

Relationship dynamics in hills like white elephant



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Hills Like White Elephant is one of Ernest Hemingway's stories that utilizes his Iceberg theory style of writing. This story is set in Spain at a train station with a man, the American and a woman, Jig discussing an operation. The couple is at a crossroad in their lives when they must decide whether Jig must have an abortion or not in order to determine the fate of their relationship.

Hills Like White Elephant is set up as a dialogue between the two, in which the American is trying to convince Jig to abort the child, but she is hesitant in doing so. Throughout the story, Hemingway uses metaphors to express the characters feelings and decisions as well as highlighting the differences in the way a man and a woman view an abortion. As readers dig beneath the surface to understand what the couple is trying to decide on, the Iceberg theory method allows them to analyze what the relationship dynamics are between the American and Jig.

Thus, resulting in two general conclusions which are Jig will either have the abortion in order to keep the relationship with the American or she will keep the child and find solace. Scholars such as Howard Hannum and Susanty Susanty argue from the point of view that based on the dynamics of the relationship between Jig and the American, Jig's decision is to keep the unborn child. However, Nilofer Hashmi argues in his article, ? Hills Like White Elephants: The Jilting of Jig, that based on the American's strong personality and conceit it would be difficult to infer that he gave into Jig's wish to keep the child. Considering textual evidence and the use of dialogue in the story, the overwhelming feeling that Jig experiences in the relationship is portrayed throughout her sarcastic comments in reply to the American. Therefore, the

dynamic of the relationship suggests that Jig will terminate the relationship and keep the unborn child in order to find solace.

At the beginning of the story as the couple waits at the train station, the story directs the focus towards the dynamic of the relationship. The following quote highlights the difference in views they both have towards the abortion:

On this side there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun. Close against the side of the station there was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies. (181)

In the above quote, the station is symbolic of the unborn child, the side between the rails that has no shade and no trees represents the American's view on abortion, while the side closest to the station with the warm shadow of the building represents Jig's view on the abortion. The setting Hemingway uses at the train station supports the point of view that the relationship between the American man and the girl is at a crossroad. The location of the station, which is symbolic to the unborn is planted in the center of a barren hill. This positioning of the station shows that the unborn is an obstacle in their relationship and that they must decide on what the outcome is going to be. However, the station isn't the final stop but more so a checkpoint between Barcelona and Madrid where the two must come up with a solution to their problem. The position of the side closest to the station is fertile and creates an imagery of the warmth of a mother's love as well as her duty to protect her child. Whereas, the side that represents the American's view is infertile and shows no means of protection (shade). This use of imagery and

symbolism supports the claim that Jig is drawn closer to keeping the child and this is traced all the way to the end of the story.

The foundation of their relationship is based on sexual pleasures and alcohol which proves that the dynamics of the relationship is not guided by ? true love but by sexual feelings. In Hannumr’s article, ? Jig Jig to Dirty Ears: White Elephants to Let., he argues that the American does not value the relationship both him and Jig has; as he would not force her to have the abortion. The American says, Itr’s really an awfully simple operation, Jig. Itr’s not really an operation at all. He continues by saying thatr’s the only thing that bother us. Itr’s the only thing thatr’s made us unhappy. Hannum states, at any rate, “ Jig” expresses all too well what the girl had meant to the American: when she revealed her pregnancy to him, she instantly became a “ white elephant” (a once-prized possession that had lost its former value) in his eyes, but the term recurs and acquires symbolic complexity as the story develops (Hannum 46).

Similarly, Jig is also displeased with the Americanr’s narrow mindedness and expresses this in the following exchange as she looks at the hills in the distance. “ They look like white elephants,” she said. The American responds “ Ive never seen one” after which he drinks more beer. Jig then responds, “ no, you wouldn’t have” (182). At this instance the American gets defensive, but Jig ignores him which shows her transition leading up to her decision to keep the unborn and disregard the Americanr’s views. The previous exchange is important in proving that from the very beginning of the story Jig is not moved by what he says or does and thus she will keep the child. Jig is not surprised that he has never seen a white elephant; something that is <https://assignbuster.com/relationship-dynamics-in-hills-like-white-elephant/>

unwanted especially if it becomes expensive to care for. The American's response justifies that he never deals with things that he does not want.

