Critics have offered these and other speculation. The only detail in “ Indian Camp” that may offer a clue to his suicide is his mysterious wound, which critics have interpreted as a castration symbol, a subtle indication that he has been rendered impotent by a physical or psychic injury. Whatever the reasons for his death, a few insights into the story’s attitude toward suicide emerge from Nick’s dialogue with his father:

“Why did he kill himself, Daddy?”

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

“ Do many men kill themselves, Daddy?”

“ Not very many, Nick”

“Do many women?”

“ Hardly ever” ( 95 )

Dr. Adams is right about actual statistics, though many men commit suicide in Hemingway’s world- so many, in fact, that it is rare to find a major Hemingway hero who does not reveal tell-tale signs of self-destructiveness. Perhaps the woman’s screams are not important to Nick’s father because in Hemingway’s stories men are far more vulnerable to suicide than women. The Hemingway hero is invariably wounded, and the wound has created a vulnerability to suicidal thinking. Following this dialogue, Nick asks his father whether dying is hard. Dr. Adams’ answer is ambiguous. “ No, I think it’s pretty easy, Nick. It all depends” ( 95 ). The story concludes with Nick seated in a boat and watching the sun rise, feeling “ quite sure that he would never die” ( 95 ), a statement at odds with his disturbing insight into the suicidality of men.

“Indian Camp” remains, after more than seventy years, one of Hemingway’s most enigmatic explorations of suicide. Its mysteries lie precisely in what the author has omitted from the story: the Indian’s motivation for killing himself, the precise meaning of his wound, the timing of the act, and the impact of suicide on Nick. These mysteries enact Hemingway’s theory of omission, in which a story’s meaning remains almost entirely submerged, like an iceberg. Hemingway suggests additions only that suicide cannot be understood either intellectually or emotionally. By the end of the story, Nick has been initiated into a world in which suffering and violent death seem both inexplicable and inevitable, and in which suicide seems to be in the

“nature of things.” By viewing suicide as an existential rather than a cultural or psychiatric crisis, Dr. Adams suggest that little can be done to avert it.

### **“The Doctor and the doctor’s wife”: He sat with the gun on his knees”**

The next story in *In Our Times*, “ The doctor and the doctor’ wife,” casts a different image of Nick’s father. In “Indian Camp” he is generally self-confident and authoritative, prepared for most emergencies; in “The Doctor and the doctor’ Wife” he appears weak, cowardly, depressed. As the story opens, DR.Admas is speaking with Dick Bolton, whom he has paid to cut up logs that have been lost from the big log booms. Bolton desires to provoke a fight to avoid paying a debt and accuses Dr. Adams of stealing the timber. When Dr. Adams makes the mistake of uttering an idle threat- “I’ll knock your eye teeth down your throat,” Bolton replies tauntingly: “Oh, no, you won’t, Doc” ( *Short Stories* 101 ). Dr. Adams walks away in defeat, seething with impotent rage, and then he encounters his wife, who humiliates him in different way. Pious ( “Remember, that he who ruleth his spirit is greater than he that taketh a city” [101] ), hypochondriacal, and smothering, she is one of a long list of unsympathetic female characters in Hemingway’s stories. The word “dear” that she used repeatedly to address her husband has an infantilizing effect on him.

The most unsettling detail in “ The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” is the shotgun that Dr. Adams methodically cleans and loads. Resting on his knees, the shotgun becomes both an ironic phallic symbol and a reminder of the explosive force that threatens to turn inward. The gun seems to be his only real companion, the object to which he pays the most attention. “ The doctor wiped his gun carefully with a rag. He pushed the shells back in against the spring of the magazine. He sat with the gun on knees. He was very fond of it” ( 102 ). And yet Dr. Adams’s mind is elsewhere, for when he stands and places the gun in the corner behind the dresser, he fails to unload it—a clear violation of basic gunmanship.

The violence underlying Hemingway’s story is palpable; as Dr. Adams walks out of his house, the screen door slams behind him, causing his wife to gasp. His flight from confining civilization to the openness of nature recalls Huck’s journey into the wilderness. “ The Doctor and the Doctor’s Wife” ends ominously, eerily foreshadowing Dr. Clarence Hemingway’s suicide a few years later, when he shot himself in the head with his father’s Civil War Smith and Wesson revolver.