

Fabian Overkamp

Elaine Lux

College Writing 2

16 April 2023

Paper on a short story

Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"

Ernest Hemingway's short story "Hills Like White Elephants" is a masterful exploration of the human experience, as it goes into themes of relationship, communication, and the effects of cultural differences. The story, set in a train station in Spain, follows a conversation between a young American man and his girlfriend, who are discussing a possible abortion of their child. During their dialogue, absinthe is mentioned and becomes a crucial symbol in the story, the couple's struggle to communicate as well as the larger context of the American expatriate tradition in Europe become important aspects of the story too. Through the symbolism of absinthe, the expatriate tradition, and the challenge of communication, Hemingway highlights the difficulties and complexities of relationships, ultimately revealing the destructive consequences of avoiding or manipulating communication.

The most prominent symbol in the story is the "Hills Like White Elephants." According to Weeks Jr. Lewis E., the hills symbolize the obstacle that the couple faces, which is the decision of whether or not to have an abortion. The color white represents purity and innocence, while the hills represent the obstacle that stands between the couple and their decision. The woman wants to have an abortion, while the man is hesitant. The hills represent the barrier that exists between them and their differing viewpoints. The woman says, "They look like white elephants," (Hemingway, 176) and the man responds, "I've never seen one." (Hemingway, 176)

This exchange represents their inability to understand each other's perspective and communicate effectively.

The train tracks in the story also serve as a symbol. Weeks Jr. Lewis E. argues that the tracks represent the decision that the couple must make. He states, "The image of the tracks is an apt metaphor for the decision to be made, as they split the setting and the couple's thoughts about the issue, just as the decision will split the couple's relationship, regardless of the outcome." (75) The tracks represent the irreversible nature of the decision that the couple must make. The fact that the tracks lead in two different directions further emphasizes the divide between the couple's perspectives.

Moreover, the luggage in the story represents the baggage that the couple brings to their relationship. Weeks Jr. Lewis E. states, "The luggage symbolizes their accumulated difficulties and their history of emotional and physical baggage." (76) The woman, who wants to have the abortion, suggests that their relationship could go back to the way it was before they encountered their current problem, but the man suggests that this is not possible. The luggage represents the emotional baggage that they bring to their relationship, which prevents them from communicating effectively and resolving their differences.

In Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," absinthe is a potent symbol that represents the couple's conflicting desires and the tension between them. Throughout the story, the couple drinks absinthe, which is known for its hallucinogenic effects and is often associated with creativity and artistic expression. As the American man orders drinks, he says, "Just because you say I wouldn't have doesn't prove anything" (Hemingway, 176). This statement implies that the couple is trying to prove something to each other and that absinthe is being used as a means of communication.

Furthermore, absinthe is also associated with bitterness and regret, which is reflected in the couple's situation. As Doris Lanier points out, “The sweet taste of the licorice-flavored drink is bittersweet, much like the relationship between the two characters” (280). The bitterness of the absinthe serves as a reminder of the couple's unhappy situation and the difficult decision they are facing.

In addition, the green color of absinthe can also be interpreted symbolically. Green is associated with growth, fertility, and renewal, which could represent Jig's desire to have a baby and start a family. However, it can also represent envy and jealousy, reflecting the tension between the couple as they struggle to communicate and understand each other.

Another point that can be analyzed with the help of Lanier's article is the symbolism of absinthe in the story. Absinthe is a green liquor that was popular in France during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In “Hills Like White Elephants,” the American man orders two drinks, “two Anis del Toro[s]” (Hemingway, 176) which is a type of absinthe. The drink becomes a symbol of their relationship, with its bitter taste reflecting the couple's unresolved tension and the potential bitterness of their situation.

Lanier writes, “Absinthe is the perfect drink for the occasion, for it can mean many things to many people, and all of them apply to the American and the girl: it is exotic, intoxicating, dangerous, and ultimately it is bitter, a metaphor for the couple’s relationship” (Lanier, 281). The bitter taste of absinthe can also be seen as a metaphor for the potential bitterness that could result from the couple's decision regarding the abortion.

