

## The Style and the Theme of Loss in Hemingway's *Hills Like White Elephants*

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### Abstract

Hemingway's Short Story *Hills Like White Elephants* presents a simple story between an American man and a young woman. Under the simple plot lies strong conflict between protagonists. Through probing into its language techniques, repetition, documentary style, and girl's loss of unborn child, her love, and her future, this paper aims to give an in-depth analysis of its style and theme of loss.

**Key words:** Repetition; Documentary style; Loss

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An unnamed American man and a young woman, Jig, are waiting for the express train from Barcelona; they are on the terrace of a small station-bar and seem to be on their way to Madrid. The story consists entirely of a seemingly objective documentation of their words and actions during their forty-minute wait for the train. The surface events are very simple. The woman looks at the hills across the valley of the Ebro, suggests that they order a drink, tries to engage the man in light conversation, responds briefly and unhappily to his assertion that an operation that she is to have is "really not anything . . . it's all perfectly natural"; she then stands up, walks to the end of the station, looks at the hills again, speaks angrily, sits back down, demands that he "stop talking," drinks in silence, and finally assures him that she feels "fine." The only actions of the man not accounted for in this detailing of the woman's movements occur after she asks him to "stop talking" and before she asserts that she is "fine." During that brief period, he carries their bags "around the station to the other tracks"

and stops to drink an anisette at the bar alone.

### THEME OF LOSS

#### Loss of Child

Clearly, little happens and not much is said, but just beneath the surface of these spare and dull events, a quiet but crucial struggle between these two characters has been resolved. The future course of their relationship appears to have been charted in these moments, and the fate of their unborn child determined. Their very first words not only reveal tension between these two but also suggest that there are perhaps fundamental differences between them. The woman is interested in the world around her, concerned with being friendly, vital, and imaginative; the man, on the other hand, is self-involved, phlegmatic, and literal.

"They look like white elephants," she said.

"I've never seen one," the man drank his beer.

"No, you wouldn't have."

"I might have," the man said.

What is critical in this story, as in Hemingway's fiction generally is the ironic gap between appearance and reality. The seemingly petty conversation here about hills and drinks and an unspecified operation is in actuality an unarticulated but decisive struggle over whether they continue to live the sterile, self-indulgent, decadent life preferred by the man or elect to have the child that Jig is carrying and settle down to a conventional but, in Jig's view, rewarding, fruitful, and peaceful life.

Although it is never stated, they are trying to agree on whether or not she should have an abortion; and it becomes clear that the girl is reluctant to accede to her companion's determined urging that an abortion would be an easy solution to their problem. The station where this drama takes place sits "between two lines of rails in the sun". Here setting neatly reinforces conflict: the two lines of rails, presumably going in opposite directions, represent figuratively the decision point at which the couple find themselves. They must choose which way to go, to have the abortion or the child. The rail lines run through a river

valley with, naturally enough, a line of hills rising up on either side. The hills on one side of the valley are dry and barren; those on the other side are described with imagery of living, growing things. Thus in choosing whether to abort or to have the child, the couples are choosing between two ways of life. The choice of abortion is associated with the arid sterility of the hills on the barren side of the valley and by extension with the aimless, hedonistic life they have been leading. The choice of having the child is associated with the living, growing things on the other side of the valley, the "fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro," the river as archetypal symbol of the stream of life (Renner, 1995, p. 28).

### Loss of Love

In spite of the man's transparent assertions to the contrary ("I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to"), it is clear that the man wants Jig to have an abortion so that they can be "just like we were before." Their life together up to this point seems to have been composed primarily of travel and aimless self-gratification: "That's all we do, isn't it — look at things and try new drinks?" "I guess so." The woman apparently yields to his unacknowledged insistence that she get an abortion; in order to do so, however, she must give up her self-respect and her dreams of a fruitful life: "I'll do it. Because I don't care about me." She does not seem to have the strength to resist his demands, but she is aware of the significance of her capitulation. She looks at the beauty, the life, the bounty across the tracks — fields of grain, trees, the river, mountains. "We could have all this," she said. "And we could have everything and everyday we make it more impossible." The abortion is not merely a "perfectly natural" or "simple operation" to her; it is a symbolic act as well, which will cut her off irrevocably from what is good and alive in the world: "It isn't ours any more." The man takes exception to her powerfully negative vision of their situation, but she has heard enough: "Would you please please please please please please stop talking?" He desists, moves their bags, wonders, while he drinks his anisette, why she cannot act "reasonably" like other people, and then returns to her as if nothing had happened. Perhaps Jig's perception that their lives are sterile and that the man does not truly love, or care for her will enable her to leave him and struggle alone to live a meaningful life; yet Hemingway gives the reader no solid reason to believe that she will do so. The story ends with an apparent lie: "There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine." Presumably they board the train; she has the abortion; and their relationship continues its downward drift into emptiness and hypocrisy.

From another aspect, having taken "the 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 from the barroom, through the breezy doorway, through which the "air" gets "let in" from the other side, the man is ironically terminated, expelled in her 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 (Kozikowski, 1994, p. 107).

Another interesting facet of this story in the context of Hemingway's fiction is the clear superiority of the woman to the man. Hemingway is not particularly kind to women generally, certainly not to women who want to have children. Usually such women are interested in asserting their sexual power over men and in depriving men of their freedom and their maleness. This girl may prove to be angry and frustrated enough to evolve into a castrating harridan; in this story, however, she is a tragic figure seemingly driven into a barren and empty existence by her love for this man.

