Hills Like White Elephants Study Guide

Hills Like White Elephants by Ernest Hemingway

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

First published in *transition* in August of 1927, "Hills Like White Elephants" became an important piece in Hemingway's second collection of short stories, *Men Without Women.* Hemingway wrote the story soon after the publication of his 1926 novel, *The Sun Also Rises,* while living in Paris. *Men Without Women* was well-received, as were Hemingway's other early works. He was embraced by the expatriate literary community in Paris and received strong reviews on his work in the United States and abroad. Although he continued to write novels and stories throughout his career, the early short stories are often considered to be among his finest works. "Hills Like White Elephants," a widely-anthologized and much-discussed story, offers a glimpse at the spare prose and understated dialogue that represents Hemingway's mastery of style.

The story, told nearly in its entirety through dialogue, is a conversation between a young woman and a man waiting for a train in Spain. As they talk, it becomes clear that the young woman is pregnant and that the man wants her to have an abortion. Through their tight, brittle conversation, much is revealed about their personalities. At the same time, much about their relationship remains hidden. At the end of the story it is still unclear as to what decision has or has not been made, or what will happen to these two characters waiting for a train on a platform in Spain.

Author Biography

Ernest Hemingway was born in Oak Park, Illinois, on July 21, 1899, to Clarence and Grace Heming-way. His father was a doctor and his mother a musician who had given up her career to care for the couple's six children.

Hemingway's early life was an upper-middle class, comfortable existence. He and his family spent summers at their cottage in northern Michi-gan. He graduated from high school and went to work as a reporter, a career he continued on and off for the rest of his life.

The comfortable life ended, however, in 1918, when Hemingway volunteered as a Red Cross ambulance driver to do service on the front lines of World War I in Europe. While in Italy, just before his nineteenth birthday, he was severely wounded while helping to rescue another wounded man. The experiences that Hemingway had in the war and during his recuperation stayed with him for the rest of his life, impacting his work greatly.

After the war, Hemingway returned to his work as a reporter. He married Hadley Richardson in 1921 and the couple moved to Paris. There he developed connections with other expatriate writers, including Ezra Pound and Gertrude Stein, among others. He also met and established a friendship with James Joyce. Throughout this period, he continued to work as a correspondent while launching his own literary career.

In 1926, Hemingway published *The Sun Also Rises,* his first novel, which generated considerable critical attention. The novel firmly established Hem-ingway as the voice of his generation, which is sometimes referred to as the "lost generation." He continued to meet with success in publishing his short stories. In 1927, he and his first wife divorced and he married Pauline Pfeiffer. In that same year, he published the well-received collection of short stories, *Men Without Women,* a collection that included the short story, "Hills Like White Elephants."

In the years that followed, the Hemingways established a household in Key West, Florida. In 1929, Hemingway's novel *A Farewell to Arms* was published. Hemingway's fame continued to grow, but not only for his literary skill—his "extracurricular" activities placed him squarely in the public eye. He hunted big game in Africa in the 1930s and German submarines in the Caribbean in the 1940s, and after covering the Spanish Civil War as a reporter, he memorialized the Loyalist cause in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940).

By 1940, Hemingway had moved to Cuba and married his third wife, Martha Gellhorn. He subsequently divorced Gellhorn and married Mary Welsh in 1946. In 1952, he published *The Old Man and the Sea,* for which he was awarded the 1953 Pulitzer Prize. In 1954, Hemingway won the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Hemingway's final years were filled with growing physical and mental pain. In 1961, at his home in Ketchum, Idaho, he took his own life with a shotgun blast, ending a

decades-long literary career and a life filled with both the highest adventure and the deepest depression. His work continues to generate immense critical and popular interest.

Plot Summary

The story opens with the description of distant hills across a river in Spain. An American and his girlfriend sit outside a train station in the heat. No other details about their relationship are provided at the beginning of the story. They decide to order beer, and the woman who works at the bar brings the drinks to their table. The girl remarks that the distant hills look like white elephants, but the man discounts her remark.

The story continues to unfold through dialogue, and it becomes clear that the girl, Jig, does not understand Spanish while the American does. In addition, it begins to become apparent that the two are having some sort of disagreement. The subject of the disagreement, however, is hidden, until the man says, "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig.... It's not really an operation at all." When Jig fails to respond, the man tries several more times to tell her that the "operation" is all "perfectly natural." His description of the operation implies that Jig is pregnant and he is trying to talk her into having an abortion.

Jig wants reassurance that if she has the operation the American will still love her and that life will go back to the way it was before the pregnancy. However, even as she asks for reassurance, it becomes clear that she does not want to have the abortion. Further, it also becomes clear that she understands that nothing will ever be the same again.

Although the man continues to assert that he does not want her to have the abortion unless she wants to, he obviously does not mean this. Jig stands, and looks out across the valley. She seems to contemplate what is at stake in their relationship and in her life. When she says that they "could have everything," the man agrees. For Jig, "everything" seems to include the baby. For the American, it means carefree life without the baby. Jig finally becomes frustrated with the conversation and asks the man to be quiet. Rather than listen to her, he continues to tell her how she ought to feel, and what she ought to realize. In addition, he continues to tell her that he knows exactly what the operation will be like. Finally, she quietly explodes: "Will you please please please please please please please stop talking?"

The man tries once more, but Jig tells him she will scream. He takes the bags to the other side of the station and quickly has a drink at the bar as he passes through. He observes that many people are "reasonably" waiting for the train, supposedly in contrast to what he sees as unreasonable behavior from Jig. He returns to the table and Jig smiles at him. He asks if she is better, and she replies that she feels fine. The story ends before the train arrives and with little indication of what the final decision will be or what the state of the relationship will be in the future.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

"Hills Like White Elephants" begins with a vivid description of the Spanish hills in the distance. They are long and white, with no trees for shade. A train station provides the only shadow on the horizon, and inside the station, there is a small bar, with a curtain made of bamboo beads to keep the flies out.

A couple is sitting at a table in the shade. They are waiting for the train that will come from Barcelona and take them to Madrid. It is hot, and the girl suggests a drink. They decide on beer, and the American man orders *dos cervezas*, two beers, through the beaded curtain.

The woman brings the beers out, and looks closely at them before going back into the bar. She sees the girl staring at the line of white hills, and the brown, dry country. The girl remarks that the hills look like white elephants, and the man retorts wryly that he has never seen one. "No, you wouldn't have," she replies.

The girl sees an ad painted on the beaded curtain, and asks what it says. The man tells her it is a drink, called *Anis del Toro*, Anise of the Bull. She suggests they try some, and the man calls to the woman through the beaded curtain again to order them.

They are mixed with water, and the girl observes that it tastes like liquorice. He replies mysteriously, "That's the way with everything." "Yes," the girl replies agreeably. " Everything tastes of liquorice. Especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe." This cryptic speech apparently puts the man on edge, and he tells her to cut it out. The tension has been building, and seems to reach a peak here. She becomes defensive, and accuses him of starting a fight. He says that he just wants them to have a good time, and she replies that she was having a good time. After all, she reminds him, it was she that made the witty comment about the white mountains and it was her idea to try the new drink. He concedes this, and they order another round of drinks. The tone calms here and they make small talk for a few moments.

At this point, the man brings up the topic that is evidently on both of their minds. "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," he says, calling her by her name, or nickname, for the first time. We assume that the operation he refers to is an abortion, and that the tension between them is because she is pregnant, and they are trying to decide whether they will keep the baby or not.

In an overly assuming way, he tells her that he is sure she would not mind it, and that it is a very simple operation. He refers to the procedure as letting the air in, and assures her that he will be with her at all times. She is unconvinced, and he reassures her that things will be as they were before, if she has the operation, since it is the only thing making them unhappy. She is still unconvinced, and he tells her that he has known

many people who have undergone the operation. At this point, she becomes sarcastic, and responds, "So have I…and afterwards they were all so happy."

