From Bloom’s Major Short Story Writers: Ernest Hemingway

Mr. Guimaraes

AP English Prep
Critical Views on
“Hills Like White Elephants”

Richard W. Lid on the Need for Speech in “Hills Like White Elephants”

[A professor of English at California State University at Northridge, Richard W. Lid is the author of Ford Madox Ford: The Essence of His Art as well as numerous articles on F. Scott Fitzgerald. In this excerpt he discusses the terrible pressure to speak that afflicts Hemingway’s characters in “Hills Like White Elephants.” Although talking can only exacerbate their pain, the characters must nonetheless express themselves.]

In Hemingway to speak is to lose something. The meaning of an experience will disappear, as it did in “Soldier’s Home” for Krebs, who “acquired the nausea in regard to experience that is the result of untruth or exaggeration.” Indeed, to speak is often to invite further pain; yet so great is the need for speech that Hemingway’s characters almost always make such a struggle, and it is these verbal actions which occupy the foreground of many of his greatest stories.

Two stories by Hemingway, “Old Man at the Bridge” and “Hills Like White Elephants,” illustrate the extremes of such struggles in Hemingway. The first story, a little incident of terror enacted against a panorama of terror, revolves around a simple, almost inarticulate old man who can barely find any words at all to express the feelings which accompany his mute drama of life-and-death. The second story, the author’s favorite, deals with the socially taboo topic of abortion and presents two highly sophisticated and articulate people, unmarried lovers, now faced with the consequence of their love and unable to communicate because their private language of love has become unbearable. In each story the barrier to articulation is the cost of being precise in language. To say truly what is felt is to undergo more pain than it is possible to endure. The struggle for words is painful. And yet, no matter the cost, speech is also the only possible relief from pain—even if, as becomes apparent, the result of speaking must mean more pain. Thus the old man groggs for words to express his plight and can only reach anguish. Thus the

young couple hurt each other more and more as they obliquely talk around the abortion the man wants the girl to have.

For the man and the girl such language is both a shield and a weapon. Under its aegis they are able to give vent to emotions too painful to face directly. Neither is enjoying the struggle of wills going on between them; both would keep it submerged as long as possible. Yet each has the need to express his feelings, and thus they both attack the relationship which has caused their predicament. The savor has gone from their intimacy; it is all a dreary sameness, like the inevitable taste of licorice in all the drinks they try. “That’s the way with everything,” the man says. In effect he is saying, “what did you expect? It was foolish to think that there would be anything unusual about our experience.” In sum, the man has baldly reduced their private intimacy to the level of all such illicit affairs. “Yes, you’ve waited so long for, like absinthe.” She is registering her disappointment in the romantic illusion. But absinthe is also a forbidden drink, banned by society because it can produce blindness. And illicit romance is similarly forbidden fruit, unlawful pleasure made more appealing by society’s taboo. It too produces blindness—of a moral order; and the consequence of that blindness is what they now have to face. It is the romantic experience itself that the girl is now bitterly denying, for what did their intimacy, reduced to its essence, consist of but looking at things and talking about them in a private way and trying new drinks, acts which they can now only perform in an empty ritual of self-mockery. Indeed, as they talk their affair becomes more and more devoid of meaning, until, at the end of the story, it is completely leveled when the man’s eyes fall on their bags, “labels on them from all the hotels where they had spent nights.”

LIONEL TRILLING ON IMAGINATION AND REASON IN “HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS”


Should we need a clue to where the point of the story lies, we can find it in a single word in the last of the few brief passages of narration, the paragraph which tells us that the man carries the bags to the other side of the station. “Coming back, he walked through the barroom, where people waiting for the train were drinking. He drank an Anis at the bar and looked at the people. They were all waiting reasonably for the train.” Waiting reasonably—it is a strange adverb for the man’s mind to have lighted on. (We might note that by his use of this word, Hemingway does, for an instant, betray a knowledge of the man’s internal life.) Why not quietly, or apathetically, or solidly? Why should he choose to remark upon the people’s reasonableness, taking note of it with approval, and as if it made a bond of community between him and them? It is because he, a reasonable man, has been having a rough time reasoning with an unreasonable woman.

Nor do we need the girl’s tones of voice labelled for us. We understand that she is referring to a desire which she does not know how to defend in words and that therefore she speaks in bitterness and irony. She wants to have the child. There is no possible way to formulate a reason for wanting a child. It is a gratuitous desire, quite beyond reason. This is especially true if one lives the life to which this couple has devoted itself—a life, as the girl describes it in her moment of revulsion from it, of looking at things and trying new drinks. In the terms that this life sets, it is entirely unreasonable to want a child. But the girl has, we may say, proclaimed her emancipa-

tion from reason when she makes her remark about the hills looking like white elephants. The hills do not really look like white elephants, as the reasonable man is quick to say. They look like white elephants only if you choose to think they do, only if you think gratuitously, and with the imagination.

