

Gender roles and symbolism in "hills like white elephants"



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In the short story "Hills like White Elephants," there is a constant power struggle between the two characters. At first glance, the woman comes off as timid and resigned to the fact that she is going to do whatever it takes to make the man happy. The man is seen as domineering and almost indifferent to the woman's feelings as he makes his argument to have the child aborted. It may seem as if the man, or the American, is controlling the decision of whether or not Jig gets the abortion, but through dialogue regarding the abortion, the symbolism of the hills versus the mountains and the railroad tracks and luggage, Jig gives subtle hints that she has already made up her mind to keep the child.

Hemingway's use of dialogue between the two characters regarding the abortion procedure gives an insight into the relationship dynamic and the position of the characters. The American man starts the conversation by telling Jig how "awfully simple" an abortion is. This shows that he thinks she should get it done and also how little thought he has put into the operation and the impact it will have on her. Jig does not respond, which can be interpreted by the audience as silent defiance to his comment. He continues to slyly try and persuade her by saying he knows lots of people who have done it and that the child will only cause them to be unhappy, all the while she never gives him an answer, furthering the audience's belief that her position is that she does not want to give up the child. The point of this dialogue is to show the reader the decision the American and Jig have to make and how he is trying to control and persuade her into giving up the child.

Another way Hemingway displays the conflict the woman is facing, is when their conversation turns to discussing the land and hills they are looking at, and the symbolic meaning behind them. "The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry" (Hemingway). She then goes on to compare the hills to white elephants, which in some cultures are considered to be a possession that is useless or troublesome, especially one that is expensive to maintain or difficult to dispose of. By describing the land as being dry and brown, Hemingway uses it to symbolize infertility, which could be a worry plaguing Jig's mind. What if she aborts this baby and can not have another one? Stanley Renner from Illinois State University uses the symbolism to describes the conflict as, "the hills on one side of the valley are dry and barren; those on the other side are described with imagery of living, growing things. Thus in choosing whether to abort or have the child, the couple are choosing between two ways of life". The man is unaware of her internal debate and it seems as if he does not want to have the discussion at all.

The railroad tracks and the luggage are the most prominent symbols of the couple's decision. The railroad tracks symbolize the two different paths the couple could take, which are abortion or no abortion. Both are paths are irreversible. Renner brings up an interesting point about how the two tracks are not only two different paths they could take, but also two opposing viewpoints about the abortion. "The two lines of rails representing the opposite choices available to them; the two sides of the valley representing two opposing directions in life, this side the way the American wants to go and the other side the way the girl wants to go" (Renner). The luggage

symbolizes the baby and the emotional weight of the decision they are about to make. In the end, the man carries the bags to the opposite side of the train tracks. This means that he not only made the decision for both of them, but he is also carrying the weight of their decision. The woman smiling when he came back from taking the bags could mean she is relieved that he made the call in regards to the abortion and they are going to discuss it while they finish their beers.

Throughout the story, the woman's internal struggle was displayed through symbolism of the scenery and dialogue. As she states in her own words, Jig wants to make the American happy, but her reluctance to give up her child is evident. Hemingway gave the man the control in the end, by allowing him to make the decision and take the bags, but the woman certainly held her own and made it clear she did not want to have an abortion.

Works Cited

Hemingway, Ernest. "Hills like White Elephants." *Men Without Women*. New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction, 1997. Print.

Renner, Stanley. Moving to The Girl's Side of "Hills Like White Elephants" (n.d.): n. pag. Illinois State University. Web.