He backs off, telling her she does not have to go through with it if she does not want to. She asks him if it is what he really wants. He avoids the question, responding instead that it would be the best thing. She asks him if he will love her again if she does it, and he responds unconvincingly that he loves her now.

She finally agrees to the operation, but in a childish, petulant way, saying she will do it because she does not care about herself. She then gets up and moves away from him. She walks to the end of the station. She sees that on the other side of the station, opposite the white, barren hills, there are trees and fields of grain along the banks of the Ebro, the river. Beyond the fields and trees are mountains.

She says, as if to herself, "And we could have all this…And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible."

He does not hear her, and she repeats a part of what she said, that they could have everything. He agrees, and she then disagrees, that after all, perhaps they cannot have everything. He insists that they can go everywhere, and she once again disagrees, telling him sadly, "It isn't ours any more."

He senses that he is losing the battle in some way, and tells her to return to the shade. She anticipates his words cynically, and asks for another beer. She is suddenly more in command of the situation. He concedes that he is willing to "go through with it if it means anything" to her. She responds dryly, "Doesn't it mean anything to you?" highlighting his use of the word "anything."

She loses her patience with him now, and asks him please to stop talking, enunciating her request by repeating "please" seven times to get her point across.

He does stop talking for a moment, and looks instead at their luggage, which he notices has labels on them from many hotels where they had spent many nights. He says something else, and she promptly threatens to scream if he speaks again.

It is another moment of high tension, a moment that is diffused only slightly by the appearance of the woman from behind the beaded curtain, who brings beers and the announcement that the train would be arriving in 5 minutes. The girl asks what she said, and we learn through her question that although the man speaks Spanish, she neither speaks nor understands it.

He goes to take the bags across to the train tracks. He comes back via the barroom, where he stops to have another Anis at the bar and look at the other people waiting for the train. When he returns she is smiling at him, apparently calmer. He asks her if she feels better.

"I feel fine," she said. "There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine."

Analysis

There is an air of mystery that pervades "Hills Like White Elephants," and as the reader, we are never sure exactly what is meant by the cryptic comments of the two characters. When the story was published for the first time in 1927, Ernest Hemingway was at first criticized by the literary critics of the time, who called it more of an anecdote than a short story. Indeed, the style is anecdotal. The story is told almost entirely through dialog, and the author is invisible. It is as if we are merely eavesdropping on the lives of two people, about whom we know nothing. Critics also noted that readers of the time preferred more direction from the author than what Hemingway gives in this piece. He adds no description to the dialog, giving the reader no hints as to how they should feel about the characters and the situation. This makes the piece challenging but interesting at the same time; as the reader is forced to draw his or her own conclusions about what is going on.

The story begins with a description about the setting, and the scenery on one side of the train station. As we read more, we realize that the scenery on the other side of the train station is quite different to the first side. This can be said to symbolize two different courses of action. The decision that is being made by the couple in the story is between having an abortion and having a child. The one side of the station is dominated by long, white hills, with no trees and no shade, and the country is brown and dry. These can all be seen as symbols of infertility, and at the beginning of the story, the girl is constantly looking at this side, seemingly fascinated by the starkness, the barrenness, and by the hills that remind her of "white elephants." A white elephant refers to something of little or no value, so perhaps Ernest Hemingway is passing moral judgment on the decision to have an abortion by calling the story by this title.

The other side of the train station, which the girl discovers when she leaves the table and walks to the end of the platform, is green and lush, with a river running through it. These are all symbols of fertility, thus this side can be said to symbolize the decision to keep the child. She becomes more interested in this side of the station later on in the story.

The dynamic between the couple is a roller coaster of emotions, and must be examined carefully. The author tells us nothing about them, only that the man is American, and the girl is of unknown origin. The fact that they are labeled as the man and the girl would seem to indicate an age difference. He also appears older and more in control in his dialog, while she is more childish, and seems to be dependent on him. Her title of "the girl" is further offset by the presence of "the woman," who brings them their drinks. Her name, Jig, also seems childish, or is perhaps a pet name that her older lover has made up for her.

There is a subtle but noticeable shift in the dynamics of their relationship approximately half way through the story. During the first half, the man is on the offensive in their conversation about the operation, and what it would mean for them. He brings it up, he tells her what it will be like, how she will feel, how simple it will be and how things will be

with them after it is all over. She asks a few questions, and poses some doubts, but she is more on the defensive at this point in the conversation. The man is very passive in his aggression, but because the author gives us no clues as to how we should feel about him, once we realize that he is really trying to use his power to manipulate her into a decision that will be best for "them" the dislike that we feel for him is much more intense.

The change in her begins when we hear in her dialogue a spark of sarcasm, when she responds to his assertion that he has known many people to have the operation by saying that she has known many people as well, and that "afterwards they were all so happy." This is obvious cynicism on her part, and immediately puts him on the defensive. The real change comes when she gets up and walks to the end of the station to see "the other side." Suddenly, her tone changes, and she seems to be a girl no longer. She delivers the cryptic but powerful line, "we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible." It is not clear what she is referring to hear, if she sees the green lushness as an unfettered existence with her lover, or as the possibility of raising a child together. Perhaps by everything she means that they could raise a child and continue to exist together as lovers.

She suddenly becomes despondent, and responds to his enthusiasm with a solemnity that makes it apparent that she is no longer the lighthearted youth of the beginning of the story. "Once they take it away, you never get it back," she replies to his forced cheerfulness. Is she speaking of her aborted child? Of their love? Of her respect for him, or for herself? As the reader, we can only speculate. He beckons her back into the shade, and she asks for another beer.

Here we should examine the role that alcohol plays in this short story. The first words that are spoken are about ordering drinks, as are almost the last. In between, a total of nine alcoholic beverages are consumed between them in less than 40 minutes, four for her and five for him. This can be seen as indicative of the times, but also must be considered as a tension breaker between the overwrought couple. It is also interesting to note as a sociological difference that as a pregnant woman in the 20's, she has absolutely no qualms whatsoever about consuming alcoholic beverages, even before she has made a decision as to whether she will keep the baby. It seems, in fact, that the stress of the pregnancy is possibly making her drink more.

She begins to finish his thoughts for him cynically, and he becomes more open to the possibility that if it meant "anything" to her, that he would be happy to keep the child. She wonders aloud if it means "anything" to him, throwing his own words back at him bitterly. At this moment, she takes full command of the conversation by asking him clearly to stop talking. He begins to talk again and she threatens to scream if he does not stop.

When the woman comes to tell them that the train will be arriving in another five minutes, the man goes to take their luggage to the other side of the station. When he returns, she appears to be completely composed. She tells him that she feels fine, and that there is nothing wrong with her.

This ambiguous ending certainly leaves much room for speculation. We do not know what she has decided, but one thing that is certain is that she has concluded in her own mind. Whether she has decided to have an abortion, keep the baby, dump her boyfriend, or accept his flaws and encourage him to marry her, is unknown by all but Hemingway. However, the interesting part of this story is not the conclusions, but the real slice of life told in an anecdotal way. It shows the growth of the female character, who blossoms in a span of 40 minutes from a young and silly girl to a mature woman who has obviously taken control of her own life and is willing to face the difficult journey ahead.

Characters

The American

The American is one of two characters in Hemingway's story. He sits at a table with a girl at a train station in Spain. Through his conversation, it becomes clear that the girl with him is his lover. Throughout the story, the American tries to convince the girl that she should have an abortion. He tries to make himself sound perfectly reasonable and rational, but as the dialogue continues, it becomes clear that he is both selfish and hypocritical. He says, "You've got to realize . . . that I don't want you to do it if you don't want to. I'm perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you." He does not mean, however, that he wants the girl to have the baby, although he says that he'll "go through with it." By the end of the story, the American has revealed himself to be self-centered and lacking in feeling for the girl, Jig, despite his protestations of love.

