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### The Girl's Choice: Images and Reactions in "Hills Like White Elephants"

Published in 1927, Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" explores important issues that surround an abortion decision. Through an overheard conversation between an unnamed protagonist and her unnamed lover, the reader is given little concrete evidence of what is actually occurring in the story. In fact, Hemingway leaves out almost every detail. In his essay titled, "Moving to the Girl's Side," scholar Stanley Renner states, "Hemingway leaves virtually everything, even what is at issue between the girl and the American, for the reader to 'figure out,' meanwhile unobtrusively supplying what is needed to understand the story's structure..." (1). Within these unobtrusive details rages the debate amongst Hemingway's readers. Will the story's unwritten outcome reveal that the girl will have an abortion? Hemingway wants his readers to believe that the girl will decide to keep her baby. This conclusion is based on a complete study of the story's imagery and a careful observation of the character's reactions toward their symbolic surroundings.

The most important image is that of the story's location, the Ebro Valley in Spain. A land of contrasts, it is both desolate and at the same time a land of plenty. When the story opens, Hemingway focuses his readers' attention on the dryness of the opening scene. He describes, "The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. **On this side** there was no shade and no trees" ( 653). In contrast, different landscape exists on the other side of the tracks. Later in the story, Hemingway writes, "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" (655; emphasis mine). Renner writes of these contrasts, "It has been long

recognized that the two sides of the valley of the Ebro represent two ways of life, one a sterile perpetuation of the aimless hedonism the couple have been pursuing, the other a participation in life in its fullest natural sense" (4).

The importance of the landscape's symbolism is magnified when the reactions of the girl are studied. From the beginning, the girl gives her attention to the hills that surround the train station. Her most important reaction to the surroundings occurs at the story's climax. The girl simply "[stands] up walks to the end of the station" (655). This symbolizes her recognition of the archetypal images of the scene that are associated with pregnancy: fertility, the water of life, and fruitfulness. She subconsciously connects with the scene and realizes that her pregnancy is a manifestation of the living power of nature. This symbolizes her connection with the life that she is carrying and her desire to keep her child.

Another important symbol is the train station in which the conversation takes place. The station sits between two lines of rails. Renner writes, "Here setting neatly reinforces conflict: the two lines of rails, presumably going in opposite directions, represent figuratively the decision point at which the couple finds themselves. They must choose which way to go, to have the abortion or the child" (1). Throughout most of the story, the couple remains on the outside of the station talking at a table. Just as important as the girl's action of moving toward the fertile landscape, the American also interacts with the train station at the end of the story. He carries their equally symbolic suitcases to the fertile side of the station. This action represents his change of heart because he is moving to the girl's side and therefore, accepting the girl's decision.

The couple's suitcases are important symbols themselves. The physical location is not the only image that must be examined. Hemingway writes that the American "did not say anything but looked at the bags against the wall of the station. There were labels on them from all the hotels where they had spent nights" (656). These bags seem to be a reminder to the American of his past and of his hedonistic

lifestyle. His last glance at the stickers symbolizes his one last grasp at his past and shows the reader that his decision to join the girl is not done without some regret on his part.

Because it stands as a major symbol throughout the story, the white elephant imagery must fully be explored. At the beginning of the piece, the girl looks upon the landscape and states that the hills that look to her like "white elephants" (653). This image symbolizes the couple's conflicting view about the unborn baby. For the American, the white elephant symbolizes an unwanted burden that has little value. In opposition to this view, Hemingway critic Kenneth G. Johnson, author of The Tip of the Iceberg: Hemingway and the Short Story believes that the elephants envisioned by the girl in the landscape hold sacred connotations. He writes, "A white elephant is also a rare pale-gray variety of the Asian elephant held sacred by the Burmese and Siamese. The girl's reverence for life is captured by this meaning of the phrase" (127).