It is decisive in the story that the girl’s simile is what it is. Some readers will have in mind the proverbial meaning of a white elephant. In certain parts of the East, this is a sacred beast; it may not be put to work but must be kept in a state at great cost. Hence we call a white elephant anything that is apparently of great value and prestige but actually a drain upon our resources of which we wish we could be rid. Quite unconsciously, the girl may be making just this judgement on the life that she and her companion have chosen. But the chief effect of the simile is to focus our attention on the landscape she observes. It has two aspects, different to the point of being contradictory. This is the first: “The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.” This is the second: “The girl stood up and walked to the end of the station. 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 shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees.” When she looks in one direction, she sees the landscape of sterility; when she looks in the other direction, she sees the landscape of peace and fecundity. She is aware of the symbolic meaning that the two scenes have for her, for after her second view she says, “And we could have all this ... And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible.” It is the sudden explicitness of her desire for peace and fullness of life that makes the man’s reasonable voice ring false and hollow in her ears and that leads her to her climax of desperation, her frantic request, with its seven-times repeated “please,” that the man “stop talking.”

It is interesting, I think, to compare the passage in the story that begins “We want two Anis del Toro” with the “A Game of Chess” dialogue in T.S. Eliot’s “The Waste Land.” Incommensurate as they are in artistic and mutual intention and achievement, the story and the poem have much in common—the theme of sterility; the representation of the boredom and vacuity and desperation of life; the sense of lost happiness not to be regained; the awareness of the failure of love; the parched, sun-dried, stony land used as a symbol
of emotional desiccation, the water used as the symbol of refresh-ment and salvation. Like "The Waste Land," "Hills Like White Elephants" is to be read as a comment—impassioned and by no means detached—on the human condition in the modern Western world.


REID MAYNARD ON THE LEITMOTIF OF TWO IN "HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS"

[Reid Maynard is a scholar on Henry James and Ernest Hemingway. In this excerpt he discusses the significance of scenery and the "pair" motif in "Hills Like White Elephants."]

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, moun-

tains, 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 appearance 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 suggest 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."

—Reid Maynard, "Leitmotif and Irony in Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants'" The University Review 37, No. 4 (June 1971): 273–274
KENNETH G. JOHNSTON ON SETTING IN “HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS”

[A professor of English at Kansas State University, Kenneth G. Johnston is the author of Hemingway’s ‘Night Before Battle: Don Quixote, 1937, and The Butterfly and the Tank: Casualties of War. In this excerpt he discusses how the setting of “Hills Like White Elephants” comments subtly on the religious tone of the story.]

Hemingway has skillfully used the setting in “Hills Like White Elephants” to help reveal and/or 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, which forms the immediate background for “Hills Like White Elephants,” 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 the unborn child. The hills like white elephants also serve to remind us 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; a property requiring much care and expense and yielding little profit; 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 beaded curtain hangs across the open door to the bar to keep out the flies, and it is repeatedly called to our attention during the story. It is the girl who first comments on the curtain, because she is curious about the Spanish words (the name of a drink) which are 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. On the other hand, the man brushes aside such considerations; at the story’s end, “he went out through the bead curtain.”


DORIS LANIER ON ABSINTHE IN “HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS”

[An assistant professor of English at Georgia Southern University, Doris Lanier is the author of Absinthe, the Cocaine of the 19th Century. Her articles on John Galsworthy and Mark Twain and others have appeared in Mark Twain Journal, American Notes and Queries, the Markham Review, and the Atlanta Historical Journal. In “The Bittersweet Taste of Absinthe in Hemingway’s ‘Hills Like White Elephants,’” she discusses the history and influences of absinthe in the 19th century.]

The addictive quality of the drink most certainly is meant to emphasize the addictive nature of the couple’s lifestyle. Like the person addicted to absinthe, the two are addicted to a way of life that will lead to destruction—a situation that the girl is just becoming aware
of. It is an empty, meaningless existence that revolves around traveling, sex, drinking, looking at things, and having pointless conversations about these things. "That's all we do, isn't it," said the girl, "look at things and try new drinks?" The lack of focus and the indirection of their lives are emphasized by the reputation of the rather indefinite "everything" and "things." When the girl says, "Everything tastes . . . like absinthe," she is making a comment about the quality of their lives and expressing her own dissatisfaction with life. When she later tells the man, "We could have everything," she is referring to those things that would bring a quality life: love, home, family. The girl is aware that "something" is missing in their lives, but she is not quite able to put that "something" into words. Neither is she able to say what "thing" will be missing if she goes through with the abortion, which is, according to the man, "the best thing to do" because the pregnancy is the "thing" that has made them unhappy. But the girl has a feeling, "I just know things," she says. Her intuitive perception of what will happen to their relationship after the abortion contrasts with his inability or unwillingness to see that their lives will be changed by the event. Though the girl would like to break the addiction and change the direction of their lives, she lacks the strength to do so without his help, and he has no desire to change.