The girl

See Jig

Jig

The second character is called "Jig" by the American; however, Hemingway refers to her as "the girl" throughout the story. This is in contrast to Hemingway's naming of the other character as "the American" or "the man." Jig is a young woman who finds herself pregnant with her lover's child. She and her lover have been traveling in Europe; the labels on their suitcases name the hotels where they have spent nights together. At the time of the story, she is sitting at a table with the American, drinking beer and anise liqueur, waiting for a train. It slowly becomes clear that the man is trying to talk her into aborting the child she carries. Although the subject is never mentioned directly, the pregnancy is at the heart of the conversation. It is not clear what decision Jig reaches by the end of the story, or if she has reached any decision at all. It does seem clear, however, that she is unhappy with both choices in front of her: keep the baby and lose the American, or abort the baby and keep the American. She seems unconvinced that either scenario will develop as the American promises it will.

Themes

Choices and Consequences

"Hills Like White Elephants" presents a couple in the midst of a crisis. Although unmarried, the girl is pregnant and the man who has made her pregnant wants her to have an abortion. His belief is that the choice for abortion will free them to return to the lives they had lived before the pregnancy. He does not want to share the girl with anyone, particularly not a baby. He believes that the consequences of having the baby will lead to the breakup of the relationship.

Jig, however, seems to have a more realistic assessment of the choices and consequences in front of her. She knows that she is the one who must make the choice about the child she carries. Although she asks for reassurance, and wants the man's love, she also knows that the chances of them finding long term happiness are remote, regardless of the decision she makes. For her, the choice to abort or not to abort will, in all likelihood, render the same consequences: life without the American.

Doubt and Ambiguity

The story of Jig and the American is a story of doubt and ambiguity for the American, for Jig, and for the reader. While the American speaks in the language of certainty, he may or may not mean what he says. In addition, he can have little knowledge of what it would mean to the girl to have the abortion he so desperately wants her to have.

Although she seems unconvinced that the abortion is the best plan, Jig nonetheless wants reassurance from the man that she is with that he will stay with her. "And if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you'll love me?" she asks the man. His reassurances seem to fall flat, however. For Jig, the path ahead is unclear. If she chooses to have the abortion, she may be unhappy with the loss. The American may leave her anyway. She may not survive the operation, in spite of the American's reassurances that it is "perfectly simple." If she chooses not to have the abortion, she may be left alone in Spain, without support, in a country where she does not even speak the language.

Even at the very end of the story, there seems to be no resolution. What does Jig decide? Does she get on the train or not? Does the couple stay together or separate? The clues in the story are sparse, and can be read either way. Thus, the doubt and ambiguity facing the characters are mirrored by the story itself.

Men and Women

In "Hills Like White Elephants," Hemingway explores the way that men and women relate to each other. Hemingway's stories are often heavily masculine, and his

protagonists are often patriarchal and sexist. As Peter Messent argues, however, in this story, Hemingway "foregrounds a woman's point of view." The more the American speaks, the more ridiculous he becomes. For example, he tells Jig, "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig.... It's not really an operation at all." Jig does not respond to this statement for several reasons. First, she knows what an abortion is and how it will be performed. It is, after all, her body. In addition, it is not simple: abortions are not legal at this time and place (abortion was not legalized in Spain until 1985), and sometimes women die. Jig knows this, and the man's denial of the complexity of what he is asking the woman to do only serves to highlight his own selfishness.

In addition, throughout the opening part of the story, the American tries to talk Jig into the abortion by telling her how simple it is. He claims superior knowledge and wants her to acquiesce. The moment, however, that she says she will have the abortion because *he* wants her to have it, the man says, "I don't want you to do it if you don't want to. I'm perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you." The use of "it" in this line is revealing: it refers not only to the abortion, but to the baby as well. And although the American wants Jig to have the abortion, he does not want to assume the responsibility for it. Not only must she have the abortion to keep him, she must also agree to the abortion on his terms, as something she wants. In this story, Hemingway suggests that sometimes a man wants to control not only the situation he finds himself in, but also the reactions a woman has to the situation as well.

Style

Setting

In "Hills Like White Elephants" the setting serves both to locate the story in space and time and to function as an important symbol. The story is set in Spain, in the valley of the Ebro River. More immediately, the setting is a railway station "between two lines of rails in the sun." The American and the girl sit at a table. On one side of the station, the land is parched and desolate. A number of critics have noted the similarity between this landscape and that of T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland.* On the other side of the station, there are trees and grain. By dividing the setting in half, with one side sterile and the other fertile, Hemingway uses the setting to reinforce the division between the couple. They can choose sterility through the abortion, or fertility through the pregnancy. The landscape outside the couple's conversation reflects the inner landscapes of the relationship.

Dialogue

The most striking feature of this story is that it is constructed almost entirely of dialogue. There are only seven short descriptive paragraphs that are not part of the dialogue itself. Further, there is very little action in the story: the girl walks from one side of the station to the other, they drink beer, and the man moves the luggage. By controlling the narrative so tightly, Hemingway forces the reader to participate in the scene almost as an eavesdropper. The reader "hears" the dialogue, but cannot break into the characters' inner thoughts. With so little else present, the weight and the meaning of the story depend on the reader's ability to decipher the cryptic comments the two characters make to each other. Hem-ingway himself once suggested that a short story is like the tip of an iceberg, the meaning of the story submerged beneath the written text. Certainly in "Hills Like White Elephants," only the smallest portion of the story's subject is apparent, and the reader must guess at the rest.

Lost Generation

The term "Lost Generation" has come to apply to a group of young writers, most born around 1900, who fought in the First World War. As a group, the Lost Generation found that their understanding of life had been severely affected by their experiences during the war. Many of the Lost Generation lived in Europe, notably in Paris, during the post-War period. The term came from a comment that Ger-trude Stein made to Hemingway, "You are all a lost generation." Hemingway used the comment as a epigraph in his novel, *The Sun Also Rises.* Other writers included in this group are F. Scott Fitz-gerald, Hart Crane, Louis Bromfield, and Mal-colm Cowley.

The aimlessness of the characters in "Hills Like White Elephants" is one of the characteristics of the fiction of the Lost Generation. Jig and the Americans are

expatriates, moving from place to place to "look at things and try new drinks." They are people who live in hotels, out of luggage, rather than being rooted in one place. The lack of rootedness, then, becomes an important motif in the literature of this generation.

Historical Context

Europe Between the Wars

Hemingway wrote "Hills Like White Elephants" in 1926 while living in Paris. Europe between the First and Second World Wars provided the historical and cultural context for the story. Hemingway was twenty-two, newly married and ready to begin a career as a serious writer when he arrived in Paris in 1921. His experiences as an ambulance driver during World War I continued to affect him, and the sense of alienation and isolation characteristic of modernist writing can be found in the writing he produced during these years.

Europe was in the process of recovering from the war; however, it was a time of political and economic upheaval for most of the nations. Many nations suffered political struggles as right and left wing factions attempted to wrest control of their particular countries. In Italy, for example, strikes, violence, and political unrest led to the 1922 Fascist March on Rome. Mussolini established himself as dictator in that country. In Germany, the heavy reparations called for in the Treaty of Versailles that ended WWI caused economic chaos. The German mark steadily lost ground as the rate of inflation spiraled upward. Germans would rush to buy goods the moment they received cash because the value of their cash would decrease by the end of the day. The other nations of Europe, their countryside scarred and their young men dead or wounded, reeled under a deep and severe recession.

