

Sverre Aarsnes

The journey of fatherhood in American short stories through the 20th century

May 2019

NTNU

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Design

Bachelor's thesis

2019



Sverre Aarsnes

The journey of fatherhood in American short stories through the 20th century

Bachelor's thesis
May 2019

NTNU

Norwegian University of Science and Technology
Faculty of Humanities
Department of Design



Norwegian University of
Science and Technology

The journey of fatherhood in American short stories through the 20th century

Abstract

This project considers the role of fatherhood in seven different short stories from the 20th century American literature and examines what factors affect this role. The role is found to be changing throughout the period because of cultural and economic changes. In the beginning of the century, the father is found to be an authoritarian figure, but the role develops into being multifaceted with higher focus on friendship and relationship building, being more receptive towards criticism and increased interactivity with the children.

Introduction

In this project I examine several American short stories that span most of the 20th century and look at the role that fatherhood has in American short stories. Therefore, the short stories vary in time of publication. Through the use of secondary literature this project also takes a look at the role of fatherhood and what affects it.

The role of fatherhood in literature at the start of the 20th century is either non-existing or filled with authoritarian and patriarchal focus. Since the split from the British Empire the United States' literature have lacked positive father figures. With the start of the 20th century comes a cultural cry for more focus on fatherhood and the role of the man when it comes to parenting. This cultural outcry results in a multitude of texts which explores the new aspects of fatherhood. Throughout the century, these aspects are further developed with the cultural evolution, and eventually leads to the change in how to address the father figure; from "father" to "dad".

The remainder of this project is organized as follows: First, the texts from the earlier part of the century are examined, followed by the mid-part and the ending in chronological order. Thereafter, the different aspects are compared and the development of the role of fatherhood throughout the century is discussed.

1925

Indian Camp

The first short story is "Indian Camp" by Earnest Hemingway. It was published in 1925 in the collection *In Our Time*. The story is about a young boy named Nick Adams going to an Indian Camp with his father which is a doctor.

When they enter the hut where the pregnant Indian woman that they came to assist is Nick's father starts to explain to Nick. "'This lady is going to have a baby, Nick', he said. 'I know,' said Nick. 'You don't know,' said his father.'" Indian camp (Hemingway, Indian Camp, 1925) Based on the dialogue between them we get to see that Nick's father, a doctor, has first hand experience in what a child birth is and the events that follow it. Nick's father simply states that Nick has no idea what a child birth really is. Which enhances the image that father figures often are portrayed as "... authoritarian and repressive figures." (Armengol-Carrera, 2009, p. 211). This image of an authoritative figure gets more solidified when Nick wonder if his father could give the Indian woman something to reduce her pain, since she is screaming, when his father responds with " 'But her screams are not important. I don't hear them because they are not important.' " (Hemingway, Indian Camp, 1925). His statement that the screaming is not important is correct given that most women during child birth screams because of the pain, but instead of telling Nick that it is normal, his father focuses on the fact that it is not important.

During the procedure we get information about everything else in hut, but nothing about what his father is doing. This is because when Nick's father asks him how he liked assisting him we get the line "Nick said, 'All right'. He was looking away so as not to see what his father was doing." Which suggests that Nick is uncomfortable with being present at the childbirth, but his decision of looking away from his father may suggest that he also does not want to learn from this situation and more importantly, to not learn from his father.

After the surgery is done Nick's father starts talking to his brother George, "He was feeling exalted and talkative as football players are in the dressing room after a game" (Hemingway, Indian Camp, 1925) this comes off as if he is boasting about his own performance, describing in retrospect what he had done with what tools. Even though it might be an impressive medical job, the greatness of the situation disappears when Nick's father talks about what he just have done.

Nick's father does not openly discuss the events with Nick. During the procedure Nick's father expects him to observe and learn, even though Nick seemingly makes no attempts to participate, he just looks away. The father can boast about how he did the procedure and what tools he used, but when it comes to answering Nick's questions, he simply avoids them and responds with phrases such as "Not very many, Nick", "Hardly ever.", and "They do sometimes." But the father's vocabulary when answering if all women have such trouble giving birth, the response is "No that was very, very exceptional." Nick being satisfied with the answer moves on, which he does not do when he gets his father's responses on suicide.

