

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Indian Half-Breed in Turn-of-the-Century Short Fiction

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7nq6w7tk>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 9(1)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Beidler, Peter G.

Publication Date

1985

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, available at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

The Indian Half-Breed in Turn-of-the-Century Short Fiction

PETER G. BEIDLER

So long as the "Indian wars" were still going on, the American people had newspaper headlines and articles to keep them informed about the nature and character of the American Indian. By the end of the nineteenth century, however, the fighting, the excitement, and the news about Indians had ended. Euro-Americans were still interested, however, and to satisfy that curiosity the short story became the primary vehicle by which writers expressed their thoughts about the American Indian. Such turn-of-the-century stories have been generally ignored as sources of information about the developing attitudes of the white man toward the American Indian. Literary scholars have understandably passed these stories over because almost all are artistically flawed: the characters are weak, the plots silly, and the themes simple-minded. Historians also have generally passed these stories over because they are, after all, fiction—"made-up" yarns by writers who tended to know little about the Indians they described, and who cared more about selling a story than telling a truth. (To be sure, some scholars no doubt knew that these short stories might yield up useful information about the changing popular attitudes toward the American Indian; but until recently no bibliography of the genre was available,¹ and those who might have been interested in reading this body of fiction about Indians had no convenient way of finding it.) The purpose of this

Peter G. Beidler is the Lucy G. Moses Professor of English at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, Pa.

study is to show, through discussion of one character type as portrayed in stories published during a twenty-year period, that the turn-of-the-century short story can give us worthwhile information, not about Indians, but about the attitudes of many whites toward them.

I have chosen to discuss the character type of the "half-breed," which, because it was by definition a mixture of diverse—even warring—elements, gave authors the opportunity to suggest characteristics they regarded as being peculiarly Indian on the one hand, and peculiarly white on the other. The period I have selected ranges from 1890 to 1910. This was a time of transition between the fire of the battlefield and the open prairie, and the ice of the reservation and the classroom. It was a cooling-off period, when white authors and their readers still remembered the romance of the Indian running wild and interfering in terrible ways with the manifest destiny of the white settler and soldier. Yet, while white writers and their readers remembered all this, they also knew that those days were over and that a new time had come for the Indian, a time of change and absorption and constraint. In this period the half-breed must have seemed an ideal literary vehicle for conveying those broad characteristics which were associated with the past and the future, with the savagery of Indian ancestry and the civilization of the white.

To summarize my findings immediately, non-Indian short-story writers in turn-of-the-century America tended to portray half-breeds positively to the extent that they resembled their white father, and negatively to the extent that they resembled their Indian mother. (Of the stories reviewed for this study, only one was about the offspring of a white woman and an Indian man. During this period it was apparently as unthinkable that a white woman might have sexual contact with an Indian man as it was to think that any Indian could have made a positive contribution to the genetic melting pot of America.) According to the authors who wrote about half-breeds, especially for the western popular presses, the major Indian attribute was animalistic and conscienceless evil, while the major white attributes were virtue and intelligence. By implication, if not by direct statement, these authors used their fiction to show what they thought was the proper path for Indians to follow as they entered the twentieth century—the path toward whiteness.

THE INDIAN HALF

Let us look first at some of the subhuman and evil features associated with the Indian half of the half-breed's nature. A story entitled "The Back Track" concerns John Paton, the son of a white man and an Ojibway woman. Raised among his Indian mother's people, he later goes to university, where he acquires both a degree in theology and a lovely white fiancée. He returns to his people as a Presbyterian missionary, but instead of converting the Indians to white ways, he is drawn back to theirs. He falls in love with Meem-waum, the Ojibway chief's daughter. Caught up in his fondness for her and enveloped in the subtle wildness of his natural surroundings, Paton runs off to the woods with Meem-waum, abandoning his mission and forgetting both his fiancée back home and the culture he had absorbed at the university. In the end the chief, Meem-waum's father, finds their hideaway in the woods and kills the half-breed with the butt of a hatchet.