The Lost Generation

In the United States, however, the economy boomed. The stock market reached dizzying heights and the dollar enjoyed an extremely favorable rate of exchange with most European currencies. In addition, many young Americans had been in Eu-rope during the War, allowing them to feel more comfortable in the different cultures. Armed with the strong American dollar and the familiarity with the language and culture, many writers found Paris a very attractive milieu—collectively, these writers became known as the "Lost Generation." According to Michael Reynolds, some six thousand Ameri-cans lived in Paris at the end of 1921; by "Septem-ber 1924, the city's permanent American population was thirty thousand and rising." Hemingway brushed shoulders with many notable writers and literary figures while in Paris, including Ezra Pound, Ger-trude Stein, Alice B. Toklas, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and James Joyce, among others.

Hemingway himself popularized the idea of a lost generation through his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises.* In his later memoir of the Paris years, *A Moveable Feast,* Hemingway writes of a conversation he had with the writer Gertrude Stein in which she called all young people who had been in the war "a lost generation." Subsequently, Hemingway used Stein's comment as one of two epigraphs that open the book. Hemingway, perhaps better than any other writer of his generation, captured the sense of waste and

loss and the resulting aimlessness that the War engendered in the young people of his era.

Social Change

The years between the war were ones of rapid social change. In the United States, the economic boom caused by easy credit and technology allowed people to own products as never before. Middle class people were able to own cars, radios, and telephones.

Social change was reflected in other important ways as well. Perhaps most important, women received the right to vote in 1920 and entered the work force in growing numbers. Women bared their legs, lit up cigarettes, and cut their hair. Such expressions of emancipation threatened traditional male values, and the clash between the genders figured in many of the literary works of the day.

Many writers left the United States, preferring the less restrictive morality of Europe. Disillusioned with civilized society, alienated from traditional values, and shell-shocked from a brutal War, these writers experimented with literary form, content, and style.

Critical Overview

Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" first appeared in the magazine *transition* in August, 1927, and within a few months appeared again in the collection *Men Without Women. The Sun Also Rises,* Hemingway's 1926 novel of life in Paris and Pamplona, had already secured the author's reputation as the spokesperson for his generation. *Men Without Women* further solidified critical approval of his early work. "Hills Like White Elephants" was singled out for special attention from reviewers. For example, Dorothy Parker, enamored with Hemingway and his prose, called the story in an early review "delicate and tragic." She further added, "I do not know where a greater collection of stories can be found."

Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, did not seem appreciate Hemingway or his prose. Her review, contemporary with the publication of the story, was filled with what could be termed "left-handed compliments." For example, she wrote, "There are . . . many stories which, if life were longer, one would wish to read again. Most of them indeed are so competent, so efficient, and so bare of superfluity that one wonders why they do not make a deeper dent in the mind than they do." She criticized Hemingway for "excessive" dialogue and "lack of proportion."

A final contemporary reviewer, Cyril Connolly, offered a more balanced critique of *Men Without Women.* He wrote that the volume "is a collection of grim little stories told in admirable colloquial dialogue with no point, no moral and no ornamentation." Although he called Hemingway's work "irritating," he also found the stories "readable and full of . . . power and freshness."

In the years after the initial publication of the story, an increasing number of critics have offered readings of "Hills Like White Elephants." Indeed, as the story began to appear ever more frequently in anthologies of short stories and American literature textbooks, it also generated many critical articles. Criticism of the story most generally focuses on structural issues, such as the use of dialogue and/or figurative language; examines the sources, analogues, and biographical material used in the story; or discusses Hemingway's construction of gender and language.

Robert Paul Lamb, for example, has studied Hemingway's role in the development of twentieth-century literary dialogue. He argues that in "Hills Like White Elephants," Hemingway "blurred the line between fiction and drama, allowing dialogue an unprecedented constructive role in a story's composition." He demonstrates the way that the dialogue simultaneously reveals and hides the subject of the story.

Other critics such as Howard L. Hannum concentrate on the symbolism of the story, exploring the many meanings of the term "white elephant" and the contrast between the fertility and sterility of each side of the railway station. He also noted the story's connection to T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in his discussion.

An important way of reading the story for many critics has been to examine gender and communication. Pamela Smiley, for example, in a 1990 article, discusses the story in terms of gender marked language, basing her analysis on the gender communication theory of Deborah Tannen. Peter Messent includes a chapter called "Gender Role and Sexuality" in his book-length study of Hemingway. He argues that "Hemingway's texts show divided attitudes to matters of sexual politics." Further, Messent writes, while many of Hemingway's stories privilege the male protagonists, "Hills Like White Elephants" is a story in which "'women's sensibilities' are certainly not ignored but rather highlighted in an extremely sensitive manner." Messent points out that it may be for this reason that the story has become more frequently anthologized in recent years. Finally, critic Stanley Renner in a 1995 article argues that a close analysis of the language reveals that the story's ending is not as ambiguous as most readers have thought. He believes that Jig's final words reveal that she has decided to keep the baby. For Renner, the story "side[s] with its female character's values" and "understands and sensitively dramatizes her struggle to take charge of her own arena, to have a say about the direction of her own life."

In addition to this sampling of critical approaches, many other critics have undertaken readings of the story. Such variety and diversity in approach suggest that "Hills Like White Elephants" is a rich and open story, one that will continue to engender multiple readings from its many readers.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
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Critical Essay #1

Henningfeld is an Associate Professor of English at Adrian College, in Adrian, Michigan. She writes widely on literature and history for a variety of academic and educational publishers. In the following essay, she discusses the tragic and comic elements of "Hills Like White Elephants," placing these elements within the context of modernism.

In 1927, Ernest Hemingway completed and published his collection of short stories, *Men Without Women.* The collection included several important stories, stories that have been closely examined by critics almost since the day of their publication. Among the stories in the collection, however, "Hills Like White Elephants" has become the most widely anthologized and the most frequently taught. The story continues to generate scholarly interest and heated debate among students.

"Hills Like White Elephants" is a very short story. Only about one thousand words, the story itself is comprised almost entirely of dialogue. Although there is a situation, there is no plot; although there are words spoken between the main characters, there is no resolution. The topic of their conversation, an abortion, is never even mentioned by name by either of the characters. In spite of the brevity of the story, and in spite of the absences created by the dialogue, scholars continue to produce pages and pages of critical commentary. Such critical interest at least suggests that the story is a rich, open text, one that invites reader participation in the process of meaning-making.

The story appears deceptively simple. A man and a woman sit at a table at a Spanish railway station, waiting for a train. They engage in a conversation, Hemingway seems to suggest, that has been going on for some time. The reader is dropped in the middle of the conversation without context and must glean what information he or she can from the words the characters say. The setting of the story is contemporary with its writing; that is, although there is no definite mention of the date, it seems to be set sometime during the years after the First World War, but before the Spanish Civil War. In addition, the setting is narrowly limited both in time and space. The story is framed by the narrative announcement in the first paragraph that the "express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes" and by the Spanish woman's announcement near the end of the story, "The train comes in five minutes." Thus, all of the story takes place within the thirty-five minutes. In addition, the characters never leave the train station itself.