Another important symbol that Hemingway employs is the girl's interaction with the beaded curtain. On one level, the curtain simply serves to keep the flies out of the station, but on a deeper level the curtain symbolizes something much more. At first she simply looks at the curtain and notices its advertisements. The wind then blows the curtain against their table. What happens next is remarkable. Hemingway writes "The girl looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out, and took hold of two of the strings of beads" (654). Critic Johnson believes that she holds the beads as if she were "clutching the beads of a rosary to give her strength and moral courage to resist.... This scene makes it quite clear that she is calling upon her moral and religious strength in her moment of crisis" (128). Surely this interaction gives her the strength she needs to stand her ground in this decision. The beaded curtain becomes an important symbol for the American also. His final action in the story is to walk "out through the bead curtain" (656). This action symbolizes his acceptance of her unspoken resolve and like her, the American seemingly gains strength as he interacts with the beads. Behind the curtain of beads are a station of people who are "waiting reasonably for the train" (656). Renner believes that the

American finds comfort in the symbol of the unity of the people behind the beads. If these people can go “this way” reasonably, it may be the American’s fears are unreasonable. At the end, the American “still [can] not see the train. [He] cannot visualize the future by going in the girl's direction will bring [but] he uneasily accepts his fate ” (7). As he steps through the beaded curtain, he asks his companion if she is better. This is the first time in the whole piece that the American asks of the girl’s condition and truly shows concern for her well being in an unselfish way.

The final symbol that must be understood is that of the woman behind the curtain. She is the figure that announces to the couple that the train will be arriving in five minutes. Renner feels that she serves as a harbinger of the outcome of the story. “The logic of the story’s design enjoins the conclusion that [the girl] smiles brightly at the waitresses announcement of the train because she is no longer headed in the direction of having the abortion” (6). The girl proceeds to “smile brightly at the woman to thank her”(656). The woman strengthens the girl as she sends the couple on their way, going in the direction that is best for everybody--the way that exists for the people behind the curtain.

This interpretation that has been discussed stands in opposition to another position. For years, many readers conclude that the journey of “Hills Like White Elephants” ends in abortion. However, this argument is not based on a complete reading of the text. Many stop reading the story when the girl says " I'll do it and everything will be fine " (655). It is necessary to read on and to take into account all of the symbols that are used in the story. “Hills Like White Elephants” is written so compactly that every word, every symbol, and every action is important.

For example, many of the critics who believe that the girl will obtain an abortion point to a brief mention of a cloud’s shadow in the description of the girl’s side of the landscape. Their supposition is that this cloud serves as a foreshadowing the death of the child. Critic Johnson states that as “[the girl] watches the scene, the shadow of a cloud moves across the field of grain, foreshadowing the death of the unborn child” (127). The difficulty with this image theory is that the cloud exists by itself. The reader

cannot only select one of the symbols and evaluate its importance to the story on its own. All images must be treated as equals.

The most powerful argument that implies an impending abortion is based on a character study of the girl. She seems to be a weak character and easily manipulated by the American. Johnson writes, “The girl knows what the American thinks. She knows 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”(128). However, what Johnson failed to understand is the girl’s change in personality. Howard L. Hannum, another contributor to the Hemingway Review, argues that the published commentary has not looked closely enough at the development of the female character through the story and “has underestimated the girl’s character considerably” (Qtd. in Renner 1). Throughout the story, the girl grows and learns to speak for herself. Through the influence of the woman behind the curtains, the girl’s reaching out for the curtain, and her physical action of walking toward the fertile side of the landscape, the girl shows to the reader that she has been strengthened by her interaction at this crossroads. Critics like Johnson often ignore this newfound strength.

Although the belief that the girl will refrain from an abortion is in the minority, it is an appropriate interpretation of “Hills Like White Elephants.” In completely studying the symbols in the story and character’s reactions to those images, the reader understands that Hemingway wants his reader to know that the girl will eventually stand for herself and for her beliefs. It is interesting to note that in a draft of the story, Hemingway wrote this of the American inside the bar. “He drank and an anis [a type of beer] at the bar and looked at the people. There must be some actual world. There must be someplace you could touch where people were calm and reasonable. Once it had all been as simple as this bar”(Johnston 133). Although this was taken out of the finished manuscript, it stands to reiterate the sanity and completeness of normal life that Hemingway wanted this couple to find. For the girl, this complete life included a child. In this forty-minute glimpse into the life of this couple, Hemingway is a

surprising advocate for the sanctity of life. His readers leave the station better educated about the difficulties involved in making this decision.

## Works Cited

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