

Historical and social
contexts in Ernest
Hemingway's *Hills Like
White Elephants*



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“ They look like white elephants” says a girl, referring to a burden that is never called by its name in the story. Although, the girl and her companion have a conversation through the story, neither of the speakers truly communicates with the other, highlighting the distance between the two. Both talk, but neither listens or understands the other’s point of view. 1920s has a political, and social phenomena clearly influenced Ernest Hemingway’s “ Hills Like White Elephants”. In 1918, a year after graduating from high school in Oak Park, Illinois, Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) volunteered as an ambulance driver in World War I. At the Italian front, he was seriously wounded. This experience haunted him and many of the characters in his short stories and novels. In *Our Time* (1925) is a collection of short stories, including “ Soldier’s Home,” that reflect some of Hemingway’s own attempts to readjust to life back home after the war. *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) are also about war and its impact on people’s lives. Hemingway courted violence all his life in war, the bullring, the boxing ring, and big game hunting. When he was sixty-two years old and terminally ill with cancer, he committed suicide by shooting himself with a shot-gun.

Ernest Hemingway’s short story “ Hills Like White Elephants” concentrates on the couple on their way from Barcelona to Madrid. They are waiting for a train at a bar, and having a conversation about the decision they have made. A couple who are considering an abortion is an American man who is quite sure in that decision, and a girl Jig who is hesitant. The short story ends up with an indeterminate ending, giving a chance to think up the story independently. Hemingway’s use of symbolism in “ Hills Like White

Elephants” illustrates that they continued their intended way, and that historical and social context has a big influence in this story.

Hemingway presents two main characters. An American man is older, and he speaks Spanish. For him “ everything” seems to mean a freedom, so when they are intensely speaking about it, he is threatened to lose it. A girl nicknamed Jig is younger, she does not speak Spanish and needs a help of the man to understand the world outside, for her “ everything” seems to mean a baby, settling down with making a family with the man near her. The girl’s inability to speak Spanish with the waitress shows her dependence on the American, but also the difficulty she has expressing herself to him. Both characters are flat, their characteristics are simple and can be briefly described, though Jig towards the end becoming dynamic.

Jig refers to a child, “... And once they take it away, you never get it back”. While the American thinks that they will be happy without a child, “... You don’t have to be afraid. I’ve known lots of people that have done it”. To that Jig sarcastically answers, “ So have I.” “ And afterward they were all so happy”. They are arguing about their “ everything”, which actually means their different points of view to the world. “ Everything” in the story illustrates that the American surely wants Jig to have an operation. Though he says ‘ If you don’t want to you don’t have to. I wouldn’t have you do it if you didn’t want to,’ he is not sincere. His honesty in this dialogue is questionable. From his earlier statements, it is obvious that he does not want to settle down, nor does he want to take responsibility for an operation; it is clear, he strongly wants her to have this operation and surely seems to

remain deaf to her desires. The beginning of a story has a description of land with a train station located in Spain.

There are two sides of rails where Jig and the man waits for a train: “ On this side there was no shade and no trees ...”. And “... on the other side, were fields of grain and trees ...”. The author describes the shadow of a cloud across the field of grain where Jig stood up. The shadow of cloud can be accepted as a literary symbol of impending trouble. The setting is important in this story. It indicates two possible results out of Jig decision. The road to the Madrid where they are heading to has a negative description of the land with no trees and no shade, that if Jig will go through with the abortion. The ground looks dry, as if there has been no rain for quite some time. There are hills in the distance that have a white color as the sun shines on them. And a road to Barcelona that has a vivid description of life. The Ebro River represents life, as it irrigates the fields. The fields of grain and trees also represent fertility and fruitfulness. The story unfolds in the 1920s, which is in history known as “ Roaring Twenties,” with its alcohol prohibition, flapper culture, bohemian life and extended women rights. The prohibition was caused by the women, believing it would protect families, women and children from the effects of abuse of alcohol.

The prohibition has been successful only in some parts of the country, whereas more had its “ side effects,” such as alcohol poisoning, and an increase in lawlessness. Mafia became more powerful because of prohibition. Arguments raged over the effectiveness of prohibition. The more people are restricted, the more they eager to do it and crave to find a way. That is how flapper culture appears, mostly recognized by a women’s short hair-cuts, <https://assignbuster.com/historical-and-social-contexts-in-ernest-hemingways-hills-like-white-elephants/>

unlikely for the ladies behavior as smoking the cigarettes, and becoming more sexually free than generation before. Modern society was appearing in fashion, jazz and women getting rights to vote. That was a start of propaganda women's beautiful life in Hollywood, in its turn advertising a freedom among people also known as bohemian people. Bohemian lifestyle rejected permanent residence, pursuit of wealth, alcohol and sexual freedom restrictions. As the characters in "White Hills Like Elephants" lives in the 1920s, they are affected by a time of prohibition and bohemian lifestyle. It can be seen by them travelling in Europe, drinking and having a freedom in choosing a partner. "... there is a common bond between Jig and the man;... We know the couple were lovers, which means at one point in their lives they had a common 'level' of communication...". The relationship between Jig and the American clearly represents Bohemian lifestyle.

However, as Bohemian lifestyle rejects the permanent relationship "their efforts are futile and we see, after knowing they have treated each style of communication, that their once living relationship and feeling for each other is now dead and empty. It is time for them to part as two people would who had met one evening and found they had nothing in common", their relationship needs to be defined for the defining further direction. At first the story appears to be a conversation. We see a hint about the topic in the man's addressing to a Jig, "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig,"... "It's not really an operation at all." The American does not perceive her abortion as an operation. The title also reveals a child, meaning an elephant for the characters. Elephant figurative. A burdensome or costly objective, enterprise, or possession, esp. one that appears magnificent; a financial

liability. So, from the story it is seen that a Jig is hesitating about her decision of abortion.

A child is considered a burden, and a financial liability. “ As Kenneth G. Johnston writes, Jig’s ‘ 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’. In the dilemma of having to choose between the man and her unborn child, Jig does not seem to even consider the option of unwed motherhood”. Though, at the time of the story it was already more or less acceptable for the American couple to travel through the Europe unmarried, nevertheless, American society expectations still were harsh to a thought of raising a child alone. Moreover, it is practically impossible for her to have the baby without the American’s support. She is totally dependent to him, so in agreeing to the abortion she can save her relationship with him. Assumably, finally they will have a train to Madrid. In fear to lose his freedom, the American man will say almost anything to convince a Jig to have an abortion. For instance, he tells her he loves her, and that everything between them will go back to the way it used to be. While the girl is indecisive, at one point conceding that she will have the abortion just to shut him up. When the man still insists, she finally says him “ Would you please, please, please, please, please, please, please stop talking?” taking a time to think. When Jig asks the American to stop talking, she has a time to make a decision. So, when the waitress came to say that 5 minutes left and Jig smiling to her brightly means that she made a decision to succumb. Eventually when American comes, she says, “ I feel fine”.

To conclude, Hemingway suggests many hints to understand his short story. The outstanding usage of symbolism to describe an abortion helps to find the main topic of the story. The setting is described ambiguously, the fields of grain and trees symbolize her current pregnant state and the life in her womb, while the "shadow of a cloud" illustrates its possible ending. Along with the conflict of the story between Jig and the American, Hemingway was able to make a story based upon the facts of life using all of these social and historical factors.