There are several important ways that critics have read "Hills Like White Elephants." Some concentrate on the structure of the story, noting the use of dialogue and the placement of the few short descriptive passages. John Hollander, for example, suggests that the story develops the way a film or play might develop and that the short descriptive passages read almost like stage directions. Other critics develop careful and complicated readings of the story based on word level analysis, examining the way that Hemingway uses allusion, simile, imagery, and symbolism. Some of these critics also include an examination of Hemingway's sources, connecting the story to T. S. Eliot's modernist masterpiece, *The Wasteland.* A more recent group of scholars concentrates on the use of gender-marked language in the story, looking closely at the different ways

the American and Jig use language to communicate. Still others try to use Hemingway's autobiographical manuscripts and letters to read parts of Hemingway's life into the story. However, the fact that so many critics read this story in so many ways does not mean that the story is flawed; it means, rather, that it is a text that invites participation. As Paul Smith argues, Hemingway does not tell the reader "how the characters arrived at their present condition, or how they will resolve their conflict; we do not need to be told, for the answers are embedded in what we so briefly do see and hear." Although Smith seems to suggest in this statement that the "answers" are there for the reading, it is possible to arrive at a multiplicity of answers, using the same lines of text.

In an early review of the story, Dorothy Parker described the story as "delicate and tragic." Although it is unlikely that Parker meant to suggest that "Hills Like White Elephants" is a tragedy in the classical Greek sense of the word, it is possible to use her statement as an entry point into the story. An examination of both the comic and the tragic elements reveals how these ideas function in the story, and how modernism has transformed the ideas themselves.

To begin, it is important to make clear that the term "comic" here does not imply humor, or laughter. In this discussion, "comedy" does not refer to a television situation comedy that is designed to be funny. Rather, for the purpose of this discussion comedy is a shape that fiction can take. Comedy has its roots in the fertility rituals of spring. It celebrates marriage, sexual union, birth, and the perpetuation of society. Comedy is not always light-hearted, however; it frequently carries with it pain, frustration, and near-catastrophe. The threat of death is always located in the underside of comedy. Ultimately, however, it is the triumph over death that gives comedy its characteristic shape.

Tragedy, on the other hand, has its roots in death and sterility. It announces the end of the line, the end of a family, the end of society. Its characteristic images are winter and wasteland. Modernism, the period of literature generally placed as beginning during World War I, reflects the culture's loss of history, tradition, and certainty in the face of the War's carnage, made possible by human-made technology. Modernism reduces the scope of the tragic in literature, focusing on smaller characters in more limited settings. Unlike the tragedies of the past, they no longer need to be about larger than life characters, trapped by their own tragic flaws. Rather, tragic movement can be seen in the alienation and isolation of contemporary life. Modernist tragedy tends to emphasize ironic detachment and T. S. Eliot's quiet, "not with a bang but a whimper" ending.

Close examination of "Hills Like White Elephants" reveals that Jig and the American are in a moment that teeters on the border between the comic and the tragic. They are at a moment of decision, one that will push them one way or the other. The landscape around them reflects both possible futures. On the one side of the station, the land is fertile and green. The water from the river nourishes new life. This is the comic landscape, the landscape of regeneration. On the other side of the station, the land is bleak and dusty, lacking in sustenance and life. The American, an essentially flawed character, fails to note the dichotomy of the landscape. His vision is limited by his own needs and desires. He lives in the perpetual "now," wanting only momentary pleasure,

not lasting growth. The girl's pregnancy, a state that necessarily points toward the future, has upset his equilibrium in the moment. Acknowledging the pregnancy itself forces him to acknowledge the future. Strikingly, he never mentions the word "pregnancy" in the entire story, as if the mere mention of the word will both implicate and complicate his life.

Jig, on the other hand, seems highly aware of the precipice on which she stands. What she wishes for is the comic resolution, one in which the Ameri-can will marry her, they will return home, and they will establish a family. She will participate in the birth of the next generation, and will focus her attention forward. However, she also realizes that what she wishes for is not likely what she will get. When she stands and walks to the end of the station, she observes the fertile valley of the Ebro in front of her, and she understands the connection between that landscape and the future she desires. As Barry Stampfl argues, "Jig indicates the truth about her relation with the American and about her feelings for her unborn baby by talking about landscapes."

In some ways, this is a choric moment, that is, a moment when a detached observer makes a judgement about the characters and their actions. In this tiny story, Jig must play the part of her own chorus. At this moment, Jig stands outside herself and sees the larger situation. Looking out over the valley she says, "And we could have all this.... And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible." It is as if she realizes that the comic ending is slipping away from her. She may be about to play a role in a modernist tragedy, a tragedy in which she finds herself, at best, isolated and alone, keenly aware of the absence of life in her womb. At its worst, she may find herself dying in an abortion clinic, surrounded by people who do not speak her language.

Unlike traditional comedies and tragedies, however, "Hills Like White Elephants" does not offer a recognizable resolution. Rather, the end of the story is inconclusive, the possible endings fragmented. For Jig, the longing for the fertile valley is both a longing for an Edenic past and the longing for progeny to carry on into the future. Neither of her choices offers the fulfillment of that longing, and she knows it. The American's glance at their suitcases covered with hotel labels signals his desire to remain in the permanent present, a present without past or future. Again, regardless of their choice, the man's desire will remain unfulfilled.

The story ends, the train still five minutes down the track. Frozen in the space between comic and tragic resolution, the characters remain, Jig and the American, the conversation ended. Although critics, academics, readers, and students may argue about what will "happen next," the truth is that nothing happens to the characters after the story ends. Hemingway leaves his characters as he found them, in the middle of something larger, outside the margins of the story. Jig and the American truly come to represent the lost generation at this moment. Without resolution, each isolated and alienated from the other, they remain in the no man's land of inconclusivity, the possibility of tradition and continuity represented by the fertile valley just outside of their reach.

Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, Overview of "Hills Like White Elephants," for *Short Stories for Students*, The Gale Group, 1999.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, Johnston examines Hem-ingway's "theory of omission" and its effect on his prose style.

His stories came back in the mail, slipped through the slit in the saw-mill door where he lived, "with notes of rejection that would never call them stories, but always anecdotes, sketches, contes, etc. They did not want them, and we lived on poireaux and drank cahors and water." Those were the early, lean years in Paris when Ernest Hemingway was submitting to the discipline of hunger and to the discipline of his new theory of fiction: "That you could omit anything if you knew that you omitted and the omitted part would strengthen the story and make people feel something more than they understood":

Well, I thought, now I have them so they do not understand them. There cannot be much doubt about that. There is most certainly no demand for them. But they will understand the same way they always do in painting. It only takes time and it only needs confidence.

Time has proven Hemingway right, although his short fiction based on the theory of "omission" is not universally admired, or fully understood, not even by some of his fellow craftsmen. Frank O'Connor, for instance, complains that "Hills Like White Elephants" does not provide the reader with enough information to make the necessary moral judgments. "The light is admirably focused," admits O'Connor, "but it is too blinding; we cannot see into the shadows."

One does not take lightly criticism by a short story writer of O'Connor's stature and talent, but O'Connor is wrong. The reader can see, clearly and deeply, into the shadows if he submits to the discipline of close reading and fleshes out the implications of this lean story. A rich pattern of dialogue, setting, action, and allusion is carefully woven into "Hills Like White Elephants." With swift, sure strokes, without a wasted word or motion, Heming-way creates a taut, tense story of conflict in a moral wasteland.

"Hills Like White Elephants" opens quietly. The day is hot, and a young couple, who are waiting for the train from Barcelona, are relaxing in the shade of the station and discussing the small matter of ordering a cool drink. When the girl remarks that the hills across the valley look like white elephants, an argument flares, but is quickly extinguished by the girl. But moments later it flares again, this time sparked by references to licorice and absinthe. These small clashes, one gradually realizes, are part of a larger conflict that centers on the question of abortion. Hemingway makes no mention of that key word, nor does he explicitly state that the conflict has been smoldering and flaring for weeks. But since nearly every topic of conversation rekindles the argument, it is quite apparent that this is not the first time that this vital issue has been discussed. The unborn child is dominating the couple's thoughts and emotions and has been for some time. The man's impatience with the girl is attributable in part to his anger at discovering, with the bags all packed, and apparently with the final decision

made, that the issue is not settled at all. Now, once again, they resume their intense dialogue, with the unborn child's life hanging in the balance....

