

How Hemingway Deals with Themes of Death

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Introduction

Ernest Hemingway repeatedly writes about death without treating it as a single dramatic event. In “Indian Camp,” death interrupts a scene of birth and becomes part of Nick Adams’s initiation into pain, medical authority, race, gender, and mortality. In “In Another Country,” death is less visible but equally powerful: wounded soldiers attend mechanical rehabilitation after war, and the Italian major’s carefully controlled identity collapses when his wife dies. Both stories use restraint, omission, physical detail, and emotionally limited dialogue to show characters confronting experiences they cannot fully explain (Hemingway, “Indian Camp”; Hemingway, “In Another Country”).

The two stories also complicate the familiar idea of the Hemingway “code hero,” the disciplined person who maintains dignity under pressure. Self-control can be courageous, but it can also conceal trauma, reproduce harmful expectations of masculinity, or fail when grief becomes overwhelming. Hemingway’s treatment of death is therefore not simply admiration for stoicism. It is an examination of how people construct meaning when bodies fail and language proves inadequate.

Death, Birth, and Initiation in “Indian Camp”

“Indian Camp” begins as a journey into unfamiliar territory. Nick travels by boat with his physician father and Uncle George to an Indigenous camp, where a woman has experienced prolonged obstructed labor. The doctor performs a cesarean operation with improvised instruments and without adequate anesthesia. The child is delivered alive, but the woman’s husband, lying in the bunk above her, has killed himself during the ordeal. Birth and death occupy the same cramped room, preventing Nick from learning a comforting lesson in which medicine simply defeats suffering.

The story is often classified as an initiation narrative because Nick encounters realities from which adults usually protect children. Yet the initiation is unstable. His father explains the operation confidently, praises his own work, and later tries to shield Nick from the suicide. Nick nevertheless sees the dead man. The father can control the procedure, but not the household’s pain, the husband’s action, or his son’s interpretation. Medical competence exists beside cultural distance and moral blindness.

Medical Authority and the Woman's Suffering

The laboring woman is central to the event but receives little voice. Her screams are treated as a technical problem, and the men speak around her. Hemingway's sparse narration exposes how institutional authority can reduce a patient to a body on which expertise is exercised. The absence of anesthesia and the improvised operation reflect the emergency, but the doctor's excitement about the procedure also creates unease. He describes the case as if it were a professional demonstration for Nick, while the woman's suffering and consent remain largely outside the conversation (Strong, 1996).

This scene should not be interpreted through a simplistic claim that the husband dies because he lacks masculine courage. The text does not supply a definitive motive. He is immobilized by an injured foot, positioned above his wife during two days of agony, excluded from control, and living within a community approached by outsiders who hold medical and narrative authority. His suicide may suggest despair, trauma, helplessness, shame, or meanings the visitors cannot understand. The father's remark that he "couldn't stand things" reveals the limits of his interpretation more than it solves the death.

Colonial Distance and Representation

The story's setting and language reflect the unequal relationship between white visitors and the Indigenous community. Earlier criticism sometimes repeated dehumanizing labels or treated the camp merely as a primitive background for Nick's development. A more responsible reading recognizes that the Indigenous characters bear the greatest pain while the story filters events through the visitors' perspective. Uncle George distributes cigars after the birth and reacts angrily when bitten, while the doctor takes professional pride in an operation performed under conditions that would be unacceptable in a well-equipped hospital.

Hemingway does not provide a full Indigenous perspective, but the gaps in the narration can themselves be analyzed. The camp is not simply a symbolic wilderness. It is a social setting in which unequal access to medical resources, cultural misunderstanding, and paternalism shape the encounter. Nick's initiation is therefore also an initiation into the privileges and blind spots of adult authority.

Nick's Questions and the Illusion of Immortality

On the return journey, Nick questions his father about suicide and death. The father offers uncertain answers, and the child concludes, while watching the morning light and feeling the water, that he will never die. This belief is not the story's final philosophical truth. It is a defensive response by a child who has seen more than he can absorb. The natural setting feels renewed after the night's violence,

but the reader knows Nick's confidence is impossible.

The ending shows Hemingway's method of placing large emotional meanings beneath simple physical details. Nick's hand in the warm water, the rising sun, and the father rowing create calm, yet the dead man remains part of the journey. The scene does not resolve death; it shows consciousness temporarily protecting itself from death.

War's Afterlife in "In Another Country"

"In Another Country" shifts from a remote camp to wartime Milan. Nick and wounded Italian soldiers attend a hospital where machines are supposed to restore damaged limbs. The phrase "in another country" describes more than geography. Nick is an American among Italians, a soldier separated from civilians, and a wounded person estranged from his former body. All the patients inhabit a psychological country created by war (Hemingway, "In Another Country").

