

# Gender and communication in hemingwayr's story



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In Ernest Hemingway's short story, *Hills Like White Elephants*, Jig and her American boyfriend aren't exactly the picture of a happy couple. Though sitting at a train station in Spain, enjoying the beautiful scenery and some cool drinks, the pair struggles to connect. While at first, it seems the American is simply disinterested by his partner's idle chattering, the reader soon comes to realize that they are really avoiding a topic which is difficult for both of them to discuss.

Having found that Jig is pregnant, she and the American are discussing the possibility of having an abortion, though because neither of them is willing to clearly state what he or she wants, the conversation is going nowhere and the tension that has been placed on their relationship persists. Because the man and girl, in stereotypical fashion, both function differently and expect different outcomes in the conversation, their gender-linked miscommunication only contributes to an uncomfortable situation and delays an agreement.

In her exploration of the short story, Pamela Smiley focuses solely on the way both men and women generally communicate. She acknowledges the inefficiency of the circular noncommunication of strong gender-linked language difference (Smiley). As is often the case with women in conversation, Jig uses imprecise language, more focused on pleasing her listener than on the actual content she's relaying. Conversely, the American chooses his responses strictly for their cognitive contribution, careful to betray no emotion and to be as straight-forward as possible (Smiley). Smiley makes an assertion that supports both of these observations, explaining that feminine language tends to be relationship-oriented while masculine is goal-

oriented. This is very important to understand when studying the exchange between Jig and the American at the train station.

Jig, feeling the discomfort of her partner, is trying to take his mind off the situation by pointing out other things” the scenery, reminding him of experiences theyd shared like the trying of new drinks” but to him, she is childishly refusing to address the issue before them: her pregnancy. For example, when she points out that the hills look like white elephants, she is trying to draw him into a conversation, because to Jig, being engaged in conversation with him in a meaningful way will lessen her feelings of emotional separation. But the American instantly shuts down her attempts by simply replying, Ive never seen one, refusing to humor her with his conversation and igniting instead the somewhat jaded response: No, you wouldnt have (Anstendig and Hicks). Still, a reader must understand that, when judged by stereotypical male standards of conversation, as she is by the American, Jig seems to be, flighty, trivial, and differential (Smiley). While the American wants a decision made so that the couple can be fine afterward, just like [they] were before (Anstendig and Hicks), she keeps attempting to draw his attention elsewhere is avoidance of what is unpleasant.

But Jig is not the only one who refuses to be frank about the decision that lies before them. Even when he succeeds in turning the conversation to the subject of the abortion, he never calls it by its true name. It's really a simple operation It's not really an operation at all It's just to let the air in (Anstendig and Hicks), he says of what was, certainly at that time, a risky and invasive procedure. The euphemisms we choose to use tell us something

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about our values, and they tell us about what makes us uncomfortable (Silver), says Author Ralph Keyes in an interview about his book, *Euphemania: Our Love Affair with Euphemisms*. In the American's case, the fact that he refuses to come out and say what the operation really is may just indicate that he is prepared for an aversive reaction on Jigr's part. But it may also indicate that he isn't as sure about the process as he wants her to believe.

[Those who use these] incredible amounts of jargon try to deflect us " and maybe even themselves " about what they're doing (Silver), so perhaps the American feels some semblance of guilt about potentially bullying his partner into the decision he wants her to make. Perhaps he realizes that his insistence on their relationship instantly resuming where they left off before the pregnancy is, in fact, impossible. Keyes could agree that any good counselor might say this couple has, unfinished business, issues which are only being aggravated when brought to the surface by such undeniable circumstances. The American relies on the euphemism, letting the air in, to reduce tension, as a representation of a flight to comfort (Keyes). Still, at least they are talking about it, which is what he continually pushes for. Whoever controls the conversation has the power, and the American shifts power back to himself by ignoring Jigr's attempts at banter. Through his need to control the conversation, perhaps the assumption could be made that he is also grasping for control of their relationship because he feels trapped by her pregnancy (Smiley).