Hemingway has skillfully used the setting in "Hills Like White Elephants" to help reveal and reinforce situation, characterization, and theme. The Spanish setting contributes to the ironic tone of the story, for the moral drama takes place in a predominantly Catholic country where the church stands in firm opposition to abortion. However, the girl does not understand Spanish, a fact which helps to reveal her essential helplessness and dependency. She is a stranger in a foreign land where her male companion is her only interpreter and guide. Their rootless existence is symbolized by the train station and by their baggage, with "labels on them from all the hotels where they spent nights." The station sits between two lines of rails to suggest the two directions in which the couple may go—toward Madrid and the abortion or away from Madrid toward a settled, family life. The description of the Ebro valley embodies the poles of the conflict too: It is both barren and fruitful. On the side which they sit facing, there are no trees and no shade, and in the distance the country is brown and dry; on the other side of the valley, there are "fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro." Only the girl looks at the fruitful side of the valley where she glimpses the life-giving water through the trees. But as she watches the scene, "the shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain," foreshadowing the death of her unborn child. (This shadow line is one of several important revisions that Hemingway made in a titled pencil manuscript of "Hills Like White Elephants": He changed "The girl looked away" to "The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on"; He inserted "The girl looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two of the strings of beads"; He inserted "The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees.")

The hills like white elephants also serve to remind one of the couple's conflicting views on abortion. A white elephant, in one meaning of the term, is anything rare, expensive, and difficult to keep; any burdensome possession; an object no longer esteemed by its owner though not without value to others. This is basically how the man feels about the unwanted child. On the other hand, a white elephant is also a rare pale-gray variety of Asian elephant held sacred by the Burmese and Siamese. The girl's reverence for life is captured by this meaning of the phrase. Her reluctance to have the abortion and the enormity of her sacrifice when she finally capitulates to the man's insistent demands are clearly suggested by her revealing gesture involving the beaded bamboo curtain. The curtain hangs across the open door to the bar to keep out the flies, and it is repeatedly called to the reader's attention during the story. It is the girl who first comments on the curtain because she is curious about the Spanish words painted on it. A short time later, when her companion is pressuring her to submit to the operation, "the girl looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two of the strings of beads," as though clutching the beads of a rosary to give her the moral courage to resist. One need not argue that she is a Catholic, but this scene makes it quite clear that she is calling upon her moral and religious strength in her moment of crisis.

The girl is sympathetically portrayed in "Hills Like White Elephants." She is the man's superior in imagination, sensitivity, and capacity for love. She has the imagination to see white elephants, whereas the earthbound man can see only long white hills. No doubt

she is thinking of her swelling pregnancy as she gazes at the swollen mounds of earth. "'They're lovely hills,' she said, 'They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees'." She senses truly the nature of her dilemma. Her instincts tell her that their relationship will be radically altered, perhaps destroyed, if she goes through with the abortion. But if she refuses, she knows full well that he will leave her: "I'd do anything for you," he declares, yet he refuses to respond to her silent and sounded pleas for child and family or to take seriously her premonitions of future unhappiness and irreparable loss. His pledge is an empty gesture: "I'm perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you," he insists, revealing his appalling insincerity and insensitivity. As the girl looks out across the grain fields toward the river, she remarks prophetically, "We could have everything and every day we make it more impossible." "What did you say?" he asks. He is not even listening. Finally, against her better judgment, her instincts, and her moral principles, she agrees to "do it," because "I don't care about me." The man does not understand. But her reason is a simple one: she cares about him; she loves him. The man is puzzled because he is incapable of such an act of selflessness, which is the truest expression of love.

The man, identified only as an American, is the villain of the piece. He is a selfish, insensitive, emotional bully, the eternal adolescent who refuses to put down roots or to shoulder the responsibilities which are rightfully his. His empty, barren life style is summed up by the girl: "That's all we do, isn't it—look at things and try new drinks." But he will not be baited into a review of the past. The girl is well aware that the intrusion of a child will send the man packing, for he will not tolerate any hindrance to his vagabond, hedonistic life style. He makes no secret of the fact that the "thing" definitely "bothers" him and makes him "unhappy." One even detects a veiled threat of abandonment beneath his "if-you-don't-want-to-you-don't-have-to" declarations. He makes his position very clear: "I don't want anybody but you. I don't want any one else." And there are no bonds of legal marriage to hold him if he should tire of their arrangement.

One of the drinks that apparently reminds them both of their passionate past is absinthe, the highly potent (140 to 160 proof), green alcoholic drink. It is the "forbidden" drink, outlawed in France, Swit-zerland, the United States, and other countries, but still legal in Spain. It was banned because it acts powerfully on the nervous system and is thought to cause sterility. However, it is also popularly believed to be an aphrodisiac and, thus, held in high esteem by pleasure seekers. The taste of Anis del Toro reminds the girl of the licorice taste of absinthe, but her remark irritates the man: "Oh, cut it out," he snaps. Very likely he introduced her to absinthe, too, in hopes that she would become sexually aroused. Now he wishes to be rid of the unwanted by-product of that passion. He is not amused by such ironic references. But it is doubtful that he has the wit to perceive the further irony of linking absinthe, with its connotations of forbidden fruit, to sterility and abortion. Quite obviously he does not appreciate the irony of his own remarks when he refers to the abortion as "an awfully simple operation," "perfectly natural," and "perfectly simple."

At story's end, with the train due in five minutes, the man leaves the girl to take the baggage to the other side of the station. He then stops off at the bar inside to have a drink alone. The people there, he observes, "were all waiting reasonably for the train."

As he sees it, he is the calm voice of reason, the rational man who must convince the emotional, irrational girl that "the best thing" for him is "the best thing" for her. (The titled pencil manuscript of "Hills Like White Elephants" at the Kennedy Library exhibits Hemingway's talent for honing a scene. Hemingway originally wrote: "He drank an anis at the bar and looked at the people. There must be some actual world[.] There must be some place you could touch where people were calm and reasonable. Once it had all been as simple as this bar." He changed this to read: "He drank an anis at the bar and looked at the people. They were all waiting reasonably for the train.") The signs of the man's discontent are quite ominous. His implicit criticism of the unreasonable girl and, more important, his seeking a moment of pleasure apart from her, tend to confirm the girl's dark premonitions and to hint at some future dissolution of their relationship, some later permanent abandonment. Meanwhile, the emotionally drained girl looks out toward the dry side of the valley and waits for the train that will speed her toward the irreversible moment.

Source: Kenneth G. Johnston, "'Hills Like White Elephants': Lean, Vintage Hemingway," in *Studies in American Fiction,* Vol. 10, No. 2, Autumn, 1982, pp. 233-38.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Weeks discusses the imagery and symbolism in "Hills Like White Elephants," focusing specifically on the image suggested by the title.

Although subject, setting, point of view, characterization, dialog, irony, and compression all make "Hills Like White Elephants" one of Hemingway's most brilliant short stories, the symbolism implicit in the title and developed in the story contributes more than any other single quality to the powerful impact.

Emphasis by position and repetition clearly suggests the importance Hemingway attached to the comparison. Besides the reference in the title, there are, within this very short three-page story, two references to the whiteness of the hills and four to them as white elephants, although one of these suggests that the hills do not look like white elephants but only have their coloring.

On first reading the title, one assumes the comparison may merely be to the color and to the rounded contour of the hills that constitute part of the setting, a quite literal reference. This impression is reinforced by the first sentence, the subject of which is "long and white" hills. The second time they are mentioned, they are contrasted with the countryside, which is brown and dry, suggestive of the limitations and aridity of the relationship of the man and woman, which begins to unfold and which is the basis of the conflict and the meaning of the story.

