

Hemingway's metaphorical hills



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Author Ernest Hemingway is known to be keen on making his stories as minimalistic as possible, giving the reader just enough undeniable indications to be able to make indefinite conclusions. This is certainly the case in the short story *Hills Like White Elephants*. Many scholars have written about this very short story and the metaphors Hemingway hid within it. Four such scholars are Frederick Busch, Lewis Weeks, Doris Lanier, and Paul Rankin. These scholars discuss the symbolism of the title, as well as analyze the dialogue, and also attempt to predict the future of these two well-developed characters through other metaphors Hemingway slips into the story.

These academic journals could be used to argue that the title of the story and other seemingly insignificant details function as symbolism towards the characters' circumstances. I agree because, for example, it is clear as the story unfolds that they are not just comparing hills to white elephants for descriptive purposes; there is obviously a deeper meaning to their words that we, the reader, have to uncover. I will examine the metaphors Hemingway used in *Hills Like White Elephants* through my own beliefs and the ideas proposed in academic journals written by established scholars. These metaphors can be uncovered through analysis of the indirect dialogue between the main characters, and the function of physical elements mentioned within the short story.

Hemingway establishes symbols throughout the story, allowing the reader to make conclusions pertaining to the meaning of the title. Weeks notes in his article analyzing Hemingway's short story that a large portion of the three-page story is committed to the description of the hills that allegedly look like

white elephants. He states that not only does Hemingway use it in the title of the story, but also “ within this very short three page story, two references to the whiteness of the hills and four to them as white elephants.” Weeks supports the concept that the title Hemingway gave to the story has a duality to its meaning. The first point Weeks makes is related to white elephant sales. The goal of white elephant sales are for people to donate and get rid of their unwanted goods. Weeks believes that in terms of the story, the white elephant is the unborn baby through the perspective of the American male. I agree with this idea proposed by Weeks. The second interpretation of the title from Weeks' perspective is more supportive of the woman and the unborn child. This meaning of white elephant that creates duality is that a white elephant is a “ rare and valuable, royal and sacred” (77) being. I believe that this explanation honors Jig's fortuitous pregnancy while the other dismisses it, akin to what the American does to Jig.

Correspondingly, Busch also notes the gravity of the title in this Hemingway story. Busch states “ but the hills, and her analogy, bear the weight of their real subject- her will, and her body, which Hemingway sets in opposition to her lover's plans for her body in spite of her will” (919). The latest maturation in Jig's body does not reciprocate the plans that the American had for himself and Jig. Thus the reader is left to speculate how Busch's interpretation of the metaphors in the title will influence Jig's attitude towards her pregnancy. This fact is made by Busch is valid because it seems to me as the story unfolds and the American's negative comments gain momentum, Jig appears to become more congenial and not as inclined to express articulated thoughts. Jig characterizes the hills as “ white in the sun and the country was brown and dry” (Hemingway, 350), allowing for there to

be a contrast between “ joy and sorrow” (75) as Weeks puts it. It is also important to consider that this comment made by Jig encourages the contrast in Jig's and her partner's attitude on the position they have gotten themselves into. Specifically because the American's retort to Jig about her comment on what the hills look like raise the tension in the dialogue between the two. In the midst of an agitated conversation about hills and white elephants, the American irritably explains “ just because you say I wouldn't have [seen a white elephant] doesn't prove anything” (Hemingway, 350). This further inforces the same contrast discussed by Weeks between the characters and their potentially very divided ideas for the future of their relationship. I acknowledge Weeks and Busch perspectives that the title is not to be taken literally, and has multiple meanings that are subtly expressed by the dialogue exchanged between the characters throughout the story. It appears that Jig equates the hills apart of the spanish landscape to white elephants because she perceives her unborn child as valuable, in immediate contrast to the American's unfavorable reference of Jig's pregnancy.

Many scholars have analyzed the dialogue within *Hills Like White Elephants* . I find that the dialogue between these two characters reveals a lot about who they are as human beings. The reader gets clues about the American's character through his sarcastic and impatient replies to Jig. Busch states that “ he replies, with the bullying facticity of a country-club Babbitt” (919). I think this further develops the American's perspective of the situation and explains the dynamic of their relationship. Weeks also notes, after an exchange regarding the fact that Jig notes their lives consist of looking at

things and trying new drinks, “ the implication as to the casualness and triviality of their lives, in which drinks are of such importance...is made apparent” (75). Lanier then furthered the themes pertaining to their drinks by analyzing the choice of absinthe. This story is so rich in dialogue that most of the clues Hemingway leaves for the reader lies within the dialogue. Lanier describes that in Hemingway's story “ the couple is forced to vent their emotions in an unobtrusive way” (280). Going off of Lanier's belief this could explain the use of sarcastic and dismissive comments made between the two as the story unfolds. At a specific spot during the plot of the story, after vehement conversational exchanges between the two main characters, the American takes off from Jig so he can take their bags to the other side of the train station where they are waiting. Busch highlights the substance of the American doing this, and I agree that this action made by the American at this in the story is very telling about his character. After the American man does this he describes the other passengers waiting for their train to be “ perfectly reasonable” (Hemingway, 353). From this small seemingly insignificant thought the American had , Busch is able to conclude that the American believes that the girl whom he impregnated is waiting unreasonably due to her wish to keep their unborn child. Busch goes on to explain that the American's perspective of reasonable has to do with “ pleasure, with self-aggrandizement, but not with the birth of any sort” (919). Varying drastically from Jig's definition of reasonable. This contrast of beliefs between the two main characters can be attributed to their varying experiences as humans in this world. Explaining the drastically varying notions that Hemingway created between these two distinct characters.