The father figure in “Indian Camp” wants to educate his son and give him experience in the medical field, which means that he wants his son to follow in his footsteps. However, it seems that Nick is neither trained or have any previous knowledge when it comes to the practicalities of child birth, this combined with the fact that Nick is young enough to lean on his father and to have him hold around Nick suggests that Nick himself might not even be a teenager. Nick still thinks “... he felt quite sure that he would never die.” (Hemingway, Indian Camp, 1925) about himself gives the sense of a childlike narrative. Given that the father wants Nick to even assist with the procedure where his father cuts open a pregnant woman with a jack-knife while four men are holding the woman down is not educating Nick, it is traumatizing him. Bringing a child to assist with a caesarean section is not normal. Nick’s father seems to be pushing his medical world onto Nick in order to make Nick grow up to be like him, a doctor.

Cross Country Snow

Another publishment in Hemingway’s *In Our Time* which focuses on fatherhood is the short story “Cross Country Snow” from 1925. Here the character Nick Adams is the father figure since his partner is expecting. The role of fatherhood is portrayed when Nick and seemingly one of his closest friends George talks about it at an inn. Previously the descriptions have been rich and filled with a love for skiing, but when it comes to the conversation between the friends it pales. Instead of looking forward to fatherhood Nick focuses on what he is losing, he seemingly has to move back to the United States from Switzerland and he is seemingly never going skiing again. Even when asked by George if he is happy, Nick’s response is “Yes, now.” (Hemingway, Cross Country Snow, 1925). Which could mean that he won’t be happy later. In addition, when George states that “It’s hell isn’t it?” Nick responds with “No. Not exactly.” Nick can’t explain in the follow-up why having a child is not hell. The story goes from two great friends skiing and enjoying themselves without having a single problem into this despair over not being able to ski anymore because of fatherhood. As Armengol-Carrera puts it “... Nick laments with his friend, George, the approaching end of his life of carefree pleasure.” (Armengol-Carrera, 2009, p. 213).

In “Cross Country Snow” we see that fatherhood is portrayed by Hemingway as something unwanted, something that kills joy and forces men to end their current lives in order to start a new one. In “Indian Camp” fatherhood is portrayed as a figure deciding over what you know and what you should do without thinking about the consequences. We also see that the fatherhood figure alienates himself from his son, even though he attempts to bring them closer together, by forcing him to participate in situations he seemingly have no intention to learn

something from. This portrayal of fatherhood being something that alienates father and child and there being no place for enjoyment in a father's life might be something that comes from Hemingway's own life. Armengol-Carrera states that "Hemingway's approach to fatherhood is, after all, understandable enough, Hemingway's father was a distant and authoritarian patriarchal figure who suffered from a mental disorder..." (Armengol-Carrera, 2009, p. 213). Having this experience as a background makes it easier to understand why fatherhood is portrayed in such a way by Hemingway.

1933

The next short stories are also from Hemingway, both "A Day's Wait" and "Fathers and Sons" were given out in the collection *Winner Take Nothing* from 1933. It is worth noting that at this point in Hemingway's life he had three children, with two different wives. So unlike the two previous ones where fatherhood could be based on Hemingway's own relationship with his father, the stories could now reflect more what kind of a father he was.

A Day's Wait

In "A Day's Wait" the fatherhood figure is calm and shows that he cares about his son. This is shown through the use of the nickname "Schatz" referring to his son as "dear" or "treasure". The father also calls for a doctor, stays with his son and gives him his medicine. The son is behaving strangely which the father thinks must be the fever, but is actually the fact that the son thinks that he is going to die from too high temperature, since the son doesn't take into consideration the differences between Celsius and Fahrenheit. When it becomes clear to the father he quickly explains the difference between them using an example that his son is familiar with, namely miles and kilometres.

