## Reading “Indian Camp” by Ernest Hemingway: Text-Centred Reading Strategies

## Traditional Text-Centred Approaches: The New Criticism

This was a movement in [literary theory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_theory) that dominated [American](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_literature) [literary criticism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_criticism) in the middle decades of the 20th

Century. It emphasized [close reading](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Close_reading); the words on the page were all that mattered. New Critics believed the structure and meaning of the text were intimately connected and should not be analysed separately. In order to bring the focus of literary studies back to analysis of the texts, they aimed **to exclude the reader's response, the author's intention, historical and cultural contexts, and moralistic bias** from their analysis.

## <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Criticism>

## New Critics ask *“How does this piece work?”* *“How do all the parts work together to create a meaning and a coherent whole?”* For example:

**In simple terms, all novels, plays and short stories have:**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Narrative Structure + | Setting + | Characters + | Style = | Theme/Ideas  (underlying message/s) |
| * Orientation * Complication * Sequence of events * Climax * Resolution   Variations:   * beginning *in medias res* * flashback * non-linear * framed narrative – stories within stories   How does the narrative structure help develop ideas? | Where – time and place?  **In what ways is the setting important to the development of the plot or to the overall meaning of the novel?** | Who is the main character and how is he/she represented?   * say * do * think * appearance * age * race * values, attitudes and beliefs   **How does the character ‘grow’ and develop?**  **What do they learn from their experiences?** | Point of view:   * First person * Second person * Third person omniscient * Third person limited   Imagery/motif  Symbolism  Relative amount of descriptive writing/action/ dialogue/  Thought  Irony  **How do the stylistic elements help to convey ideas?** | Main ideas e.g.   * Man’s inhumanity to man /the importance of empathy and compassion * The importance of love and sexuality to human happiness * The importance of individual identity and independence * The importance of maintaining individual human dignity * The acceptance of human mortality * Remaining optimistic in the face of hardship   **These operate within discourses and are underpinned by attitudes, values, assumptions and beliefs.** |

## This is probably how you approach narrative texts in your English classes.

## Let’s consider the ways in which a narrative text can be read (invited/alternative/resistant readings) which moves beyond the ‘new critic’s’ table above.

## “Indian Camp” by Ernest Hemingway – A Rite of Passage Story

At the lake shore there was another rowboat drawn up. The two Indians stood waiting.

Nick and his father got in the stern of the boat and the Indians shoved it off and one of them got in to row. Uncle George sat in the stern of the camp rowboat. The young Indian shoved the camp boat off and got in to row Uncle George.

The two boats started off in the dark. Nick heard the oarlocks of the other boat quite a way ahead of them in the mist. The Indians rowed with quick choppy strokes. Nick lay back with his father’s arm around him. It was cold on the water. The Indian who was rowing them was working very hard, but the other boat moved farther ahead in the mist all the time.

“Where are we going, Dad?” Nick asked.

“Over to the Indian camp. There is an Indian lady very sick.”

“Oh,” said Nick.

Across the bay they found the other boat beached. Uncle George was smoking a cigar in the dark. The young Indian pulled the boat way up the beach. Uncle George gave both the Indians cigars.

They walked up from the beach through a meadow that was soaking wet with dew, following the young Indian who carried a lantern. Then they went into the woods and followed a trail that led to the logging road that ran back into the hills. It was much lighter on the logging road as the timber was cut away on both sides. The young Indian stopped and blew out his lantern and they all walked on along the road.

They came around a bend and a dog came out barking. Ahead were the lights of the shanties where the Indian bark peelers lived. More dogs rushed out at them. The two Indians sent them back to the shanties. In the shanty nearest the road there was a light in the window. An old woman stood in the doorway holding a lamp.

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. She lay in the lower bunk, very big under a quilt. Her head was turned to one side. In the upper bunk was her husband. He had cut his foot very badly with an axe three days before. He was smoking a pipe. The room smelled very bad.

Nick’s father ordered some water to be put on the stove, and while it was heating he spoke to Nick.

“This lady is going to have a baby, Nick,” he said.

“I know,” said Nick.

“You don’t know,” said his father. “Listen to me. What she is going through is called being in labour. 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 is happening when she screams.”

“I see,” Nick said.

Just then the woman cried out.

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

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

The husband in the upper bunk rolled over against the wall.

