

Symbolism and meaning of liminal spaces in "hills like white elephants"



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Since its publication in 1927, Ernest Hemingway's seemingly simple short story "Hills Like White Elephants" has readers arguing over the ever-present issue of a woman's rights. At first glance, "Hills Like White Elephants" appears to be about a man and a woman having drinks and a shallow conversation whilst awaiting a train. However, the seemingly light and airy time is actually much more serious and a matter of life or death for the woman and her unborn fetus. As the American and Jig take in the desolate scenery around them, the American continuously tries to convince Jig to get an abortion because "it's really a simple operation... it's not really an operation at all." (Hemingway 590). The meticulous setting of this short story ultimately mirrors the three possible outcomes of Jig and the American's relationship.

First, there is the setting of the train station bar, the liminal ground, in which the pair are the majority of the story. This liminal space mirrors the fact that Jig and the American are undecided in whether to keep the baby or rid themselves of it. Second, there are the dry and infertile-looking hills, which would ultimately mean Jig getting rid of the baby. The final option for the pair would be the beautiful lush forest by the Ebro that Jig explored by herself, which would mean Jig having the baby and leaving the American. As the characters explore these possibilities they grow farther apart from each other, and each end up coming to their own conclusion. Throughout the text, the liminal train station and change in setting allows both characters to explore what their futures may hold, and face the truth that Jig ultimately holds the power to make the decision to keep her baby or to get rid of it. Throughout the text, Jig and the American use the setting surrounding them

in the train station to mirror their inner, liminal state. As the story opens, Jig and the American sit at a train station that on one side had “ no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun.” (589).

This train station, which is set between two lines of rails allows for the conversation of liminality. Jig and the American could quite literally go one way or another with their decision to keep the baby or not.

In addition to the liminal space of the train station, Jig and the American are also sitting “ at a table in the shade, outside the building.” (589). Herein, there is a contrast between the station being in the sun and Jig and the American sitting in the shade. The station, which is illuminated by light, symbolizes truth or realization. However, where Jig and the American are sitting in the shade, can be read that they are quite literally shaded by denial and doubt—at the beginning of the story the pair are not ready to face the light. While outside, the “ girl was looking off at the hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.” (589). Again, the sun illuminates the hills, which cannot only symbolize the stomach of a pregnant woman, but also, the fact that they are white means that they have positive connotations and are pure, compared to the desolate brown country surrounding them. Yet, Jig and the American are still in the shadows, illustrating both the liminality and avoidance of the issue of her pregnancy. Within the story, the liminal setting begins to revert the American into the past, and force Jig to think about her future.

Separating Jig and the American from the inside is the liminal structure of the beaded curtain with “ Anis del Toro” painted on it (589). Since alcohol has been such a prominent part of Jig and the American’s previous relations, one <https://assignbuster.com/symbolism-and-meaning-of-liminal-spaces-in-hills-like-white-elephants/>

could assume that the beaded curtain symbolizes the pair's past—and going back through the curtains means reverting to their past party-going ways and not having the baby. Jig comments, “that's all we do isn't it—look at things and try new drinks.” (590), herein, she focuses on the desolation and shallowness of her and the American's relationship. If all Jig and the American do is run around drinking and being irresponsible, is it really love or a quality relationship that could sustain a child? As Jig comes to the realization the she and the American will separate, she begins to humanize the baby, saying “they're lovely hills... they don't really look like white elephants, I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees.” (590). By calling the hills lovely, Jig is romanticizing her pregnancy and starting to appreciate that having a child would not be as bad as the American makes it seem, but rather having a child with the American would be bad. Though Jig has made her realization, the American is still stuck in their party days and has the persistent mindset that Jig will get the abortion. As Jig sends the American to bring their bags to the other side of the station he, “did not say anything but looked at the bags against the wall of the station. There were labels on them from all the hotels where they had spent nights.” (592). First, the fact that the American brings the bags to the other side of the station could suggest that he is indeed changing his mind about making Jig get the abortion, but the fact that he romanticizes the hotel labels forces one to believe that he is still fixated on not being tied down. This quote reinforces the American's perpetual liminal state of mind, though Jig seems to clearly make up her mind, the American never comes to a concrete conclusion.

Through the progression of the story, Jig's interpretation of her surroundings allows her agency to move from the liminal space. Ultimately, the conversation between Jig and the American goes nowhere, and Jig begins to have agency and is able to move out of the liminal space. Out of frustration: The girl stood up and walked to the end of the station. Across, on the other side, were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro. Far away, beyond the river, were mountains. The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees. (591) At the end of the station, the imagery is lush and fertile. By leaving the liminal bar and walking off by herself, Jig is able to clear her head and find a positive place, where there is life and presumably happiness, as opposed to the dry, infertile country inhabited by the American. In fact, as Jig returns to the bar where the American resides, the imagery once again becomes desolate: "they sat down at the table and the girl looked across at the hills on the dry side of the valley and the man looked at her and at the table," (592) herein, the American becomes linked with the negative infertility of the hills. The pair's different interpretation of the setting surrounding them leads to tension. As the story closes, Jig has come to the conclusion that she will have the baby, and the American just looks around and sees other people, "waiting reasonably for the train," (592). This quote makes it seem as if the American is stuck perpetually in the past, in a state of adolescence. Instead of moving on, growing up, and having a family like most "normal" people, he wishes to travel, have guiltless sex, and drink alcohol excessively. By the end of the story, it is clear that Jig is drawn to the fertile forest, and the American is just drawn to the bar.

In “Hills Like White Elephants,” Hemingway suggests that the current human condition is strained. Relationships are shallow and filled with misconceptions. Especially relationships such as Jig and the American’s, it started out as liminal, something that was not serious, but also was not completely blasé—but then when Jig got pregnant neither knew how to properly deal with the situation. Through the use of the liminal settings, Hemingway allows Jig and the American to explore their different options for the future. Though the American keeps trying to convince Jig to get an abortion, she finally comes to the realization that she does not have to listen to him and she has the autonomy to do what she pleases with her own body. Unfortunately, though this story was written in 1927, there is still a controversy concerning a woman’s rights to contraception, abortion, etc. today.