From the father's perspective their interaction seems normal, but from the reader's perspective we see a boy ready to face death without a tear being shed or anything meaningful exchanged with his own father. The son is lying still and waiting for death with his father present. He does not want to make this a fuzz with his father present. But when the father leaves to hunt it is clear that the boy does not want anyone present when he dies. With his father gone he gets more of a grip on the situation refusing people to enter the room because he fear he is contagious. The lack of emotion between the two is more evident in how the boy approaches death. The boy does not cry, apologize or blame anyone. There is no show of emotional feelings between them. There is only a child accepting death the way he thinks his father wants him to accept it. Which we can see from the conversation between them " 'I don't worry,' he said, 'but I can't

keep from thinking.' 'Don't think,' I said. 'Just take it easy.' 'I'm taking it easy,' he said and looked straight ahead. He was evidently holding tight onto himself about something." (Hemingway, *A Day's Wait*, 1933).

The role of fatherhood is evidently just being present in the child's life and correcting him if he is wrong. The ending of the story points in some ways back to "Indian Camp" with the closing quote "The hold over himself relaxed too, finally, and the next day it was very slack and he cried very easily at little things that were of no importance." (Hemingway, *A Day's Wait*, 1933). Again, the mentioning from the father figure that he knows what is important and not. Now that his son is being sick and complaining like any child would, the father portrays him as weak through "he cried very easily at little things" (Hemingway, *A Day's Wait*, 1933). The role of fatherhood in this story seems to just be present in their child's life and only on a physical level.

According to Hinkle in the mid-1910s the notion of what a good father was changed (Hinkle, 2011, p. 2). Leading to "authors focused more intently on father-son relations, ... and encouraged fathers to stay young, to connect with the boy on his level." (Hinkle, 2011, p. 2). However, this social push seems to have made little impact, because according to Armengol-Carrera states that "Paternal absence is a recurrent theme in twentieth-century American literature as well." (Armengol-Carrera, 2009, p. 212). This might suggest that the culture change that Hinkle argues for did not change the majority of authors. Armengol-Carrera even argues that the absence of fatherhood is a staple of American literature "Most canonical authors appear to avoid dealing with the issue of fatherhood, which thus remains largely absent from American literature." (Armengol-Carrera, 2009, p. 211).

Fathers and Sons

Hemingway might have incorporated the idea to "connect with the boy on his level." (Hinkle, 2011, p. 2) in the short story "Fathers and Sons" Nicholas Adams thinks back to his own father, after a hunting trip with his own son. The joy that Nick felt with his own father when they were fishing or shooting is something that is dear to him, and the joy still persists today when Nick is a grown man. Here we get the feeling that the father is present and engaged in Nick's life. Showing that there are healthy signs in their relationship. Due to Nick's father taking an active role in his life, they seemingly have interactions beyond just fishing or shooting in silence together. The reality becomes apparent when topics regarding sexuality gets brought up. A quote even says "His father was as sound on those two things as he was unsound on sex..." following this later on: "While for the other, that his father was not sound about, all the

equipment you will ever have is provided and each man learns all there is for him to know about it without advice..." (Hemingway, *Fathers and Sons*, 1933). This shows that Nick and his father is close, but that their relationship does not go beyond doing activities together that they both enjoy. Taboo surrounding teenage sexuality and sexuality in general exceeds most father-and-son relationships even by today's cultural standards. However, this leads to Nick growing up with a father that believes masturbation causes blindness. Nick even states himself that things went badly from then on "On the other hand his father had the finest pair of eyes he had ever seen and Nick had loved him very much and for a long time. Now, knowing how it had all been, even remembering the earliest times before things had gone badly was not good remembering." (Hemingway, *Fathers and Sons*, 1933). Which shows the readers that their good relationship did not last.