Furthermore, the use of absinthe can also be seen as a nod to the cultural differences between Americans and Europeans during the time period. Absinthe was banned in the United States in 1915, while it remained legal in Europe until the 1920s (Lanier, 280). The American

man's order of absinthe can be interpreted as a way for him to assert his American-ness and his desire to embrace the exotic and dangerous aspects of European culture.

A significant cultural difference depicted in the story is also the contrasting attitudes towards parenthood and family. The American man seems to view parenthood and family as an obstacle to his personal freedom, while Jig expresses a desire to have a baby and start a family. As the man says, "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig. (...) It's not really an operation at all" (Hemingway, 177). The American man's dismissive attitude towards the abortion reflects the differences in attitudes towards sexuality and reproductive rights between Americans and Europeans.

Another cultural difference that is highlighted in the story is the issue of communication. The couple's conversation is marked by a lack of direct communication, with much of what they are feeling and thinking left unsaid. As Jig says, "Would you please please please please please please stop talking?" (Hemingway, 179). This lack of direct communication underscores the cultural differences and the difficulties that Americans faced in trying to navigate a foreign culture and language.

Furthermore, the title of the story itself, "Hills Like White Elephants," can be interpreted as a metaphor for the cultural differences and conflicts between Americans and Europeans. The hills represent the differences between the two cultures, while the white elephants symbolize the difficulties that arise when trying to communicate and understand one another. As Hemingway writes, "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 Barcelona would come in forty minutes" (76). The couple's experience of waiting for the train highlights the difficulties of communication and the cultural differences that existed between Americans and Europeans during the early 20th century.

According to Grant David, “The story is about the clash between two cultures, each with its own values and priorities” (268). The American man and Jig represent the clash between American individualism and European collectivism. The American man is portrayed as a stereotypical American tourist, seeking to satisfy his own desires and interests without regard for anyone else. Jig, on the other hand, embodies the values of collectivism and family that are traditionally associated with European culture.

David also argues that the story reflects Hemingway’s own experiences as an American in Europe. Hemingway lived in Paris during the 1920s, a time when many American expatriates were drawn to the city’s vibrant cultural scene. However, as David notes, “Hemingway was often critical of American expatriates and their inability to adapt to European culture” (269). In “Hills Like White Elephants,” Hemingway highlights the difficulties that Americans faced in trying to navigate a foreign culture and language.

Furthermore, David suggests that the title of the story itself is a reference to European art and literature. He notes that “the image of ‘hills like white elephants’ recalls the descriptions of the landscape in French impressionist painting and the Symbolist poetry of Stéphane Mallarmé and Paul Verlaine” (Grant, 272). This reference to European art and literature further emphasizes the cultural differences between Americans and Europeans.

In conclusion, all the several different aspects discussed in the paper like: the symbolism of absinth, the context of the American expatriate tradition in Europe, and the difficulty of communication, change and intensify the meaning and depth of the story. This furthermore means that the thesis from the beginning has been confirmed. So the paper proved that through the symbolism of absinthe, the expatriate tradition, and the challenge of communication,

Hemingway highlights the difficulties and complexities of relationships, and reveals the destructive consequences of avoiding or manipulating communication.

Works Cited

- Grant, David. "Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants' and the Tradition of the American in Europe." *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 35, no. 3, Summer 1998, p. 267. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=6343468&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Hemingway, Ernest "Hills Like White Elephants." *Literature: A Portable Anthology*, edited by Janet E. Gardner et al., 4th ed., Bedford/ St.Martin's, 2017, p.176-179.
- Lanier, Doris. "The Bittersweet Taste of Absinthe in Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants.'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 26, no. 3, Summer 1989, p. 279. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=7133560&site=eds-live&scope=site.
- Weeks Jr., Lewis E. "Hemingway Hills: Symbolism in 'Hills Like White Elephants.'" *Studies in Short Fiction*, vol. 17, no. 1, Winter 1980, p. 75. EBSCOhost, search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=7134801&site=eds-live&scope=site.