Therefore, he closes his mind to anything he is not interested in. Jig recognizes this then switches the subject of the conversation when she looks at the bead curtain and ask him what the painting says (182). The pleasure aspect of the relationship is depicted when Jig mentions and questions the substance of the relationship, I wanted to try this new drink. That's all we do, isn't it look at things and try new drinks? The American responds I guess so (183). The American's response proves that he has no value for the relationship because he did not provide an assurance that he truly loves her and understands how much keeping the baby would mean to her. Also, the fact that he described the abortion process as a awfully simple operation suggests that he has not looked beyond the operation itself and exaggerates it to be an easy procedure. However, if the term is viewed by its literal meaning it means that an abortion is dreadful, but the procedure can be simple. In this case, he did not take into consideration the after effects the abortion would have on Jig if she follows through.

In Hills Like White Elephant the American did not base his views on the greater good for him and Jig but on his egotistic view. In Susanty's article, The Meaning of Relationship in Hemingway's ? Hills Like White Elephant., it indicates that the story was written during a period of patriarchal dominance and that the men are said to be egocentric. Susanty also suggests that the men had no understanding of a meaningful relationship and that relationships should not be based on one person's insensitive view but to rather compromise for the greater good for both. Similarly, in Hills Like White
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Elephant the American did not whole heartedly take Jig's view on the abortion seriously. His way of manipulating her through a form of guilt tripping is depicted throughout the following dialogue:

If you dont want to you dont have to. I wouldnt have you do it if you didnt want to. But I know itr's perfectly simple.

And you really want to?

I think itr's the best thing to do. But I dont want you to do it if you dont really want to. And if I do it youll be happy and thing will be like they were and youll love me?

I love you now. You know I love you.

I know. But if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and youll like it? (183)

The American was more worried about her keeping the child and not her concerns on the after effects she would experience if she does the abortion. The constant back and forth in the dialogue between the two is used as a tactic in guilt tripping Jig to make it seem as if she was overreacting.

It is important to reiterate that the American, in fact, was not ready to have a child. Due to the one-sided dominance, the relationship is broken between the two. Jig asked, Doesnt it mean anything to you? We could get along. The American says to her, of course it does, but I dont want anybody but you, I dont want anyone else and I know itr's perfectly simple (185). Once again, the American trying to persuade Jig on how easy the operation is and that his expectations on the outcome of the relationship was not to have a child but just to have her. She tries to shut him up by asking " would you please

please please please please please stop talking"? Also, she mentions I'll scream" (185).

Both her disgusted attitude towards the American as previously suggested and her efforts to keep him from talking at this point in the story suggest that she is ready to move beyond the checkpoint and make her own decisions. Jig's choice to keep the child is clearly depicted by the following excerpt, the girl smiled brightly at the woman, to thank her. Also, Jig smiles when the American says to her, I'd better take the bags over to the other side of the station (185). The fact that the American took the bags to the ? other side and Jig smiled simply proves that the side they are going to is the one that she is happy with.

Coming back, he walked through the barroom, where people waiting for the train were drinking. He drank an Anis at the bar and looked at the people. They were all waiting reasonably for the train. He went out through the bead curtain. She was sitting at the table and smiled at him. (185)

Throughout the story, this is the first time Jig smiles and seem happy. She was not content when he was trying his best to persuade her into getting an abortion. Therefore, it evident that her happiness at this point in the story is the result of being left alone for a few minutes so that she could decide what she wants to do without being interrupted.

Lastly, Jig used the dialogue throughout the story as an opportunity to insert irony in the form of sarcasm, in order to find out the American's true feelings towards her. Her findings on his egotistic views and inconsideration on the abortion helps her to make her decision. The story ends with the <https://assignbuster.com/relationship-dynamics-in-hills-like-white-elephant/>

following, I feel fine, she said. There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine (186). Jig's quote justifies that she has made up her mind to keep the child. She also disregards the American's view of her as a ? white elephant if she follows through with keeping the child. Thus, Jig keeps the child as a form of solace for the broken relationship she experienced with the American.