Now, the plot development in this story is mediocre, at best, but the characterization is revealing. The Ojibways are equated with animals. The chief has "the disposition of the gray wolf," while Meem-waum, "a superb, full blooded animal," has "the disposition of the bay-red doe."² Paton's going off with this "full blooded animal" is referred to as his having "reverted to the mental condition of his maternal ancestors." "The dark wilderness blood of his mother," we are told, "came to the top."³ Inspired by "the same primal passion that made the blood fume in the veins of the hairy men of the Neolithic Age," Paton forgets "all that had happened in his life before the red strain inundated the white in him."⁴ The implication is clear: The Indian part of his nature connects him to lower forms of animal life and to an early stage in the evolutionary development of man in his rise from animal ancestors. Instead of moving forward, as his white side has urged him to do, he "reverts" to a more primitive state. The title, "The Back Track," is thus appropriate to a story that announces itself as "the story of the result of [Paton's] living in too close touch with his mother's people."⁵ The author clearly believes that Paton should instead have taken the forward track by staying with his white religion, his white culture, and his white—therefore human—blood.

When this subhuman wildness surfaces in a literary half-breed, evil happens, evil that can triumph even over love. This is the theme of a story about "the Princess," a lovely young half-breed woman sired by an army general during the time he lived with his first wife, the daughter of a Paiute chief. The Princess builds a reputation for drugging and poisoning her lovers. When a young journalist comes to Nevada to write a story about the discovery of gold there, he foolishly takes up with her. His friend tries to warn him away from her because, as he puts it, "Indian blood alone is bad enough—hidden by the velvety veneer of the Anglo-Saxon, it is a veritable volcano."⁶ (The volcano image, of course, is significant. The evil in her comes from her Indian blood, the whiteness being a covering that keeps it—often unsuccessfully—from boiling over.) The volcano erupts when the journalist tells the Princess that he has no intention of becoming a squaw man, for she then gets angry and drugs him, and then locks him in one of the fortresses of her Indian ancestors. When the Princess is confronted and asked some direct questions by the journalist's friend, she whips out a pistol. The author puts it this way: "Cornered, her Indian blood had come to the surface."⁷

A somewhat similar story concerns Lolita Lavegne, the daughter of a Frenchman and a Yokio woman. The lovely Lolita has many suitors. Unfortunately for them, however, she murders each of them soon after accepting them as lovers. The situation would provide an interesting challenge to any writer: how to account for, and make plausible, Lolita's apparently irrational desire to murder her lovers. The author of this story makes quick work of explaining the half-breed's motivation: "Lolita's failings . . . were inherited from parents who were naturally vicious." And, lest a reader should think that the white parent was vicious by nature in the same way that the Indian parent was, the author immediately explains that the Frenchman "had gone among the Yokio Indians while a very young man, and had adopted, in a great measure, the ways of this native people."⁸ Lolita had, indeed, "an inherited passion for murder,"⁹ but it was a passion natural to Indians, not whites.

A savage heredity is a contributing factor in the literary half-breed's inclination toward making more evil than love. Maxepeto, a half-breed Blackfeet, beheads his young wife shortly after they marry. Why? Simply because, as the author puts it,

"he was a big, blundering breed, with a thousand-year heritage of savagery in his blood."¹⁰ That was, apparently, reason enough for a turn-of-the-century reading audience. "When an evil Indian dies—too evil to get into the Happy Hunting Ground—he comes back reincarnated as a half-breed," the author tells us by way of further explanation, "and Maxepeto was unholy even for a 'breed.'"¹¹ Audiences had apparently been conditioned to accept without argument such explanations of the racial origins of evil.