The woman in the kitchen motioned to the doctor that the water was hot. Nick’s father went into the kitchen and poured about half of the water out of the big kettle into a basin. Into the water left in the kettle he put several things he unwrapped from a handkerchief

“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 hands scrubbing each other with the soap. While his father washed his hands very carefully and thoroughly, he talked.

“You see, Nick, babies are supposed to be born head first but sometimes they’re not. When they’re not they make a lot of trouble for everybody. Maybe I’ll have to operate on this lady. We’ll know in a little while.”

When he was satisfied with his hands he went in and went to work.

“Pull back that quilt, will you, George?” he said. “I’d rather not touch it.”

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. Nick held the basin for his father. It all took a long time.

His father picked the baby up and slapped it to make it breathe and handed it to the old woman.

“See, it’s a boy, Nick,” he said. “How do you like being an intern?”

Nick said, “All right.” He was looking away so as not to see what his father was doing.

“There. That gets it,” said his father and put something into the basin.

Nick didn’t look at it.

“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 up the incision I made.”

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

His father finished and stood up. Uncle George and the three Indian men stood up. Nick put the basin out in the kitchen.

Uncle George looked at his arm. The young Indian smiled reminiscently.

“I’ll put some peroxide on that, George,” the doctor said.

He bent over the Indian woman. She was quiet now and her eyes were closed. She looked very pale. She did not know what had become of the baby or anything.

“I’ll be back in the morning,” the doctor said, standing up. “The nurse should be here from St. Ignace by noon and she’ll bring everything we need.”

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 Caesarean 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.

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

He pulled back the blanket from the Indian’s head. His hand came away wet. He mounted on the edge of the lower bunk with the lamp in one hand and looked in. 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.

“Take Nick out of the shanty, George,” the doctor said.

There was no need of that. Nick standing in the door of the kitchen, had a good view of the upper bunk when his father, the lamp in one hand, tipped the Indian’s head back.

It was just beginning to be daylight when they walked along the logging road back toward the lake.

“I’m terribly sorry I brought you along, Nickie,” said his father, all his postoperative exhilaration gone. “It was an awful mess to put you through.

“Do ladies always have such a hard time having babies?” Nick asked.

“No, that was very, very exceptional.”

“Why did he kill himself, Daddy?”

“I 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.”

Don’t they ever?”

“Oh, yes. They do sometimes.”

“Daddy?”

“Yes.”

“Where did Uncle George go?”

“He’ll turn up all right.”

“Is dying hard, Daddy?”

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

They were seated in the boat, Nick in the stern, his father rowing. The sun was coming up over the hills. A bass jumped, making a circle in the water. Nick trailed his hand in the water. It felt warm in the sharp chill of the morning.

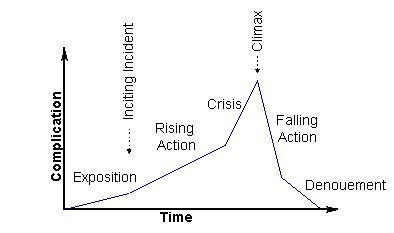
In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he felt quite sure that he would never die.

**Traditional Text-Centred Approaches - New Criticism**

**Narrative Structure** (First described in ancient times by Aristotle and Plato.) This is a [literary element](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Literary_element), generally described as the structural framework that underlies the order and manner in which a [narrative](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative) is presented to a reader, listener, or viewer.

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narrative_structure>

**Discuss: Where is the climax? Does this story neatly fit this conventional narrative structure pattern? How does the narrative structure help develop ideas?**



**Setting**

In works of narrative, the literary element ‘setting’ includes the historical moment in time and geographic location in which a story takes place, and helps initiate the main backdrop and mood for a story. **Which setting elements are the most significant in assisting in the construction of meaning?**

## Atmosphere

Atmosphere is a term used in literature to describe the mood of a piece of writing, which is usually created by the way in which the author describes the setting and background, as well as the characters and events within the story.  <http://www.ask.com/art-literature/atmosphere-literature-250df2253eb0d153>

**Typical question: How does the atmosphere change from the beginning of the story to Nick’s initial experiences of the inside of the cabin? Refer to the specific words and phrases which contribute to this evocation of atmosphere**

**Character**

**Typical questions:**

* **Who is the main character and how is he/she represented?**
* **How does the character ‘grow’ and develop? What do they learn from their experiences? How does his new understanding contribute to the overall meaning?**

**Other characters:**

* **How does the woman respond to her experience?**

**Style**

1. **From what point of view is the story told? E.g. first person (I), second person (you), third person omniscient, third person limited. What effect does this choice have on the reader?**
2. **Imagery** in a literary text is an author's use of vivid and descriptive language to add depth to his or her work. It appeals to human senses to deepen the reader's understanding of the work.