On the other hand we have the relationship between Nick and his son which seems to be an improvement over the relationship between Nick and his father. We get a more sense of dialogue between Nick and his son versus the communication between Nick and his father. Nick explains and asks towards his son, while previously Nick gets told by his father. At the same time one could argue that Nick and his son are still at the happy stage in their life, just as Nick and his father were at one point. This point gets furthered by the awe that Nick's son feels towards him, not believing that his grandfather could be a better shooter than his father, emphasising that sons grow up trying and failing to fill their father's shoes. One could also argue that Nick avoiding mentioning his first love "Could you say she did first what no one has ever done better..." (Hemingway, *Fathers and Sons*, 1933) is Nick's version of avoiding the sexual subject like his father did. However, since Nick's son is not even twelve it might be too early to talk about sexual subjects, given that the son still does not own his personal gun yet. Nick could still mention that he used to love an Indian girl he grew up with, the concept of loving someone is something a young boy would be familiar with, but Nick seems to want to leave that out.

In "Fathers and Sons" we see a more caring role of the fatherhood, not concerned with dictating what's important and not, engaging in dialogue with his son while constantly being remembered about a childhood gone bad. Fatherhood in this short story shows that it's not set in stone, that sons can be better fathers than theirs, while at the same time being cautious to not make the same mistakes their fathers makes. It is also important to note that Nick's son uses the word "Papa" to address him, which fits the cultural change going on in America in the 1920s according to Hinkle (Hinkle, 2011, p. 11). The change was that "The ideal father of the 1920s

would still serve as a role model for his sons, would be involved and thoughtful, but he would do so without ever playing the “heavy.” He would have fun and be fun. This was the creation of the “dad.”” Thus, moving away from father into new words like “papa” or “dad” could be a new way to show fatherhood. Such a fatherhood is reflected in the next text that is examined.

1939

Discovery of a Father

The short story “Discovery of a Father” by Sherwood Anderson was a publishment in *Readers Digest* 35 in 1939. In this story the role of the fatherhood is the “new” one, the father is presented as a funny person that loves making other laugh, always being friendly with others and telling stories that nobody believes are true. He is not the authoritarian father which provides his family with everything they need, on the contrary the mother often needs to work in order to help provide food. This representation of this “new” kind of father makes the son in the story hate him. He wants the traditional “proud, silent, dignified father.” (Anderson, *Discovery of a Father*, 1939). Even though the entire town loves his father, his son can’t stand him. This all changes one day when his father comes home after being gone for several weeks and tells the son to follow him to a pond. They spend time together swimming and the son starts to feel proud of his father because of such a good swimmer he is. This is a stark contrast to earlier when the son wished that he had a different father because they were not similar at all. But the father changing his approach to his son manages to make the son proud of him. This suggest that even though all the other kids and adults loved how his father was, that being a father is a more personal thing. The father manages to change the son’s perspective of him after a few hours. The son goes from despising his father into knowing he is going to grow up to be just like him. “Discovery of a Father” opens up the door for fatherhood mastering both the traditional “proud, silent, dignified father” (Anderson, *Discovery of a Father*, 1939) and the “new fun dad”.

1961

My Father Sits in the Dark

In the short story “My Father Sits in the Dark” by Jerome Weidman in 1961 we get to see interactions between a father and his son in a more modern setting. The father of the house seemingly spends all his time at night sitting in the kitchen with the lights turned off. The son starts to worry about his father and when he confronts him about it, the father tells him not

worry and that “It’s just restful. That’s all.” (Weidman, *My Father Sits in the Dark*, 1961). In this story the father does not share his personal thoughts with his son, but the son still cares for him. The son spends most nights thinking about his father and what might trouble him. One night when he walks into the kitchen and can’t find the faucet, the son turns on the lights which makes his father finally react and confess that “I can’t get used to the lights. We didn’t have lights when I was a boy in Europe.” (Weidman, *My Father Sits in the Dark*, 1961). Which instantly triggers the son’s memory and he pictures his father sitting in the dark in “the wide-beamed kretchma (inn).” This relieves the son and he lets his father sit in the dark because he finds comfort in it.

The text is full of repetition, and some of the words are “Pop” or “Pa”, making the relation between the two seem close. The understanding the son feels for his father is also instant, even though the son is not closer at all to finding out what he thinks about, but he leaves him be when he knows it is about his father’s childhood. In doing so he creates an intimate moment between the two. Fatherhood in this text is almost reversed in a sense, it’s the son that takes responsibility to find out why his father is staying up at night, the son worries and the son gets angry at the father, but when he finds out that this is what his father grew up with, he lets go and shows understanding. Showing that fatherhood is something that the child can contribute towards as well.

