

Formalism and
geography in hills like
white elephants, a
short story by ernest
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When one hears the title, “ Hills like White Elephants”, what comes to mind? Maybe a visual representation of ginormous white hills or maybe something that looks to be an elephant. In fact there are such things as white elephants. White elephants are considered sacred and rare in nature. The short story “ Hills like White Elephants”, by Earnest Hemmingway, is being told through a conversation between an American man and a woman that is answering to the name of Jig. The two are waiting for a train to Madrid and as they wait a conversation sparks up between them about a difficult decision that has to be made. Hemmingway’s short story can be viewed through the critical lens of formalism. Formalism is a literary theory that focuses on the context of the story and or literary work, making the context of the story clear and understandable. The use of formalism is to take aspects such as symbolism, tone, characters, and structure to create the overall meaning behind the story.

Geography plays a major role in literature. Geography can develop characters, can be a part of the plot, symbol, mood, tone, and/or symbol (Foster). Geography in this short story shows the positive uplifting side of the situation at hand but as well shows the downfall and negativity. The setting contributes to the conflict and the tension that lies between the couple, showing the literal and figurative aspects of the situation (O’Brien). The station, an important attribute, lied between two lines of rails in the sun, I felt like this represented the two different point of views of the operation. . The couple sit facing the side of the valley where there are no trees, there is a country side in the distance that is brown and in much need of water. On the opposing side of the valley, there are “ fields of grain and trees along the

banks of the Ebro.” But as she watches the scene, “ the shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain,” foreshadowing the death of her unborn child (Johnston). I also feel like when the girl said that the hills look like white elephants, she looked upon the hills like they were beautiful in every way, something sacred and so giving to the earth. All the while she feels the same about the decision she has to make. She feels that it would be no change between her and the man, she feels that they can still love the same. As for the guy when he states that he never seen a white elephant, I felt like he didn't view the hills as she did, like he didn't care as much as her for him to be the person pushing the girl to go forward with the operation, he doesn't want change. I truly believe that he feels that if she doesn't go forward with the operation then their relationship won't be the same and he doesn't want to be around when whatever happens, happens.

Another thing to keep in mind is the cultural aspect of the setting.

Hemingway placed his story in Spanish territory. It may be a bit ironic that Hemmingway placed his characters in this setting. Most Spanish speaking countries are mostly catholic countries, which means they don't agree with abortions. “ However, the girl does not understand Spanish, a fact which helps to reveal her essential helplessness and dependency. She is a stranger in a foreign land where her male companion is her only interpreter and guide.” Their luggage shows that they are not from around the area and their luggage also hints that they have two options once they leave the station. They can go towards Madrid and become a family or go to the same place and get the abortion (Johnston).

Another Symbol that is being used is White Elephants. “ White elephants are paradoxical in nature” (Weeks). “ A white elephant, in one meaning of the term, is anything rare, expensive, and difficult to keep; any burdensome possession; an object no longer esteemed by its owner though not without value to others” (Johnston). This aspect and view of the elephant is how the man feel towards the unborn child. It seems as if he is ignoring the fact that it’s a child’s life. White elephants are sacred yet a burden to the ones that keep them. Elephants in general are very valuable and sacred but white elephants are rare and were used to show justice and fairness in Asian countries (Weeks). These elephants are a burden because people believed that these elephants should not be used for work but they had to be fed and token care of which cost a lot of money. Jig’s reference to white elephants; The fact that she feels like they can still have the whole world means that jig would accept the consequence a lot more than her supposed significant other, he feels it’s a burden that is going to keep them from having the world. It is both barren and fruitful (Johnston).

What kind of operation was Jig supposed to be having? At first I didn’t recognize what kind of operation the man was trying to get the woman to go through with, I actually had to read the story twice. It’s a certain part in the story that made me feel like the man was trying to convince the girl to get an abortion. When the man said “ I know you wouldn’t mind it, Jig. It’s really not anything. It’s just to let the air in.” I instantly tried to think of what operation let’s air in, but then as I continued to read and the story described the way the woman reacted to the topic of having an “ operation” I realized that maybe she wanted whatever it was not the same as the man but I did

realize that they were talking of an abortion. They are always trying new things, the baby would have been a burden upon their relationship. The couple was not ready to commit, well at this moment it seems like the American man is trying so hard to make her choose the decision of going through with the operation. The choice of words that Hemmingway uses when the male talks to Jig are much repetitive. Using words like “ just”, “ really”, and “ reasonably” shows which side the man stands upon with the idea of abortion, even though his words were describing everything else around him. Hemmingway used these words to show an exaggerated typical male view on life (O’Brien).

Jig is an important character in Hemmingway’s short story. The name Jig, means a dance, music for the particular dance, or something that is to be taken as a joke. Her name develops central conflict. The way the man treats her and speaks to her is kind of like he doesn’t care, like everything she is saying is irrelevant. Jig can also mean many other things. Her name could be associated with “ jigger” which refers to the whisky measures, or even a phrase like “ thinger ma jigger” in a way dehumanizing her making her seem like she is a tool or object. Hemmingway knew what he was doing when he purposely had the first appearance of Jig come up after the idea of having an operation (O’Brien)

The whole story is about having something that can be very beautiful and can bring much joy but can also stop you from doing the things that one would love to do or can even become a burden. Choices and decisions can be very difficult to make but reading this story also shows how people can be on two totally different paths in their life. Like how the station sits between <https://assignbuster.com/formalism-and-geography-in-hills-like-white-elephants-a-short-story-by-ernest-hemingway/>

two lines of rails, the couple could be on two different paths of life. Hemmingway used significant words, techniques, and word play to bring his story to life. No one really knows how this short story ends, but it creates such a cliff hanger that it gives the reader no other choice but to use their imagination, and the dialog between the characters to create an ending of their own.