**Which images were most powerful? Which contributed most significantly to theme/s?**

1. **Symbolism** means to imbue objects with a certain meaning that is different from their original meaning or function. E.g. white symbolising purity, dove symbolizing peace

**What ideas might the following symbols represent in the story?**

* **The rising sun**
* **The jumping fish**

1. **Relative amount of descriptive writing/action/ dialogue/thought. How would you characterise Hemingway’s writing style?**

**So far, you have participated in constructing the invited meaning of the text.**

**Traditional Text Centred Approaches - Structuralism**

This began as a linguistic theory developed by Saussure in the early decades of the twentieth century. Saussure, the founder of linguistics, **argued that language communicated the ideology, the beliefs of a culture**.Some structuralists also interpreted all of culture as “systems of signs” and undertook a semiotic analysis of the systematic patterning and structuring of cultural texts.

**Dualisms/Binary Oppositions**

Structuralism notes that much of our imaginative world is structured of, and structured by, binary oppositions (being/nothingness, hot/cold, culture/nature); these oppositions structure meaning. Binary oppositions are patterns of opposing features and concepts. Historically, binary oppositions were seen to be stable and distinct and the values underpinning them were considered to be natural.

**A most noticeable binary operating in the story is man/woman. What other naturalised binaries are evident? How do they help reaffirm the invited reading?**

**Semiotics**

Another method of analysing texts, attributed to the structuralist Saussure, is semiotics. Under historical text-centred theory, Saussure acknowledged that “*there was a basic divide between language and what language meant*” (King, 2005). Semiotics identifies this relationship as a sign, where the signifier points to the signified in order to create meaning. According to King (2005), a signifier “*can be anything such as a word or picture*” which points to the signified, or *“the different interpretations or mental pictures that can be made of the signifier within a culture”* (King, 2005).

**Myth**

The concept of myth is closely linked to semiotics, and also plays an important role in exposing ideology within a text. Myths are “*omnipresent signs, which impose upon us the belief that something simply goes without saying”* (Hourihan, 1997). Hourihan (1997) cites Barthes in accusing myths of creating perceptions “*of the falsely obvious”*. Furthermore, Hourihan (1997) describes the “*mythic level of meaning in a text*” as a *“pre-packaged set of beliefs and practices that seem natural and obvious to members of a culture”.*

**Hourihan, M. (1997)****Deconstructing the Hero: Literary Theory and Children’s Literature**

**Myths activated in Indian camp: doctor, child, Indian, mother, father, birth –‘**goes without saying’, unquestioningly accepted.

**Dominant, Alternative and Resistant** **Reading**

**Dominant readings** (invited meaning): those which the text may be positioning the reader to accept or favour, or which embody the dominant values and beliefs in a culture.

**Alternative readings**: those which are less common but are deemed acceptable because they do not challenge the dominant reading.

**Resistant readings:** those which move beyond the dominant cultural beliefs to challenge prevailing views.

**Constructing the Invited or Dominant Reading using Traditional Text-Centred Approaches**

The preferred or dominant reading of a text is the reading that the text is designed to favour, which represents the beliefs and values which are most powerful in a culture. It is the easiest meaning to identify because the reader usually already shares the values and attitudes it promotes.

**Theme**

**Although Nick doesn’t do much in the story, the story focuses on his experiences and their effect on his understanding of life. What does Nick learn?**

**Possible Invited Reading**

*In a story whose central theme is one of personal growth, Hemingway conveys the idea that in order to move from childhood innocence towards adulthood, human beings must accept their own mortality. The story describes the experiences of young Nick Adams at an Indian camp. Firstly, he witnesses the extremely difficult birth by caesarean intersection of a young Indian child in what is initially an event for rejoicing. Secondly, he sees that the child’s father has inexplicably committed suicide whilst the child is being born. Nick asks a series of questions of his father, the doctor, about the nature of human experience including, “Do ladies always have such a hard time having babies?" and “Do many men kill themselves, Daddy?" Hemingway presents his central theme of the acceptance of the cycle of life, including death, by using subtle symbolism. As Nick thinks about the issues, Hemingway inserts images of new life and the cycle of life. “The sun was coming up over the hills” signifies a new day, a fresh start and perhaps even birth; “A bass jumped, making a circle in the water” symbolises the cycle of life through the visual image evoked and the warmth of the sun “in the sharp chill of the morning” represents new hope and reassurance for Nick. Like many people, when confronted with elemental experiences like birth and death, Nick has acquired new knowledge which will help him to mature but he also “felt quite sure that he would never die”.*