THE WHITE HALF

If the Indian half contributed a subhuman wildness and an inherited propensity for evil to the literary half-breed, the white half contributed features that helped him or her to move a step closer to virtue and intelligence—to true humanity, in other words. A little story about the half-Ute operator of an illegal still illustrates the point: This half-breed gets into a fight with a Paiute after both have drunk freely of the raw whiskey which the former has distilled. The fight is long and exhausting, and by the end the "two-legged animals . . . like two vicious dogs, mad with the smell of blood,"¹² kill each other. Of particular interest here is the author's generalized description of half-breeds as Indians "with enough 'white blood' to make them ambitious, and enough red to make them kill a man for a new saddle."¹³ The murderousness comes from the Indian half, the ambition from the white half. While the terms of the equation vary from story to story, rarely was anything negative said to derive from the white side of a half-breed's nature.

Let us consider the more extended example of a story about the positive contribution made by a half-breed's white blood. The story is entitled, significantly, "The Indian Who Was a White Man." The protagonist of this story, a half-breed named Silent Pete, is a surly, unpopular logger. Secretly in love with a young woman named Nora, he is enraged to learn that she not only fails to return his love but instead loves another logger named St. Claire. While lying wounded and near death after a logging accident (there is more than a hint that Silent Pete has caused it), the delirious St. Claire takes from his bosom a photograph of Nora and a lock of her hair. Seeing him do this, Silent Pete

seethes with insane jealousy. The author puts it this way: "The blood of his red ancestors coursed fiercely through his veins. He clenched his fingers viciously and swore impotently because the throat of his rival was not within his clutch."¹⁴ Then, remembering that St. Claire will probably die and that Nora will soon be free to become his own lover, Silent Pete offers a prayer of gratitude. A moment later, he recognizes the terrible blasphemy of his uncharitable prayer. In weakness, confusion, and fear, he cries aloud, not knowing what to do.

Finally, "in the strength of his white man's might,"¹⁵ he ends his vacillation with positive action in the name of righteousness by summoning Nora to her lover's bedside. Even this charitable action, however, is partly motivated by his desire to win Nora's favor by appearing to be the friend of St. Claire. She comes immediately, kisses the delirious man, and helps him recover sufficiently to make the trip to a hospital. Again, Silent Pete agonizes and weakens. Wanting to destroy his rival, he cuts the supports on the bridge over which the injured man's wagon must pass, and emits a wild and demonic laugh as he envisions the death of St. Claire. Upon Silent Pete's return to the camp, Nora thanks him for his friendship and for summoning her to her lover's side. After hearing her praise him as an angel of God and receiving her blessing, Silent Pete feels remorse, changes his mind again, and sneaks back to reinforce the bridge timbers, thus assuring the safety of his rival after all. The next morning he watches Nora and St. Claire depart, knowing that he will never see either again. At the end, sad, lonely, and disappointed in love, Silent Pete nevertheless "secretly exulted, as he realized that throughout his gigantic stature he was every inch a white man after all."¹⁶

The author of this story was not alone in suggesting that the white half of a breed's being is a kind of conscience that holds in check the darker impulses of the Indian half. In another story, a half-breed named Jacques is in love with Belle, a lovely Cree maiden, who is in turn enamored of a white surveyor. At one point in the story, Belle wanders off in search of the surveyor and Jacques follows her, not certain whether he should carry her back to the safety of the camp or murder her for rejecting his advances. In the end he does neither, realizing that she has the right to lead her own life. But notice how the author words it: "The white man within him made him ashamed of his sulking."¹⁷ The shame, the conscience, the virtue, are specifically said to come from that element in him which is white.

Just as frequently, authors depict the relatively high intelligence of half-breeds as deriving from the white part of their heritage. For example, a girl named Dorthe is a shipwreck survivor on an island off the coast of California. The daughter of an Indian woman and a white sailor, Dorthe impresses the missionary who comes to the island as demonstrating "a certain intelligence, unusual to the Indians of California."¹⁸ Since the intelligence is clearly not inherited from her Indian ancestors, by implication it comes from her white forebears.

