

Alcohol and "hills like
white elephants"



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In literature, the presence of alcohol can play a fundamental role in guiding the themes and perspectives within a given narrative. The characters in the story "Hills Like White Elephants" by Ernest Hemingway, for instance, were heavily intoxicated throughout the work. Because of this, the characters' decisions and reactions to one another are not true to what they are actually thinking and feeling, and the story's outcome is very different than what it could have been if the two characters had been sober. Hemingway uses the presence of alcohol in many of his stories; this one is not an exception, as alcohol acts as a lubricant between the two characters' conversations as well as a point of comparison to the relationship between the two characters.

Ernest Hemingway was a very complex and at times troubled man: "his personal and public writings reveal evidence suggesting the presence of the following conditions during his lifetime: bipolar disorder, alcohol dependence, traumatic brain injury, and probable borderline and narcissistic personality traits" (Martin 352). Many of the traumas in Hemingway's life seeped through into his many works, especially in that the characters in his stories always seem to have a drink in their hand. Martin comments that "Hemingway's writing can be seen as an adaptive defensive strategy for dealing with painful moods and suicidal impulses" (Martin 359) and that "[he] may have told certain stories in order to ease the aches that life started inside him" (Martin 359). Hemingway was married and divorced multiple times through his life and alcohol played a role in the divorces many times, such as the times when his wife Martha found empty liquor bottles underneath his hospital bed after he had been in a drunk driving accident and suffered a concussion, which for her "the death knell sounded for his

third marriage" (Martin 355). His problems in his relationships and his heavy drinking problem did not hide themselves in his story "Hills Like White Elephants" that features a couple heavily intoxicated, contemplating abortion, and most likely on the verge of ending the relationship, although it never clearly states it in the story.

While Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" has major themes of abortion and the relationship between the couple, it has major underlying themes of alcohol consumption that greatly affected the story in its entirety. The very first line that is spoken in the story is about alcohol and states "What should we drink' the girl asked" (Hemingway 635). The conversation between the woman, Jib, and the American man does not even begin until they both have a beer sitting in front of each of them. The couple seems rigid and uncomfortable with each other, only exchanging words with each other about the alcohol that they are about to order and the weather. It is only until the beer is put in front of the two that the conversation begins to flow, seeming to make the booze the barrier that the couple needs to put in between them, both physically and mentally, to feel comfortable.

Absinthe plays a very large symbolic role in the story, although it is only ever actually mentioned once in the story. One line of the story in particular stands out more than the others in tying in the connection between the alcohol and the characters. In this line, Jib has just tasted a drink called Anis del Toro which has anise in it, which has a licorice taste to it. She states that "It tastes like licorice" (Hemingway 636) which in turn the man retorts with "That's the way with everything" (Hemingway 636). To this Jib responds: "Everything tastes of licorice. Especially all the things you've waited so long

for, like absinthe" (Hemingway 636). While this may seem like an insignificant comment, to the woman it seems that she has made a connection between absinthe and 'everything' in the couple's relationship (Lanier 286). Absinthe has a very bitter taste representing the bitterness that the two characters hold for each other that is so prevalent in the relationship and the bitterness towards each other about the decision that they have to make about the abortion (Weeks 75). The color of licorice, which is the taste in absinthe, can also be a large symbol of its blackness compared to the white hills that Jib mentions and the symbolic contrast between sadness and joy, the joy being a new life or a baby, and the sorrow in deciding whether to abort it or not (Weeks 75). The "living green color" (Weeks 75) of the actual absinthe drink and the contrasting dull, brown, dryness of the countryside, symbolizing fertility and infertility and the two warring sides of the argument for life or death (Weeks 75).