**An Alternative Reading**

An alternate reading is a less common but acceptable reading. It does not challenge the dominant reading. You could examine the text from the perspective of gender construction. Here we ask the questions: **How is the masculine gender constructed in this text? What representations of masculinity are evident? What themes or ideas about masculinity emerge from the story?** By doing this we are decoding the masculine subtext of the story.

**Contemporary Text-Centred Approaches – Reading Resistantly**

While the New Critics and structuralists had looked for coherence or system and thus unity in texts, contemporary text-based approaches focus instead on **incoherence, contradictions and disunities** in texts. Therefore, contemporary text-centred approaches overlap with some of the theoretical concerns and reading practices of reader-centred and world-context-centred approaches. Practitioners of contemporary text-centred approaches **harass the text to make it reveal what it tries to conceal.** They show the ways in which the text comes undone, or deconstructs itself, by identifying its **gaps, silences and contradictions**. And they press the text until it yields **multiple meanings**. For example, they **focus on the binary oppositions** which the structuralists had taken to be stable and distinct, but which post-structuralists assert are not mutually exclusive. The privileged (preferred or central) member of the binary pair depends on the other, marginal, member but needs to deny this dependency to maintain its superiority. According to post-structuralists language cannot be pinned down to a single, fixed meaning; there will always be other meanings beyond those which are dominant or invited. This excess of meaning can never be permanently repressed but serves to destabilise any claims that the text is unitary.

1. **Why do you think the woman’s husband commits suicide? What are the clues in the text which support your answer? (fill gaps)**
2. **How do you interpret Uncle George’s ambivalent relationship with the Indians? Why did Uncle George hand out cigars? Where do you think Uncle George went and why? (interpret contradictions, incoherences, ambivalence)**
3. **List binaries in order of privileged binary. Comment on the ideology underpinning the binaries. E.g. white/Indian, man/woman, educated/uneducated, youth/experience, cleanliness/filth, civilised/primitive**
4. **The story is primarily about masculinity, suffering and fatherhood. What is the effect of the silencing of women in the text? (feminism)**

**A Resistant Reading**

These are readings which are unacceptable in terms of the dominant cultural beliefs, and which challenge prevailing views. You could call them unpopular readings because they tend to be different from what most people find in the text. They also challenge dominant race, gender and class ideologies within society so are seen as being controversial by some. For instance, we could look at how Hemingway has constructed the representation of race in the story. The story was written in 1924 and constructs race in terms that may now be considered offensive and unacceptable, especially by indigenous peoples such as Aborigines and American Indians. Consider the following questions:

1. **Marginalisation/silences - None of the Indians in the story have been given names. Why might Hemingway have done this? What attitude does he suggest by not giving them names? (post colonial)**
2. **Connotation/myth - Hemingway constructs a fairly negative image of Indian camp life in this story. Identify 2-3 quotations which foreground negative ideas about Indians. Are there any positive representations? What ideas about Indians are promoted through the word choices you have identified? (post colonial)**
3. **Binary opposition - Which group is represented as holding the power within the medical discourse of the story, the Indians or the white doctor and his white companions? (post colonial)**
4. **Is Hemingway unconsciously reflecting the values and attitudes of the 1920’s ? Do you think he intended race to be a central issue in the story or just to be ‘taken for granted’? (new historicism)**

**Other Resistant Readings**

This story is laden with ethical problems from a 21st century perspective.

What justification is there for forcing a child to become part of a brutal sequence of medical events?

When, if ever, is it morally acceptable to treat patients as though they were animals? The medical treatment of the labouring woman is unquestionably lifesaving, but the cruel insensitivity of the two white men contributes to the unnecessary death of the infant's father. Duties to children and to patients, as well as inhumanity, racism, and sexism in the professional relationship are all issues raised in the story, which could be explored by the resistant reader.