Then only twenty lines into the story, the young woman remarks for the first time that the hills look like white elephants; and the first hint of tension between her and the man appears in his ironic reply, "I've never seen one," and her retaliation, "No, you wouldn't have." Although they seem to talk of trivia in the next four lines of dialog, the tension increases; and it is apparent that an argument is about to erupt or re-erupt. Talk of the drink Anis del Toro, that they have just tried and that tasted like licorice, leads her to say, "Everything tastes of licorice, especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe." The implication as to the casualness and triviality of their lives, in which drinks are of such importance, and the further ironic implication in the bitterness of absinthe, with its wormwood basis, is made apparent. In addition, the belief in absinthe as an aphrodisiac adds another ironic twist to its mention. Color symbolism involving the blackness of licorice and the whiteness of the hills suggests the contrast between sorrow and joy as has the already mentioned contrast between the white hills and the brown, dry countryside. The living green color of absinthe also suggests a contrast with the dry drabness of the countryside.

As the tension increases between the couple, he tries to smooth things over by saying, "Well, let's try to have a fine time." She replies, "All right, I was trying. I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn't that bright?" He agrees, and she continues, making explicit her opinion of the shallowness of their life together, "That's all we do, isn't it—look at things and try new drinks?" He tentatively acquiesces; and she looks across at the hills, saying, "They're lovely hills. They don't really look like white

elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees." His unconsciously ironic reply is to offer her another drink. Immediately afterwards and for the first time, we learn what the problem is through his reference to an "awfully simple operation . . . not really an operation at all . . . just to let the air in." She is pregnant, and he wants her to have an abortion.

Immediately the symbolic significance of the title and the reason for the frequent mention of the hills becomes apparent. A number of images and emotional reactions flood the reader's mind as the dialog swiftly makes clear that the girl wants the baby, not the abortion, which he says will make no difference in their relationship and which hypocritically he persists in assuring her he does not want if she objects to it.

The final reference to the hills occurs about halfway through the story in the girl's plaintive but skeptical appeal that, if she does go through with the abortion, "it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you'll like it?" Our immediate understanding of the white elephant reference when we learn that the story's conflict revolves around an unwanted pregnancy is probably that associated with the ubiquitous white elephant sale. These sales raise money for worthwhile causes by providing an opportunity for people to donate unwanted objects, white elephants, which will be sold at low prices to people who can find some use for them or think they can. To the man, the child is a white elephant that, in his selfishness, he wants to get rid of. To the girl, the child is a white elephant only insofar as its father rejects it; she would like to bear the child.

Another association and image surely comes to mind in terms of the comparison and is encouraged by the third reference, involving the skin of the hills. This image is of the fully pregnant woman, nude and probably lying on her back with her distended belly virtually bursting with life and with her breasts, engorged by the approaching birth, making a trinity of white hills. However, this image, stimulating as it does, the sense of wonder at the miraculous process of pregnancy and the remarkable elasticity and resiliency of the human body is one that will not blossom into birth for this couple. The man will not permit it; and the woman will be denied the fulfill-ment of motherhood, the loving support of the child's co-creator throughout the period of pregnancy, the shared joy of the birth, and the care and nurture of the child.

The richness, complexity, and irony of the white elephant symbol increases as we see the conflict over the unborn child develop and as we recall that the actual white elephant is a rarity in nature, is considered sacred and precious, and is revered and protected. Moreover, we may remember that Buddha's mother, Mahamaya, before his birth, dreamed of a beautiful silvery white elephant that entered her womb through her side. The priestly interpretation of this dream was, of course, that she would give birth to a son who would become either a universal ruler or a Buddha.

However, like the story's white elephant child, the actual white elephant is also paradoxical in its nature. On the one hand, it is rare and valuable, associated with potentates, the royal elephant, and has sacred attributes and spiritual powers. On the other hand, the figurative use of the term as a gift or possession that is worthless, a

burden, even harmful, or overwhelmingly troublesome is said to derive from the fact that the white elephant has an enormous appetite and, being sacred, can neither be disposed of nor used as a beast of burden but must be cared for and treated with care, respect, and concern until it dies. Consequently, if a king or potentate had an enemy to whom he wished ill, he could present him with a white elephant, ostensibly a mark of singular favor but in reality a burden whose expensive upkeep might bring ruin and would certainly confer hardship.

Hemingway's use of the white elephant symbol in his title and throughout the story has immeasurably enriched this poignant episode, with its insight into the complexities, the disappointments, and the sadness of life's "might-have-beens." It is a particularly significant story for our times when radical changes in traditional sexual morality and the issue of legalized abortion seem to emphasize the age-old problem presented in "Hills Like White Elephants."

Source: Lewis E. Weeks, Jr., "Hemingway Hills: Symbolism in 'Hills Like White Elephants'," in *Studies in Short Fiction,* Vol. 17, No. 1, Winter, 1980, pp. 75-77.

Critical Essay #4

In the following essay, Maynard explores the ironic manner in which symbols of unity operate in "Hills Like White Elephants."

Ernest Hemingway's short story "Hills Like White Elephants" is about a selfish man who wants his girl friend to have an abortion so that they can continue to have fun and be unencumbered by a child. The man's callousness and sterile view are contrasted with the girl's sensitive, sensuous response to life. As an ironic contrast to their present disunified relationship, a leitmotif of oneness, or unity, threads through the story. This leitmotif takes the form of the repetition, with variation, of the word *two.*

Before considering scenic irony and the leitmotif of unity, we should first observe the general features of the scene. The first paragraph creates the stage on which all of the action, what little there is, and dialogue take place (the leitmotif is also unobtrusively introduced in this description—but more about it later):

The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun. Close against the side of the station there was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies. The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building. It was very hot and the express from Barce-lona would come in forty minutes. It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went on to Madrid.

The man and the girl are appropriately positioned on a sterile, wasteland plain with "no shade and no trees." In the distance are objects that are symbolic of a sensuous, fertile, pure, natural life: "Across, on the other side, were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro. Far away, beyond the river, were mountains." The mountains and the river and the fields of grain are as far removed from the railway station café as the man's and girl's present strained relationship is removed from their past close relationship. When the girl wistfully views the distant scene, "the shadow of a cloud" moves "across the field of grain" and distorts the purity of her nostalgic vision, bringing her thoughts back to the sordid present. The "hills like white elephants" and other objects in the distance suggest to the girl the sensuous beauty of a love relation that is quickly deteriorating, now that she has become conscious of her lover's selfishness.

Since these images suggest the man's and the girl's past experience, they are appropriately in the background of the story's canvas. In the center of this prose painting is the railway station, where the Barcelona express stops for two minutes on its way to Madrid. The description of the station's position between the two railway lines subtly introduces the leitmotif of "two," to be reiterated in the story, but in this single instance "two" appears in an image of division or separation and suggests the actual state of the lovers; i.e., it is not an ironic "two." "Two" in "two minutes" is unobtrusively reiterated and prepares the way for the oneness, or unity, images of "two" which follow. All of these oneness or unity images operate ironically in the story, for they suggest a kind of life

(symbolized by the river, mountains, and fields) which is the direct opposite of the life now being experienced by the couple. These images are of course integrated smoothly into the literal level of the story, as such symbolic images are in all of Hemingway's works. Symbols should not stand out like raisins in raisin bread, Hemingway felt.

