A question of interpretations in "roman fever” and "hills like white elephants”

Literature, Books

Differences in Perspective in Edith Wharton's " Roman Fever" and Ernest Hemingway's " Hills Like White Elephants"

" There are no facts, only interpretations" – Friedrich Nietzsche

Interpretations of individuals and life vary. In Edith Wharton's short story " Roman Fever," Alida Slade and Grace Ansley each visualize the other through " the wrong end of her little telescope" (1370). These misinterpretations emphasize the complexity and depth of Grace Ansley's character. The perspectives of the couple, the American man and Jig, in Ernest Hemingway's short story " Hills Like White Elephants" also differ on concrete issues, but imply a more abstract discrepancy of each's view on life. The disparities in perspective in these two stories emphasize the misunderstood depth of an individual and the dependence of reality on interpretation.

Alida's misinterpretation of Grace's knitting in " Roman Fever" represents her skewed perception of Grace's character. Mrs. Ansley begins by using her knitting to avoid engaging with Mrs. Slade. When Mrs. Slade first brings up their girlish escapades in Rome, Mrs. Ansley is said to reach a " delicate point" in her knitting (1370). Mrs. Slade misinterprets Grace's work by claiming it to be so " like her" to focus on knitting in the face of their conversation and the ruins, when Mrs. Ansley does care deeply about the ancient scene. As the two women contemplate the colossal ruins, Mrs. Slade reflects, " one might almost have imagined (if one had known her less well) that, for her also, too many memories rose from the lengthening shadows of those august ruins. but no; she was simply absorbed in her work" (1371).

Mrs. Slade misperceives Grace again, as many of Grace's memories did rise from the ruins. The fact that Grace is knitting with crimson silk indicates a deeper meaning to the activity. Neither crimson, a passionate color, nor silk, a luxurious, almost sensual, fabric, evoke the idea of a " poor parent," as knitting does (1367). Just as conceiving a child out of wedlock with a friend's fiance contrasts Mrs. Slade's impression of " poor Grace" (1369). Though both Grace and her knitting seem slightly " old-fashioned" (1367), the crimson silk and the secret night in the colosseum reveal a different perspective.

Initial misrepresentation of the daughter's roles indicates the complexity of Grace Ansley's character. The two daughters reflect the two women, bringing back the past " a little too acutely" (1371). The descriptive diction relates each daughter to the mother of the other. Alida's " vividness" (1369) is described in contrast to her daughter, Jenny, just as Barbara's " edge" (1368) is described in contrast to her mother, Grace. Both Alida and Barbara are also described as " brilliant" (1369), indicating them to be similar individuals, separate from Jenny and Mrs. Ansley. In contrast to their " brilliant friend[s]" (1369), Jenny and Grace are immediately described in terms of physical appearance, Jenny as " extremely pretty" (1369) and Grace as " exquisitely lovely" (1368). Mrs. Slade uses the word " boring" (1369) in regards to Jenny, and describes Grace as a " museum specimen" (1368), both descriptions suggesting conventionality. However, by the end of the story, Wharton reveals Grace and Barbara's connection by disclosing the

unconventional terms of Barbara’s conception, highlighting Mrs. Ansley’s unrecognized, edgy characteristics.

The differences in perspective of the couple in “ Hills Like White Elephants” allude to differences in reality. Jig and the American man differ in outlook of the pregnancy. Hemingway dedicates most of the story to a dialogue of the American man attempting to talk Jig into this “ simple” procedure. He pushes for this action because the pregnancy is the “ only thing that bothers [them],” “ the only thing that makes [them] unhappy” (540). He speaks for both of them, even though Jig doesn’t share this pessimistic view of the child. Jig implies that she cares about the baby when she asks him, “ Doesn’t it mean anything to you?” (542). Jig looks for further meaning in the situation, which indicates her ability to hope for the future.

The American man’s insistence on maintaining their current relationship contrasts Jig’s willingness to change and expand. The man’s reluctance to adapt becomes apparent when he states “ I don’t want any one else” (542). At first, this seems like a declaration of love for Jig, but in the context of the story it appears to relate to the child. The man is unwilling to welcome another being into the relationship, stubbornly clinging to the life of “ look[ing] at things and try[ing] new drinks” (540). Jig realizes their relationship has already changed, as the world “ isn’t [theirs] anymore” (541), no matter what they do. That conversation about whether they “ could” or “ can” have everything reveals the discrepancies in their perspective. Jig’s belief that they can’t have the whole world shows she has progressed past that stage of life in her mind. The man’s adherence to his

ideal lifestyle only highlights Jig’s progression. Jig reveals his deluded perspective, as an unwilling but integral part of said lifestyle. He claims “ We can have everything,” (541), but because Jig knows they can’t, she removes herself from the “ we” he relies on, proving her own statement to be true; “ We” can’t have everything..

The difference in view of the natural landscape represents the impact of perspective on life. The setting symbolizes the couple’s struggles and separate reactions. The hills in the distance immediately grab Jig’s attention, leading her to comment, “ They look like white elephants” (539). Hills like white elephants evoke the image of a protruding, pregnant belly, so the man’s less than enthusiastic response implies his aversion to Jig’s pregnancy. However, just as the man periodically plugs the operation, Jig doesn’t cease to notice the hills. After the man shoots down her simile that the hills are like white elephants, she creates a metaphor, claiming the hills have white colored “ skin” through the trees (540), as an elephant would. A comment, to which the man merely suggests they have another drink, showing the differences in perspective as Jig sees past their usual activity and the man remains stuck.

Jig’s appreciation of the train station’s surroundings conveys her open attitude toward the future and contrasts the man’s focus on the present. Hemingway narrates, “ The girl looked across at the hills on the dry side of the valley and the man looked at her and at the table” (542). This image of the couple represents their separate views of life. The man remains hopelessly fixated on the girl and drink consistently in front of him, not

bothering to look at what lies beyond. Jig sees past the hopelessness and normalities of her life to the possibilities the white hills and her own pregnancy hold.

The emphasis on different perspectives in these two stories illuminate the intricacy of character and dependence of life on the individual. Mrs. Ansley, a constantly misinterpreted character, reveals a secret about herself that contrasts the general perspective. This slight upheaval in Grace’s personality traits emphasizes the misconceptions she entertained throughout the story and her true, hidden character. The American man and Jig hold quite different perspectives on their pregnancy, relationship, and surroundings. The man’s immature opinions indicate his hopeless view of life, while Jig’s willing perspective highlights her optimistic idea of future. An identity constructed from other’s opinions could be entirely wrong, but defining. A limited view of the world can narrow reality accordingly. Perspective shapes individuals from the inside and outside.