Absinthe has been used since 1790 when a French refugee, Dr. Ordinaire, discovered it and was labeled a narcotic. It is made from the leaves of the plant wormwood, which is the most dangerous ingredient in absinthe and "is capable of producing a potent, toxic, psychoactive alkaloid 'that is extremely harmful to the habitual user'" (Lanier 282). Europeans were the highest consumers of absinthe, but once it was exported to the United States it became popular very quickly. It was banned from the United States just as quickly because of its harmful effects. A violation of the ban came to fruition in 1926, the year before Hemingway wrote "Hills Like White Elephants" (Lanier 283). The drink became illegal and remains illegal in most countries, except a few, notably Spain where "Hills Like White Elephants" takes place.

Hemingway, being aware of the drink, as well as being an avid drinker himself, placed the drink into the story knowing about the “ mental and physical deterioration [that the drink] caused” (Lanier 283), using it to loosen the character’s wits and make their conversation that is one that cannot fully be trusted by the reader, while also using it as a symbol of the couple’s deterioration as well. One critic, Doris Lanier, comments that it is “ Innocent-looking, seductive, and intoxicating, absinthe promises joy, excitement, heady delight, it’s tantalizing color and taste concealing the destructive power that is lurking in its green opulence” (Lanier 286). Absinthe was also known for its aphrodisiac powers which is what Lanier is referring to when describing it as “ seductive”.

The significance of the story being set in Spain is also notable. With the story being written in 1927 when prohibition was at full rampage in the United States, many young people were fleeing the States to chase after the party scene, many settling in Spain and other places in Europe where drinking was an everyday occurrence. Lanier comments that the couple seems to have a “‘shallow’, ‘ rootless’, and ‘ transient’ lifestyle” (Lanier 281) and that their lives, represented by their labeled suitcases, are ‘ rootless’, ‘ pleasure-seeking’ and ‘ without responsibilities’” (Lanier 281). The absinthe can also be looked at as a symbol for not only the couple’s relationship, but their lives as well. They started off coming to Spain where they expect to live a free, happy, exciting life, “ innocent -looking and intoxicating” (Lanier 286), but ending up in pain, and deterioration.

Hemingway also uses alcohol in the story as a way for the man to brush off Jib’s comments and feelings, making the conversation even more tense. Jib

comments, "That's all we do isn't it- look at things and try new drinks?" (Hemingway 636) to which the man replies a simple "I guess so" (Hemingway 636). Jib is clearly upset when she says this and is trying to comment on the "shallowness of their life together" (Weeks 76), but the man only agrees and moves on, brushing off her feelings as if she never said them in the first place. He does this again when Jib comments on the hills yet again trying to clarify what she meant. He ignores her disregarding her statement and simply asking "Should we have another drink?" (Hemingway 636) using alcohol yet again as a barrier between himself and Jib creating a way of avoidance of responding to her. By this time the couple is buzzed having had a large beer and an Anis del Toro each. This has allowed the woman to talk freely and gain some brazenness to speak her opinions without hesitance. Had the couple been sober, the conversation between the two may have not gotten even this far.

The most unanswered question in the story is whether the couple comes to an agreement about the abortion or not. The story ends with Jib begging the man to stop talking about it saying "Would you please please please please please please please please stop talking?" (Hemingway 638), showing how fed up she is with the conversation and also showing just how intoxicated she is. The story ends with the man bringing the luggage to the tracks and asking Jib: "Do you feel better" (Hemingway 638) to which she replies "I feel fine. There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine" (Hemingway 638). A clear solution to their argument does not seem to be made, however, the argument could prove to be invalid nonetheless because of the copious amounts of alcohol that Jib has consumed, possibly killing the fetus anyways,

although the characters would not have known the harmful effects of the alcohol at the time.

Alcohol is so prevalent in the story that even though the characters seem to be speaking coherently to one another for the majority of the story, their words and actions cannot be trusted. After all, alcohol affects the brain in many ways, causing people to make irrational decisions and say things that they do not mean. The characters in "Hills Like White Elephants" thus cannot be taken seriously in what they are saying and thinking. If the two characters had been sober throughout the story, the reader would have more ease in believing the decisions, or non-decisions, that the characters make. Hemingway uses the alcohol in the story to leave the reader guessing, leaving an unanswered question on the table for the reader to figure out on their own.

Works Cited

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