The rehabilitation machines symbolize modern confidence in technical repair. Photographs display ideal outcomes, but the soldiers do not fully trust the devices. Their skepticism reflects a wider uncertainty: machinery may exercise a hand or knee, but it cannot restore lost time, social belonging, courage, or the dead. The polished promises of technology contrast with the patients' private knowledge of irreversible damage.

Medals, Courage, and Belonging

Nick initially shares companionship with decorated Italian officers, but the basis of that companionship becomes uncertain. The Italians earned medals through acts they consider genuinely dangerous, while Nick's medal is associated partly with being an American. Once they recognize the difference, he feels separated from them. The story questions whether courage can be measured through decorations and whether a person can claim an identity that has not been tested in the same way.

Hemingway's famous code emphasizes composure, skill, and endurance, but "In Another Country" does not present a simple hierarchy of brave and cowardly men. The soldiers' injuries, fear, isolation, and need for companionship reveal vulnerability as part of courage. Nick's honesty about his fear is more morally valuable than empty boasting.

The Major's Discipline and Grief

The Italian major appears to embody controlled conduct. He is exacting about grammar, skeptical of the machines, and unwilling to sentimentalize military experience. When he abruptly argues that a man should not marry because he must not place himself in a position to lose everything, Nick does

not initially understand the intensity of the statement. The major then reveals that his young wife has died unexpectedly after a brief illness.

His grief breaks through the discipline by which he has organized himself. He apologizes, leaves the room, and later returns wearing a black band. The moment does not prove that self-control is false; it demonstrates that no code eliminates attachment or loss. The major's wife has not died in battle, yet her death wounds him more completely than his injured hand. Hemingway thereby expands the meaning of courage from battlefield performance to the difficult continuation of life after bereavement.

Style, Omission, and the Iceberg Principle

Both stories rely on compressed dialogue and selective description. Hemingway does not provide long psychological explanations for the husband's suicide, Nick's fear, or the major's grief. Instead, he presents gestures, questions, physical surroundings, and abrupt changes in speech. The reader must infer what lies beneath the surface. This technique is often described through Hemingway's iceberg principle: the visible narrative is only a fraction of the emotional structure (Reynolds, 1999).

Omission, however, should not be confused with neutrality. What the narrator leaves unsaid shapes whose pain is visible. In "Indian Camp," the woman's inner life and the husband's perspective are largely absent. In "In Another Country," the dead wife never appears directly, yet her absence dominates the ending. Close reading must therefore ask both what is implied and who is denied a voice.

Comparison of the Two Stories

"Indian Camp" places death beside birth and shows a child encountering adult incapacity. "In Another Country" places death beside rehabilitation and shows experienced soldiers confronting limits that courage and technology cannot overcome. In the first story, Nick's response is denial: he imagines himself immortal. In the second, he observes a man whose experience makes denial impossible. Read together, the stories trace an education in mortality.

The father and the major also form a revealing contrast. Dr. Adams begins with confidence and ends with uncertain answers. The major begins with discipline and is overtaken by grief, yet returns to the hospital. Neither figure possesses mastery over death. Their dignity lies, when it exists, not in invulnerability but in continuing despite incomplete knowledge and pain.

Historical Context and Recurring Nick Adams

Both stories belong to Hemingway's early writing, shaped by the aftermath of the First World War and by his development of Nick Adams across several texts. Nick is not a fixed autobiographical substitute but a recurring consciousness through which Hemingway explores education, injury, fear, and memory. Reading the stories together shows that initiation is cumulative. The child who imagines he will never die is connected to the young veteran who understands that courage, medals, medicine, and machines cannot guarantee wholeness.

The postwar context also explains the stories' distrust of heroic language. Public narratives celebrate medical progress and military valor, while the stories foreground bodies in pain, emotional dislocation, and unequal authority. Their restraint resists melodrama but does not erase the violence beneath ordinary conversation.

Conclusion

Hemingway deals with death through juxtaposition, silence, and damaged forms of control. "Indian Camp" exposes birth, suicide, medical authority, colonial distance, and childhood denial within one night. "In Another Country" shows war wounds, doubtful technology, contested courage, and bereavement in a rehabilitation room. Together they challenge the idea that masculinity requires emotional absence. Death strips away fantasies of mastery, but the stories still locate value in honesty, restraint without cruelty, companionship, and the effort to continue living (Hemingway, "Indian Camp"; Hemingway, "In Another Country").

Works Cited

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