

Hills like white elephants: a narrative structure analysis literature review exam...

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)



“ Hills Like White Elephants” is one of Ernest Hemingway’s most famous short stories, and for good reason. It is a story that contains timeless themes and deals with a timeless issue: the interaction between men and women. Hemingway took and developed a concept that would come to be known as the “ Iceberg” style of short-story writing and created what amounted to an entirely new stylistic type of short story. Hemingway’s use of a variety of literary elements to create dramatic tension and to really underscore the thematic idea of the problems of talking versus communication, particularly between individuals of different genders.

There is a huge difference between talking and communicating. Anyone who has the capacity for language can talk, but truly communicating has other components-- listening and understanding. When one person talks, the person they are trying to communicate with must be listening and comprehending, without an outright dismissal of what the original speaker was saying. In the short story “ Hills Like White Elephants,” all the literary elements that Hemingway carefully utilizes work towards revealing the differences between talking and communicating.

One of the most interesting literary devices that Hemingway uses in his text is the nearly-continuous dialogue. There is very little description of the actions taking place, or of the location of the story at all; indeed, there is only a very vague sense of the landscape, location, and periphery characters in the story. There is very little description in the story, which makes the description of the hills-- “ like white elephants”-- and the land-- brown and dry-- stand out much more clearly to the reader (Rankin). This functions to create a sense of contrast for the reader; the land is parched, dry, and

barren, while the hills are smooth and white. The hills could very well be symbolic of the woman's fertility and pregnancy, while the barren ground is representative of the abortion the man wants her to perform. This contrast echoes the problems that the couple is having with communication-- throughout the story, a lot of talking goes on, but very little communication is had.

The dialogue in the text is deceptively simple. It is a perfect example of Hemingway's concept of the iceberg-style of short story construction. The pair is sitting at a restaurant having a seemingly normal conversation, when they have this exchange:

' Wellif you don't want to you don't have to'

' And you really want to?'

' I think it's the best thing to do. But I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to.'

' And if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you'll love me?'

' I love you now. You know I love you.'

' I know. But if I do it, then it will be nice again?'" (Hemingway, n. d.)

In this quote, it is clear that the two speakers are talking past each other, and are not communicating effectively at all. The first speaker, the American man, clearly has an opinion-- he wants his female companion to have an abortion. She, on the other hand, seems hesitant, although she does appear to agree with him on the surface. Her personality comes off as avoidant and cagey; indeed, even her inability to speak or understand the bartender is

indicative of her unwillingness to communicate.

Without truly reading into the context of the story, the casual reader may see the plot as an interaction between two friends or even a boyfriend and girlfriend as they wait for the train to Madrid. However, in line with Hemingway's iceberg-style dialogue, with a closer reading, it becomes clear that the simple dialogue is filled with pain and conflict. However, this is communicated only to the reader: part of the irony of the theme is that the two characters in the story have a complete and utter inability to understand the feelings of their counterpart.

The woman appears to truly want to keep the baby; she mentions that she and the man could "get along," as though that is the highest form of relationship and ideal for child-rearing and making a family. The American man, however, does not want to raise the child; he wants the woman to have an abortion. She refuses to hear it, begging him to stop speaking. This dialogue underscores the conflict in the story: the woman is saying one thing while meaning another, and the man is acting in a similar way; while they do this, they allow each other an excuse for misunderstanding (Renner, 2010). Another interesting literary device that Hemingway uses is the subtle device of symbolism. White elephants, for example, have long been a symbol for gifts that no one wants; in this case, the white elephant hills symbolize the girl's pregnancy and potential child. The American man keeps telling the girl that he does not want the baby, but the girl seems intent upon forcing the gift of a future child on the American man. This further underscores the inability of the couple to communicate properly; she seems completely unwilling to acknowledge what he wants, and he seems completely unwilling

to compromise and hear what she wants. As such, they continue to talk past each other with no real conclusion to the conflict ever reached.

The girl's name, "Jig," even speaks symbolically to the problem that they are having with communication. She continuously dances around the subject of a potential abortion, completely unwilling to engage with the American man (Renner, 2010). Everything about her is flighty and skittish; however, Hemingway still manages to make the character sympathetic through the obvious pain she shows. Renner suggests that Hemingway's purpose was not to show that women cannot communicate, but that women and men communicate differently, and are thus often unable to communicate well. "Hills Like White Elephants" encompasses many of the different aspects that make Hemingway a great short-story writer. However, it also serves as a fantastic insight into human behavior; it gives the reader a glimpse into the way that they may act, and gives them insight into the way the opposite gender may try to communicate to them.

References

Hemingway, E. (n. d.). Hills Like White Elephants. [e-book] http://www.asdk12.org/staff/grenier_tom/HOMEWORK/208194_Hills_Like_White_Elephants.pdf.

Rankin, P. (2010). Hemingway's Hills Like White Elephants. *The Explicator*, pp. 234-237.

Renner, S. (n. d.). Moving to the Girl's Side of "Hills Like White Elephants".

<https://assignbuster.com/hills-like-white-elephants-a-narrative-structure-analysis-literature-review-examples/>