Another substantial symbol in Hemingway's story is the character's choice of alcohol, specifically their choice of absinthe. Lainer argues that there is an importance to their choice of drink because the characters are drinking while they carry out momentous conversations. Lainer even states that absinthe "reverberates beneath the surface of the story" (279). I agree with Lainer in this sense because a side effect of absinthe is forgetfulness, which is what the American wishes for referring to the pregnancy. The idea of forgetting mentioned by Lainer can be compared to ideas pertaining to white elephants sales proposed by Weeks. Another significant aspect of absinthe that reveals a deeper meaning to the reader is the taste of the alcohol. The American describes the taste of absinthe being similar to licorice, a food known for being bitter. He states "Everything taste of licorice. Especially all the things you have waited so long for. Like absinthe" (Hemingway, 350). The bitterness of the absinthe can be compared to the exchanges between Jig and the American. The American's quote also speaks to how many people, like Jig, wait excitedly for the day they will become a parent. However, from the American's point of view this pregnancy is as unwanted as the bitter taste of licorice is. Similar to the bitterness of absinthe, elephant meat too has an unpleasant taste to most. This is evidenced by the explorer from the 1400's Alvise Cadmost. At this time period it was rare to consume elephant meat, and Cadmost was the first to record the taste of it. Overall, Cadmost found the meat difficult to get down similar to how many feel about absinthe. This allows for there to be ties between the title and symbols in the story, reinforcing the unpleasantness Jig and the American felt towards their circumstances to the reader. Lainer describes that the "bitterness has

become a substitute for the sweet" (288) possibility that pregnancy could bring to Jig.

I recall the most powerful conversation to occur at the conclusion of Hemingway's story. The American asks Jig if she feels better, and she replies " I feel fine. There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine" (Hemingway 353). Regarding the outcome of the couple's current dilemma, Busch notes the American " wants the fetus aborted, and she wants to keep him" (919) and ultimately Busch predicts that " he will win" (919). Weeks also makes a prediction regarding the future of Jig's pregnancy. Weeks believes " The man will not permit it; and the woman will be denied the fulfillment of motherhood" (76). Rankin also supports the idea that the man will get his way by stating " Hemingway's unnamed American Male protagonist dominates the meeker, weaker-sexed Jig- the other in terms of her femaleness, her youth..., and her foreignness" (234). Rankin ultimately comes to the conclusion that " she [Jig] submits to his will and consents to aborting the child" (234). Based on Rankin's quote pertaining to Jig's gender and ethnicity, I believe that he has come to this conclusion based on evidence from society. According to sociology males typically acquire more political and economical resources giving them greater decision making power compared to their female counterparts. Rankin infers that this societal norm between genders applies to Jig and the American. I, however, argue that Rankin excludes the possibility of Jig being an exception to this unfortunate norm. I support the idea of Jig being an exception to this disproportion of power because of her sarcastic and secure comments towards the man trying to convince her to get an abortion. I also must note

my bias on this stance, being that I am a female that supports other females making their own decision. Although, so far I have mostly agreed with the assessment of the short story by Weeks and Busch, this is where our opinions begin to part ways. I don't think that Jig will succumb to the American's attempts to bully her into having an abortion. I think that she will not submit to his desires, which is evidenced through her logical and quiet strength demonstrated in her dialogue throughout the story. For I am a firm believer that not responding to an antagonizing comment can be the strongest thing to do, and that is precisely what Jig does in this scenario. When the American sees her at the end of the story, it appears to me as the reader that she has already set her mind and is perfectly content with her decision to keep the baby. Contrarily, I would also argue that the American's toxic habit of being self-centered and simple in his nature will ultimately be his downfall. Leading to Jig part ways with him. The idea of them parting ways is demonstrated by Hemingway choosing the setting of the story to be at a train station, a place where there are different paths for one to take to their destination. Jig's powerful desire for motherhood dualing with the American's self-centered wishes for Jig to get an abortion makes for an epic battle in which I think Jig and the baby will be victorious.

The academic journals discussed the symbolism of the title of *Hills Like White Elephants*, as well as the deeper meaning within the dialogue, predictions of what will happen to Jig's unborn baby, and other subtle symbols Hemingway included. Hemingway strategically planted symbols and developed conversation in this dialogue-rich three page short story. I agree with the examinations of the story written by these scholars, but I see

the unwritten outcome of the story oppositely. The academic journals discussed support the idea that the American will Bully Jig into getting an abortion, while I believe that Jig is much more secure in herself than they give her credit to be. Giving her the confidence to go against the American's wishes and keep the baby. Overall, Hemingway makes his ability to leave explicit clues for the readers to make implicit conclusions obviously distinct in the story *Hills Like White Elephants* .

Works Cited

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