

Symbolism in ernest hemingway's hills like white elephants essay

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Hills Like White Elephants is full of symbolism, much like a lot of Hemingway's work. The title itself is symbolic of the various allusions made throughout the story: the plot revolves around 'The American' and his companion, 'Jig' whilst they are waiting for their train. We are party to their conversation which appears to be a discussion about Jig getting an abortion. The American says: "But I don't want anybody but you" and this suggests this he is un-willing to share his lover with a baby. The baby and its abortion are not explicitly referred to, and this is the 'white elephant in the room', as alluded to in the title. Its sub-text runs through the entire story and although the word 'abortion' is never used, the reader is left at no loss as to what Hemingway's characters are discussing. The 'hills' too, are symbolic of obstacles and this represents how the American feels about fatherhood: the baby would simply get in the way of him living his life as he chooses.

The story is set in a railway station which is symbolic of the ideas of movement and transition. People go to the train station when they want to go somewhere else or to 'move on' from their current position: Jig seems to want to become a mother and embark upon the new journey of having a child, whereas the American seems keen to either stay put or move in the opposite direction, down a track of bachelorhood. Jig's eventual acceptance of his plea symbolises the patriarchal force which influences women's decisions every day. Her final comment of, "I'm fine... There's nothing wrong with me, I feel fine" is symbolic of the female struggle to both please herself and her male partner.

The entire story is a clear allegory for Jig's innocence and its removal by the American. As the plot develops, it is revealed that he is simply not interested in anything more than the physical and her innocence is displayed by her obedience and desire to please him, despite his lack of worth. This idea is compounded when, in the bar, she tries a drink that she has never had before: "Do you want it with water?" "I don't know" the girl said, "is it good with water?" If she was an experienced woman, Jig would know have tried this drink before and she would not accept the American's flimsy excuses for why having a baby is a good idea. It seems Jig simply just wants to please this man: after he tells her they'll be "happy again", Jig says: "And you think then we'll be alright and be happy?" Her desperation rings through and emphasizes her innocence – furthered by her willingness to be drinking alcohol whilst pregnant and the American's encouragement of this.

Written in 1927, *Hills Like White Elephants* was published at a time where subjects such as sex and abortion were highly private matters that were occasionally discussed between a husband and wife – never with an outsider and certainly never in public. Hemingway uses symbolism to present the sub-text whilst starkly juxtaposing the subject matter with its out-of-place historical context: an un-married couple discussing her abortion in a public bar. This helps to compound the true message behind their words and serves to highlight the American as a scoundrel and Jig as the innocent under his spell.

References

1. Hemingway, Ernest. " Hills Like White Elephants." Men Without Women. London: Arrow, 1994.
2. Meshram, N. G. The Fiction of Ernest Hemingway. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers and Distributors, 2002.