The destructive potential of absinthe also suggests the destructive nature of the couple's relationship. Innocent-looking, seductive, and intoxicating, absinthe promises joy, excitement, heady delight, its tantalizing color and taste concealing the destructive power that is lurking in its green opulence. Subtly and slowly, however, its treacherous poison overpowers its victims, bringing with it impotence, sterility, dullness of emotions, and, finally, abject despair; likewise, the couple's illicit affair and irresponsible lifestyle, which deceptively promise joy and happiness, are fraught with concealed danger from the very beginning. It becomes a destroyer of the child, who is aborted; a destroyer of the girl, who endures the physical and emotional pain of aborting the child she wants; and a destroyer of the couple's relationship. Though the man insists that after the abortion they will be "Just like [they] were before," the girl is very aware that the abortion will probably mark the end of what had once promised to be a happy relationship. As a destroyer of life, the drink aligns itself, symbolically, with the brown, dry side of the landscape and serves to emphasize the barrenness, infertility, and unproductiveness of the couple's lives. The green color of the drink, however, reflects the greenness of the fertile landscape, a reminder that they could "have everything" instead of nothing.

Because of its reputation as an hallucinatory agent, the absinthe adds another dimension to the white elephant symbolism in the title. The hallucinatory quality of the drink relates directly to the girl's distorted view of the hills, reflecting her emotional and mental state. For the moment, at least, she is having difficulty distinguishing between illusion and reality. Her failure, or reluctance, to see the real landscape—the brown, dry hills—suggests her inability to face the reality of their deteriorating relationship. Deep down she is holding on to the belief that there is still a chance that the man will commit himself to a permanent relationship, that her pregnancy means something to him, and that she can give birth to the child that is the product of their love; in reality, however, even though he insists that he loves her and doesn't want her to do anything she doesn't want to do, he doesn't want the child and is coldly indifferent to her feelings. To him their relationship is no more than an illicit affair, a temporary arrangement; unlike the girl, he wants to avoid the possibility of a permanent relationship that would result if she had his child. By connotatively suggesting eroticism and sexual stimulation, the absinthe, like the labels on the suitcases and the girl's pregnancy, emphasizes that their relationship is mainly a sexual one.


PAMELA SMILEY ON CONVERSATIONAL STYLES IN "HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS"

[A professor of English at Carthage College, Pamela Smiley has written numerous articles on Mary Gordon, as well as the effects of orthodoxy on Roman Catholic women authors. In this selection she takes a linguistic approach to "Hills Like White Elephants," comparing the conversational styles of the man and the women in terms of gender.]
As the argument continues, Jig asks him whether he “wants” her to have the abortion; he translates his reply into what he “thinks,” thereby denying his emotions. Directly contradicting his desire for the abortion, he twice repeats that he does not want Jig to do anything she doesn’t want to do. Making several obviously impossible promises—to always be happy, to always love her, to never worry—he demonstrates flagrant bad faith. From the standard of male language these contradictions are the inevitable results of his unreasonable questions: abstract emotional responses to abstract emotional questions. From the standard of female language, they are inauthentic answers and betray trust. The differences stem from the genderlike premises that language does/does not deal with emotion and is/is not the basis of intimacy.

Jig’s series of questions exposes both the American’s and Jig’s conversational double binds. The double bind, as described by Bateson, is a conversation with two objectives. To be true to one conversational objective a speaker must be untrue to another.

Jig’s direct insistence on the American’s emotional commitment forces him into a double bind. The American has two conversational objectives. The first, as Tennen phrases it, is to “Maintain camaraderie, avoid imposing and give (or at least appear to give) the other person some choice in the matter.” For this reason he repeats six times within the forty-minute conversation: “I don’t want you to [do anything you don’t want to].” The American’s other objective is the abortion. Unfortunately it is impossible to maintain easy camaraderie while insisting on the abortion. Instead of choosing one or the other, he chooses both and ignores the contradiction. While a traditional masculine standard of language might recognize the sincerity of the American’s concern for Jig, the traditional feminine standard translates his contradiction as hypocrisy.