So far, I have mentioned only two appearances of "two," both of them in the first paragraph. More such images are needed if a leitmotif strand is to be established. And they are present: "Dos cervezas," "two glasses of beer," "two felt pads," and "two anis del Toro" are images of paired objects in which the two entities of each pair are alike and, as it were, unified. These images serve as ironic contrasts to the divided couple sitting at the table, who, because of their quite different responses to life, are so unlike each other that they cannot in any sense be considered a unified pair. Not one of these "two" images would be construed as a symbol if it were seen only in terms of its literal function in an isolated context. But, collectively, the piling-up of "two" images suggests that their connotative meanings are of more significance in the story than their literal functions.

When the man callously tells the girl that her pregnancy is the only thing which has made them unhappy, the girl, deeply hurt, looks at the bead curtain and takes "hold of two of the strings of beads." Since she knows that what they once had together can never again be the same, she subconsciously reaches out to take hold of that which is lost to them. Here again their former union is suggested to the reader by the reiterated "two" motif, which at this point in the story has been established and which is now emphatically objectified, or made tangible, by the two strings of beads. And the repetition of "two" is continued in the images of "two heavy bags" and in the reappearance of "two glasses" and two "damp felt pads."

One aspect of the girl's sensitive, sensuous response to life is her fertile imagination. For example, she imagines that the hills have the skin of white elephants. "They look like white elephants," she says to the man. "I've never seen one," he replies. "No, you wouldn't have," she says, realizing that he is incapable of sharing her fancy. Since elephants, which are herbivorous animals, live in areas of vegetation, perhaps the girl associates them with such images of fertility as the grain fields and the river. Or maybe their largeness and shape suggest a pregnant woman. Or perhaps their whiteness marks them as unnatural elephants—sports—and suggests the unnatural aspects of the abortion the girl fears so much. These are only conjectures. The point is that in looking at the hills she can respond imaginatively, while the man cannot.

Later, her imagination subdued by the man's flat replies, the girl says, "They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees." But the hills still look like white elephants to the girl. The title, "Hills Like White Elephants," and the oneness motif both represent her attitude, which is an imaginative, sensuous, warm appreciation of life.

No matter what the girl and the man do now, the man's selfish desire to avoid complications has hurt them beyond repair. Their present state has a tragic aura that

pervades the scene, and their pathetic condition is largely manifested by the ironic contrast provided by the leitmotif of oneness.

Source: Reid Maynard, "Leitmotif and Irony in Heming-way's 'Hills Like White Elephants'," in *The University Review,* Vol. XXXVII, No. 4, Summer, 1971, pp. 273-5.

Adaptations

"Hills Like White Elephants" is one of three short stories filmed as a cable television movie. The other two stories on the film include "The Man in the Brooks Brother Shirt" by Mary McCarthy, and "Dusk Before Fireworks" by Dorothy Parker. The ninety minute film aired on HBO entertainment network in 1990 as *Men and Women.* The video version of the film is titled *Women and Men: Three Tales of Seduction* and is a 1996 Front Row Entertainment production. David Brown and William S. Gilmore are the producers. The film stars Beau Bridges, Melanie Griffith, Elizabeth McGovern, Molly Ringwald, Peter Weller, and James Woods. As the story closes, Jig asserts that she is "just fine." Under the circumstances, however, it is clear that this is not the case.

Topics for Further Study

Read *The Sun Also Rises* and the other stories in *Men Without Women*. How do you characterize the human relationships portrayed by Heming-way in the books? What different kinds of relationships does Hemingway explore?

Investigate the American expatriate community in Paris during the years 1920 through 1929. Who are the members of the community? What is their relationship to each other? How did their close affiliation affect their writing?

The Treaty of Versailles ended the hostilities of the First World War. However, many historians argue that the terms of the treaty made the Second World War inevitable. Investigate the treaty and the years between the wars. Describe the connections between the Treaty of Versailles and movement toward World War II.

The role and status of women changed dramatically during the years from 1920-1929. Investigate this shift by looking at representations of women in art, music, and literature. What does this investigation reveal about the relationship between the sexes at this time?

Visit an art gallery, or check out books on art from your library. Examine art produced during the years between 1920 and 1929. How is this work different from the work produced during the last half of the nineteenth century? What might account for the dramatic shifts?

Compare and Contrast

1920s: Post-war American economy roars, fueled by a growing stock market. Credit is easy, and fortunes are made and lost in a day. The culture becomes increasingly consumer-oriented as new technology puts desirable products into the hands of the middle classes.

1990s: The United States enjoys a period of nearly unprecedented prosperity. Credit is easy, and the stock market spirals upward. The growth of technology has made computers, video games, digital cameras, and cell phones affordable for the middle classes.

1920s: Women finally receive the right to vote in the United States. They use their new-found voting power to make the consumption of alcohol illegal in the United States through a Constitutional Amendment prohibiting the making or sale of alcohol. Women work outside the home, and the "flapper" becomes the symbol for a generation of young women.

1990s: Women hold elected offices, serve on the Unites States Supreme Court, and manage large corporations. Nevertheless, the earning power of women still lags behind that of men. Sexual discrimination and harassment laws protect women from being fired or demoted because of their gender.

1920s: Abortions are illegal in most countries in Europe and in the United States. Nevertheless, many women have abortions, and many die from poorly performed illegal abortions. Because there is no reliable means of birth control, and because of the great social stigma against unmarried mothers, women endanger their own lives rather than endure social censure.

1990s: Abortions are legal in the United States. In Spain, abortions have been legal since 1985. In the United States, a growing segment of the population believes that abortion is wrong, with some anti-abortion activists turning to violence. Abortion doctors are murdered and abortion clinics subject to bombings and violent demonstrations.

1920s: Modernism, the sense that the old ways of doing things no longer apply, takes hold of art, literature, and culture in Europe and the United States. Artists experiment with new forms and subject matter. In spite of disillusionment with human enterprise, the modernists still believe that art and literature can say something important about reality.

1990s: Postmodernism grows in response to modernism, now deemed worn out and old. Literature becomes self-reflective and meta-fic-tional. Reality seems to splinter into ever smaller fragments; truth becomes increasingly contingent.

What Do I Read Next?

The Sun Also Rises (1926) is a semi-autobiographical account of Hemingway's post-World War I experience as an expatriate. The well-received novel earned Hemingway the title of spokesperson for his generation.

Where I'm Calling From: New and Selected Stories, (1988) is a collection by short story writer Raymond Carver. Most critics agree that Carver's style was influenced by Hemingway's early stories.

Michael Reynolds's *Hemingway: The Paris Years* (1989) is a careful examination of Hemingway's expatriate period in Paris as a member of the "Lost Generation." The time period covered includes the years when Hemingway wrote and published "Hills Like White Elephants."

A Moveable Feast (1964) is Hemingway's memoir of his years as a young writer in Paris. Hemingway worked on the manuscript during 1957 and 1958, and the volume was published after his death in 1961.

Further Study

Meyers, Jeffrey, editor. *Hemingway: The Critical Heritage,* London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1982.

Contains many important contemporary reviews of Hemingway's books, including reviews of *Men Without Women* by Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Parker, and Edmund Wilson, among others.

Reynolds, Michael. *The Young Hemingway,* Oxford: Blackwell, 1986.

A thorough and readable biography of Hemingway's early days by a notable Hemingway biographer.

Rovit, Earl, and Gerry Brenner. *Ernest Hemingway,* Boston: Twayne, 1986.

An excellent introduction to Hemingway studies. Includes biographical material, criticism of many of Hemingway's works, and a useful bibliography.

Smith, Paul, editor. *New Essays on Hemingway's Short Fiction,* Cambridge University Press, 1998.

A collection of recent critical essays on Hemingway's short stories. Contains a useful introduction by editor Paul Smith, "Hemingway and the Practical Reader."

Wagner, Linda W., editor. *Ernest Hemingway: Six Decades of Criticism,* Michigan State University Press, 1987.

A collection of important reviews and critical articles on Hemingway, spanning his entire career.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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