### Loss of Meaningful Life

On a deeper level, *Hills Like White Elephants* calls to mind T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922); like Eliot's masterpiece, Hemingway's story deals with the sterility and vacuity of the modern world. The boredom of the man and the desperation of the girl reveal the emptiness of the postwar generation and the crucial necessity of taking responsibility for the quality of one's own life. Both Eliot's poetry and Hemingway's fiction are filled with a sense of missed opportunities and failed love, of a fullness of life lost and never to be regained: "Once they take it away, you never get it back." As in Eliot's poem, the landscape takes on powerful symbolic dimensions here. On the side of the tracks where the couple is waiting, the country is "brown and dry"; "on the other side, were fields of grain and trees . . . the river . . . mountains." The girl calls attention to the symbolic value of the setting and indicates that in choosing to have an abortion and to continue to drift through life they are choosing emotional and spiritual desiccation.

Hemingway's brief and seemingly objective story is a powerful condemnation of the aimlessness, hypocrisy, and moral and spiritual poverty of the modern world.

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## LANGUAGE AND STYLE

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### Documentary Style, Objective Presentation

The impassive, documentary style of "Hills Like White Elephants" is typical of much of Hemingway's fiction. It manifests the care, restraint, intensity, and control, the economy and precision that characterize his best prose. The author seems to be indifferent both to the characters and to the reader; he pretends to be merely an objective observer content to report without comment the words and actions of these two people. He has virtually no

access to their thoughts and does not even interpret the emotional quality of their words or movements by using adverbs; he simply records. Hemingway believed in a precise, naturalistic rendering of the surface; he insisted on presenting things truly.

As was indicated earlier, Hemingway's ironic technique plays an important role in this story. The very use of a clear and economical style to reveal a relationship that is troubled and complex is ironic. The story seems to be void of artifice and emotion yet is carefully fashioned and powerfully felt. The dispassionate style appears to be absolutely appropriate to the cold, sophisticated, literal-minded, modern sensibility of the protagonist, yet in fact the man is revealed to be disingenuous and destructive. The deeper levels of this story are disclosed by examining not only what is implied through the irony but also what is indicated by symbolism and repetition.

The symbolism has already been remarked, and only one other observation seems necessary here. It is important to note that anything that can be said to operate symbolically does so without violating the realism of the story in any way. Hemingway uses banal repetition quite effectively here. The insincerity of the man is apparent in his dependence on empty phrases: "it's perfectly simple"; "if you don't want to you don't have to." Both the man's duplicity and the girl's perceptiveness, anger, and despair are evident in the way in which she echoes his transparent lies: "And afterward they were all so happy . . . I don't care about me. . . . Yes, you know it's perfectly simple."

In terms of style and technique, "Hills Like White Elephants" is a quintessential early Hemingway story. The use of the language of speech as the basis for the story, the insistence on presentation rather than commentary, the condensation, and the intensity are all basic elements of his theory of fiction.

### Repetition

"Hills Like White Elephants" is, if taken literally, a story in which little actually "happens": a couple has drinks at a train station in Spain and argues about something rather vague. A useful approach to such an enigmatic text is to examine the very language of which it is made.

The stylistician M.A.K. Halliday observes that motivated prominence is frequently generated by the repetition of words, clauses, and groups of related words or "lexical sets (Halliday, 1973, p. 112)."

Perhaps the most obvious means of foregrounding in "Hills Like White Elephants" is the repetition of sentences and lexical sets. It is through this repetition that much of the argument is played out. Within the economy of this short story, barely 1500 words long, repeated items are notable. For example, the phrase "like white elephants," occurring five times, is lent particular significance by its titular status.

Sentences repeated in the text include seven variations on a conditional question asked by Jig, if "afterward" the

couple can be as happy as they were before the operation was necessary. The final repetition is distinguished from its predecessors because it is a declarative statement: "And I'll do it and everything will be fine." Jig, then, answers her own question, and in predicting that "everything will be fine," suggests that despite her reluctance, the man's persuasion is succeeding.

Through a statistical analysis of "Hills Like White Elephants" as a means of opening new avenues for its interpretation. The story's careful use of repetition bridges its disparate themes. In addition, the ambiguous, repetitious language deepens the significance and raises the stakes of the couple's argument. This underscores the emotional violence, broadens the significance, and complicates the closure of that argument.

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### SUMMARY

In accordance with his so-called Iceberg Theory, Hemingway stripped everything but the bare essentials from his stories and novels, leaving readers to sift through the remaining dialogue and bits of narrative on their own. Just as the visible tip of an iceberg hides a far greater mass of ice underneath the ocean surface, so does Hemingway's dialogue belie the unstated tension between his characters. In fact, Hemingway firmly believed that perfect stories conveyed far more through subtext than through the actual words written on the page. The more a writer strips away, the more powerful the "iceberg," or story, becomes.

In "Hills Like White Elephants," for example, both the American man and the girl speak in short sentences and rarely utter more than a few words at a time. Hemingway also avoids using dialogue tags, such as "he said" or "she said," and skips any internal monologues. These elements leave the characters' thoughts and feelings completely up to the reader's own interpretations. Hemingway is lauded by his style of simplicity, believing that fewer misleading words paint a truer picture of what lies beneath.

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