In another story, a half-breed army scout named Billy travels with some homesick Ree Indians to visit their village. It is a long trip and, "as he rode with the silent Rees for the fifth day, the white half of Billy began to be bored with the monotony."¹⁹ The suggestion is that a full-blood Indian would not be intelligent enough to be bored. Later in the story, as Billy ponders whether he should marry the Indian girl he has been living with, the author tells us that "perhaps there was, somewhere back in the white half of Billy's brain, something of philosophy,"²⁰ a statement that implies that there is little capacity for "philosophy" in the brain of an Indian.

Another half-breed character named Scipio Le Moyne clerks in the agency store on a Montana Indian reservation, where he is very clever at business dealings with the Indians. He tricks a rival storekeeper into frightening the reservation Indians so that they will not do any more business with him, but will trade at the agency store instead. The stratagem is simple enough: He gets his rival to perform some amateur magic tricks and to show the Indians his false teeth. The superstitious Indians, thinking the new storekeeper is a sorcerer of some sort, refuse to return to his store. The author boldly announces the moral of this little story:

An Indian, even if he be a warrior, and a grandfather, and a chief, and have slain many white men with his own red hand, nevertheless remains until death as innocent as the nursery. His child-mind is extremely like yours in the days when you could be amused by a jumping-jack.²¹

Scipio is able to win his little capitalistic battle because he understands the child-like minds of his full-blooded brothers. It is his white ancestry, of course, that distances him from them and accounts for his having the intelligence to profit from their ignorance.

Making more sophisticated use of her white-side intelligence is Blanche Ramon, a western half-breed who goes east and is able, at least for a time, to "pass" as white. The daughter of a wealthy Oregon rancher, Blanche is sent to Boston to study music at the Conservatory. Not telling anyone of her Indian heritage, this "charming conversationalist" is an accomplished musician, and soon becomes the darling of Boston society: "Each successive appearance was a triumph. Her art was magnificent. Her interpretation was sublime. She had the temperament, the intellectual standard, the emotional tenderness, and was fitted by nature for the highest achievement."²²

Blanche's male counterpart, in another story, is Robert, the half-breed son of a soldier and an Apache woman who meets the lovely white girl Estelle after he graduates from college. She admires him greatly, not knowing that he is part Indian: "You . . . are a type of the true American, both physically and mentally. . . . So few college men excel in athletics and, at the same time, graduate with honors, particularly when, like you, they have fortune enough for two men."²³ The implication of both these stories is clear: Half-breeds can become as successful as white people by acquiring a good education in the white man's school and by being superior cultural or athletic achievers. They can make it in America, that is, by denying that part of them which is Indian and by fostering that in them which is white. The alternatives are poverty, regression, and ignorance.

THE COURSE OF ACTION

Let us consider, finally, two short stories about half-breeds that suggest a proper course of action for Indians. One concerns a half-breed Cherokee maiden. She falls in love with a white surveyor who is wandering the great Southwest trying to map out a route for the railroad which will bring progress into Indian country. Both are pursued by bloodthirsty Apache warriors. The daughter of a Cherokee chief and a white captive, the Cherokee maiden was herself captured in a raid by the marauding Apaches, but had escaped. The young surveyor returns her love and, with her help, outdistances the Apaches and makes it to civilization. He gallantly decides to marry his Cherokee Pocahontas: "You're going to come with me and be my wife, . . . and

I'll teach you everything your lovely mother knew." Therein is the solution: Learn everything your white parent knew, and you will be all right. Neither the surveyor nor his Cherokee maid gives any thought to her returning to her Indian family. When the girl hangs back in fear of all the white people she sees in the settlement the surveyor reassures her: "Come, sweetheart. They are your people as they are mine."²⁴ She must forget that there is another people that is also hers.