1974

A Tender Man

“A Tender Man” by Toni Bambara from 1974 shows how fatherhood has evolved in American literature throughout the century. The main character Cliff Hemphill wants to be together with a woman named Aisha who loves him back. However, Aisha points out that he does not father his own daughter that he has from his previous marriage. During the short story Cliff realises that the one thing he did not want to become when he grew up, his father, is what he has become. In the end Cliff manages to break the cycle and become a better man, resulting in him to “feel good again.” (Bambara, *A Tender Man*, 1974). Showing that outside forces can help an individual’s role as a father and by extension the role of fatherhood.

Conclusion

The role of fatherhood in American literature is dependant on factors such as culture and economics. With women joining the American workforce the interest in joint-parenting

increased and when the fathers have emphasis on being the provider only the fertility rates increase, not the focus on fathering the children (Atkinson & Blackwelder, 1993, p. 984). “Interest in gender-nonspecific parenting overtook interest in mothering or fathering by the twenties and increased in emphasis in later decades.” (Atkinson & Blackwelder, 1993, p. 984) which suggests that fatherhood and motherhood could be more intertwined than previously. In the literature we see an increased focus on fathers showing love and affection for their kids in addition to learning them about things being of importance in their lives.

The struggle of fatherhood not being present in American literature, or when it is present it is represented through “authoritarian and repressive figures.” (Armengol-Carrera, 2009, p. 211) is being changed by modern contemporary writers choosing to make the fatherhood figures more complex: “Although American literature has usually proved either evasive or conservative in its treatment of fatherhood, it is equally true that several contemporary authors have set out to re-visit conventional conceptions of American fatherhood as patriarchal authority.” (Armengol-Carrera, 2009, p. 224).

Through these texts, especially in Hemingway, we see that the role of fatherhood can be many and that over time the role of a positive fatherhood is the core to some texts. Which is an evolution from the fatherhood having only a negative impact on the story, if it was at all present to begin with. Pointing towards Hemingway in particular that seemingly grew from having children himself and then writing positive interactions between the father and his son based on that. Even though there might be personal trauma from his own childhood. The role of fatherhood seem to grow with increased cultural focus on fatherhood and how present a father should be in his family. The notion of using the word “dad” instead of “father” to informalize the relationship between the father and his children is good. However, it does not matter what you call your father if he still holds on to the authoritarian and repressive beliefs, as illustrated in “Indian Camp” where Nick’s father takes Nick with him to help a Indian woman give birth. Nick still calls his father for “dad” even though his father forces him into the situation. Fatherhood is something complex and should be used as such in American literature. Most people grow up with a personal opinion on fatherhood and how it shapes them as individuals.

Bibliography:

Hemingway, E. (1925). «Indian Camp». In *In Our Time*.

Hemingway, E. (1925). «Cross Country Snow». In *In Our Time*.

Hemingway, E. (1933). «A Day's Wait». In *Winner Take Nothing*.

Hemingway, E. (1933). «Fathers and Sons». In *Winner Take Nothing*.

Anderson, S. (1939). "Discovery of a Father". In *Reader's Digest* 35 (pp. 21-25). New York: Viking

Weidman, J. (1961). «My Father Sits in the Dark». In *My father sits in the dark and other selected stories*. New York: Random House

Bambara, T, C. (1974). "A Tender Man".

Armengol-Carrera, J. M. (2009). «Where are Fathers in American Literature? Re-Visiting Fatherhood in U.S. Literary History». *The Journal of Men's Studies*, 16(2), pp. 211–226.
<https://doi.org/10.3149/jms.1602.211>

Atkinson, M., & Blackwelder, S. (1993). «Fathering in the 20th Century». *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 55(4), 975-986. doi:10.2307/352777
(<https://www.jstor.org/stable/352777>)

Hinkle, C. M. (2011). «Creating Dad: The Remaking of Middle-Class Fatherhood in the United States from 1900-1930». UC Berkeley. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4w79j653>