Presumably unable to understand Spanish, Jig asks the American what the beaded curtain near them reads, giving him a chance to flaunt his knowledge, probably hoping that doing so will soothe his ego and allow them to forget the unpleasantness he seems determined to discuss. When things get strained, maintaining the relationship becomes her responsibility, requiring that she accommodate his communication style (Fulbright). And clearly, she does this by appealing to his sense of dominance in their relationship. Many of Jig's statements are followed by questions like, wasnt that bright?, and isnt it? (Anstendig and Hicks) These are tag-end questions, attempts to pull him into the conversation and entice him to engage. But her dependence on him to know the language may make him feel that she's too dependent on him, in general, may remind him of the pregnancy, and her questions come across as clingy and insecure. She constantly seeks an answer as to what he wants, to which he responds with what he thinks, and while his short, dismissive answers force her to make her own decisions, to her they come across as insensitive (Smiley).

But just as they are both guilty of talking around the topic at hand and for failing to understand the other's conversational needs, Jig inadvertently hurts her partner just as he does her. That's all we do, isnt it" look at things and try new drinks? she asks, to which he replies that he guesses so (Anstendig and Hicks). But if men measure intimacy through actions rather than conversation, her reducing their time together to only trying new drinks and looking at things must feel like a dismissal to him, somehow unappreciative of the time they've spent together. And he does try to make amends, reaching out to her in his own way by offering to stay with her

during the procedure. Once again, if shared activity equals intimacy, then his offer to stay with Jig during the abortion is a gesture of love (Smiley). And while he does make her vague promises that come across as insincere" itr's perfectly simple, I dont want anyone else, I love you now but I just cant think about it, I wont worry (Anstendig and Hicks) all this he says to console her, not meant to convey any real emotion because to a man that can only be demonstrated through action (Smiley), and he has already offered to attend the appointment with her.

Smiley reports on research from the 1970r's which concluded that men and women often struggle to communicate because they speak different languages, women trying to connect emotionally and men only wanting to convey specific information. But in an article meant to debunk these claims, Dr. Yvonne K Fulbright cites research which finds that perhaps genders communicate differently only when in opposing conversational roles" differences don't necessarily appear when males and females are doing the same things or playing same roles (Fulbright). It does seem obvious to the reader that Jig wants the baby" she is more drawn to the scenic, fertile hills, baffled as to why her partner would want to throw away life" and the American wants her to get the abortion so they might shirk responsibility and resume their relationship as it was before. If they were on the same side of the issue, there wouldnt be tension, nor any misunderstanding as they attempt to navigate a grim subject. Fulbright clearly both resents and mocks that men are sized up as inarticulate, aggressive Neanderthals, incapable of feeling emotions and being sensitive while, women are criticized for being overly cooperative and caring doormats. Still, stereotypes become such for a

reason, and it doesn't seem as though Hemingway supports those realities as much as he does reveal their lack of success.

In his short story, Hemingway paints a scene of two lovers in a delicate situation, having found that she is pregnant and feeling oppositely drawn on how to handle it. Still, both parties are hesitant to discuss and both seem willing to defer to the other on the actual decision. They are torn between sides of themselves” a double-blind in which both parties vie for two solutions that can't both be achieved (Smiley).

The American does want Jig's happiness on some level, but he also wants her to get an abortion to ensure his continued freedom from responsibility. And she is so bent on pleasing him and maintaining their relationship as it was when she was pleased with it, that, at least when the story ends, she agrees to the abortion despite the fact that she clearly wants to keep the baby. Because both of them are torn, even within themselves as far as the decision is concerned, and both want to persuade the other without overtly forcing their solution on the situation, the conversation is a failed attempt at communication, further inhibited by their inability to engage at the emotional level on an issue that is so fueled by emotion. Even in the final lines of the story in which the American asks, do you feel better? it can be seen that he viewed her opinion as a problem and wasn't really listening all along.