The second story suggesting appropriate action for overcoming one's Indianness concerns Caldonia, the daughter of a white father and an Indian woman. When the mother dies shortly after giving birth to Caldonia, the father brings his newborn half-breed baby to live with him. He raises Caldonia himself, making sure that she is trained to be neat and clean, and that she is educated to read and speak well. She eventually grows up, marries another half-breed, and has a fine wedding in a Catholic church. Caldonia is very happy until the day she hears a passerby remark that she and her husband are "just a couple of Indians married like white folks."²⁵ The sensitive Caldonia begins to wish that she could escape to some faraway place where no one would know she was part Indian. She falls prey to a white drifter named Three Fingered Jack who promises to take her to the city, where everyone will think she is pure white. When they are about to run off together, her father stops the affair, but at the expense of getting shot. From his bed the wounded man tells his daughter that she must stay with her husband and be a lady. He then reveals that, although Caldonia's mother had not been a "lady," he had nevertheless loved her. The news that her father, a white man, could have loved an Indian woman is a wonderful revelation to Caldonia: "O, father, father, dear father! Did you love my mother—really love her—just like a white lady? Then I am not a regular half-breed girl, I am as good as a white girl."²⁶ As good as a white girl—that was what she wanted to be and what, presumably, readers and writers of American fiction during the decades flanking 1900 wanted her to be.

CONCLUSION

Although few of these stories have much artistic merit, they do reflect the attitudes towards half-breeds which were dominant

at the beginning of this century. They tell us that most Americans believed that white was good and bright, while Indian was evil, stupid, and subhuman; that if half-breeds did badly, it was because they were part Indian, while if they did well, it was because they were part white. Half-whites had to learn to be whole-whites. It was the same old "white is right and red is better off dead" message. Sometimes it was called progress; sometimes it was called survival of the fittest; sometimes it was called assimilation; sometimes it was called education; but behind the mask it was the same essential racism.

By 1900, virtually all Indians were seen as potential half-breeds. Even if they did not have the requisite quantum of white blood, they had by then had the "advantage" of growing up in a society dominated by white ways. If the Silent Petes and the Caldognias could learn to become white by example, instruction, and encouragement, then other Indians could also aspire to that status. All they had to do was deny what was most Indian in their nature so that they could rise to the level of the white man. That, at any rate, was the unfortunate message of much of the short fiction about half-breeds published at the turn of the century.

NOTES

1. Peter G. Beidler and Marion F. Egge, *The American Indian in Short Fiction: An Annotated Bibliography* (Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, 1979). See the "Subject Key Words Index," p. 197, for references to the fifty-odd stories about "half-breeds" which I read in preparation for this study. Scholars interested in the fictional portrayal of the offspring of Indian and white parents will want to consult William J. Scheick's *The Half-Blood: A Cultural Symbol in 19th-Century American Fiction* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1979). Scheick's book is helpful, but he discusses novels almost exclusively. I believe that short stories of this period, which tended to come from the pens of less sophisticated writers than did novels, reflect more directly the characteristic American attitude toward the "half-breed." I trust, incidentally, that I will be forgiven my use of the term "half-breed," which more accurately reflects the biases of the writers I discuss than do the currently fashionable terms "half-blood" and "mixed-blood."

2. Marstyn Pollough-Pugue, "The Back Track," *Outing* 41, 1902, p. 41. Animal imagery was commonly used to describe the literary half-breeds of the period. For example, the half-breed Joe Curran moves his "powerful, clumsy body . . . with the litheness of a cat" in Herbert Arthur Stout's "The Vengeance of the Wild," *Overland Monthly* 50, 1907, pp. 487-492. In the course of this story Joe Curran kills two defenseless panther cubs with a blow of his axe, and

then, "without a trace of feeling, he skinned the young bodies, still warm and twitching." Then there is Iroquois Bill, "a half-breed an' as mean a skunk as ever wore moccasins," in Clarence Hawkes's "Some Painter Episodes," *Overland Monthly* 49, 1907, pp. 368-72. Another half-breed Indian named José Gomez is described as a "panther," a "human hyena," and a "bloodstained creature" that moves "catlike" in Flora Haines Loughead's "In the Shadow of the Live-Oak," *Overland Monthly* 34, 1899, pp. 14-19. True to his subhuman nature, he one night "butchers a family" for no apparent reason and the next night tries to attack a defenseless white woman in an isolated woodland cabin.