Jig is also caught in a double bind. She wants both the American and the baby. Her series of questions establishes that she can accomplish at least one of her objectives, so she releases the other with her self-sacrificing statement “I don’t care about me.” While Jig may be totally sincere, not caring about herself and having only the American’s interests at heart, such total devotion is highly unlikely; it is more likely that she is well-jaunited in the skills of social deference. But in this situation, where the American’s inter-
est equal lack of growth, eternal adolescence, and sterility, her deference is self-destructive.

Of course, the unnaturalness of Jig’s self-sacrifice and the artifice of her insincerity leave her vulnerable to the stereotype of “women as fickle, distrustworthy, and illogical.” Judged by traditional male language patters, Jig is capricious and manipulative. Judged by traditional female language patterns, particularly within the context of the double bind, the progression of Jig’s conversation is logical and inevitable.

The American’s reaction to Jig’s acquiescence is immediate emotional withdrawal and disavowal of responsibility for her decision or for her problem. His distance contradicts all of the protestations of love he made minutes before. It also contains a thinly veiled threat of permanent withdrawal. His knee-jerk response shows that his desire for noninvolvement and nonresponsibility is much stronger than his desire to maintain a relationship with Jig. Of course, objectively, the abortion is Jig’s problem: it is her body, and the American has no right to interfere. However, the objective facts do not take into account the emotional dimension of their shared reality: the body is hers; the relationship and baby is theirs.

Even though Jig agrees to the abortion, it is obvious that she is not emotionally reconciled to it. She moves away from the table and him and, while staring at the fertile valley, continues the argument. Unwilling to give up her dream, she finds it impossible to believe he has deliberately chosen stagnation, sterility, and death. The American goes into shellshock in this segment of the conflict. While she reveals her most intimate desires, he seems to be scarcely listening.

STANLEY KOZIKOWSKI ON METAPHOR IN “HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS”

A professor of English at Bryant College, Stanley Kozikowski is a noted scholar of 19th and 20th century American literature and Tudor drama and poetry. He has published articles on Edgar Allan Poe, Henry James, and William Shakespeare in American Transcendental Quarterly, Arizona Quarterly, Shakespeare Studies, and elsewhere. In this excerpt he compares the importance of plot details to the man and the girl in “Hills Like White Elephants.”

To the American man, as distant from metaphor as he is from the hills, the “wind” of the hills simply defines casually and literally what an abortion is: as “the warm wind blew the bean curtain against the table,” he is quick to say, “I know you wouldn’t mind it, Jig. It’s really not anything. It’s just to let the air in . . . I’ll go with you . . . They just let the air in and then it’s perfectly natural.”

Jig’s reaction, delayed but deliberate, and consistent with her sense of what the hills are like, is signaled in the doorway. The wind through the bamboo curtain illustrates for her the sweet past and the bitter present. The curtain, painted with the words “Anis del Tor,” signifies the sweet-now-bitter anise-seed of the bull. In the very drinks that both have, it conveys to the man, with doltish literalism, “a drink,” but to Jig, a licorice taste grown as bitter as wormwood—the very taste evoking “all the things you’ve waited so long for, like absinthe.” Jig, again figuratively, thus experiences what life—precious and unwanted—is “like.” The breeze, the moving beaded curtain, and the evocative drink—like hills like white elephants—connote to Jig the sweet promise of seedling and the bitter termination of birthing. The same objects convey to the man an easy sense of exit, excision, and getting on with other things. Ever opposite, his ironic and brutal, but now figurative, words, “Oh, cut it out,” are answered by Jig’s sharp but now literal, “You started it”—a remarkable counterpoint of clauses, playing off his dour, unimaginative indelicacy against her superb delicacy of self-awareness.

Just as Jig holds the two strings of bamboo beads blown into her hand, she maintains full literal possession of her self and her child, as we see in the story’s culminating design. But Jig nevertheless has an abortion of sorts, one precisely like hills like white elephants:

Having taken “the [not their] two bags”—“Two heavy bags” to the other side of the station, symbolically the mother and child, the man then goes into the bar from that other side, drinks “an Anis at the bar,” and finally, with an astonishing irony to which he is oblivious, struts “out through the bead curtain” to the table outside, where Jig and he had sat previously, and where Jig, now smiling, remains seated. Conveyed out of the barroom, through the breezy doorway, through which the “air” gets “let in” from the other side, “the man” (appropriately nameless, mere reiterated “seed” from “bull”—Anis del toro—but now like an aerated fetus himself) is ironically terminated, expelled—in her (now triumphantly ironic figural) consciousness—from any further relationship with Jig. Clearly, Jig and her child have now come out literally “fine” after this “awfully simple operation.” He, metaphorically, goes “out through the bead curtain” and out of their lives.