3. Pough-Pugue, op. cit. p. 42.

4. Ibid. pp. 43-44.

5. Ibid. p. 41.

6. Richard L. Rinckwitz, "The Circe of Lahonton Basin," *Overland Monthly* 52, 1908, pp. 61-62.

7. Ibid. p. 61.

8. J. A. Rhodes, "Lolita Lavegne: A Tale of Yokio Rancho," *Overland Monthly* 33, 1899, p. 552.

9. Ibid. p. 557.

10. W. A. Fraser, "The Way of A Half-Breed," *Outing* 36, 1900, p. 6.

11. Ibid. p. 3.

12. Cy Warman, "Valley Tan," *Frontier Stories*. (New York: Scribners, 1898), p. 67.

13. Ibid. pp. 61-62. The suggestion that Indians are, by nature, unambitious is common enough in the popular literature of the period. Fraser, for example, in the story just discussed, tells us that "of a free choice work is never included in the curriculum of an Indian. Maxepeto was a specific redman in his abhorrence of labor" (p. 6).

14. Mary Alden Carver, "The Indian Who Was a White Man," *Overland Monthly* 52, 1908, p. 463.

15. Ibid. p. 463.

16. Ibid. p. 465.

17. Cy Warman, "The Belle of Athabaska," *Weiga of Temagami and Other Indian Tales* (Toronto: McLeod and Allen, 1908), p. 138. The reference to conscience as a white, not Indian, characteristic is common enough in this literature. When John Paton (see "The Back Track," note 2 above) runs off with Meem-waum and forgets his white fiancée back home, we are told that he "felt no twinge of conscience. Understand that his soul was folding in Nirvanic tranquility" (p. 44).

18. Gertrude Atherton, "The Isle of Skulls," *The Splendid Idle Forties: Stories of Old California* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1902), p. 264. Examples of the superior intelligence which derives from the white side of the half-breed's nature are abundant. In addition to the examples cited in the text of this essay, I might mention Therese, in Rose Simmons's "Old Angeline, the Princess of Seattle," *Overland Monthly* 20, 1892, pp. 506-512. Therese dislikes the "stupidity and stolidity" of the Indian girls she grows up with and, responding to "a movement of the dim soul within her for larger intelligence, a fuller scope," she runs off to Seattle with a white man. She finally kills herself there, and the author laments that she might have been safe and happy among her mother's people, had not "the alien blood told in her" by urging her to seek that "larger

intelligence." It is interesting to compare Therese with Ben, in L. E. Eubank's "The Treasure of the Tomb," *Out West* 2, 1911, pp. 144-148. Ben is an educated half-breed who does well enough until he hears sounds he takes to be those of his dead great-grandfather. Terrified, he abandons the search he had undertaken: "The marks of civilization had suddenly fallen from Ben like a mask. There stood the real Indian, superstitious and simple." In a story by Cy Warman, "Injun Fin' Um Paper-Talk," *Frontier Stories* (New York: Scribner's, 1898), pp. 21-33, two half-breeds are each, in their own way, able to outwit a band of renegade Ute outlaws. The clear implication in this, as in so many of these stories, is that the half-breed, by virtue of his or her white blood, is smarter than the full-blood Indian.

19. Emerson Hough, "The Wedding of Beaver Eyes," *Outing* 38, 1901, p. 625.

20. *Ibid.* p. 630.

21. Owen Wister, "The Patronage of High Bear," *Cosmopolitan* 30, 1901, p. 250.

22. Bert Huffman, "Ah-lo-ma," *Overland Monthly*, 45, 1905, p. 491. Note that Ah-lo-ma's Anglo name is Blanche, which means "white."

23. Emma Seckle Marshall, "An Infusion of Savagery," *Out West* 28, 1908, p. 321.

24. Lillian May Troy, "'Vaneety,' the Cherokee Maid," *Overland Monthly* n.s. 54, 1909, p. 355.

25. Lillian H. Shuey, "Caldonia of Red Cloud," *Overland Monthly* 19, 1892, p. 243.

26. *Ibid.* p. 245.