

# THE MEANING OF RELATIONSHIP IN HEMINGWAY'S "HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANT"

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**Abstract:** This article is intended to postulate the position of women described well by Hemingway as a girl called Jig in "Hills like White Elephants" as a marginal part of a patriarchal society. Difficulty is found in describing the exact nature of a man-woman relationship in Hemingway as the woman characters are so thinly portrayed. "Hills like White Elephants" suggests a relationship between the meaning of white elephants and the man's attitude toward the unborn child. The relationship presents the representation of boredom, desperateness of life, the sense of lost happiness, and the awareness of the failure of love. The story also can be defined into a two-part theme. The first is a commentary about the way selfishness can corrupt a relationship. The second comments on life and what it means to bear life.

**Keywords:** attitude, character, Hemingway, relationship, women

The position of women as a marginal part of a patriarchal society is described well by Hemingway as a girl called Jig in "Hills like White Elephants". The female characters have the problem in her marriage and in their life and she tries to react and give her opinion or argument to reduce the problem. It is difficult to describe the exact nature of a man-woman relationship in Hemingway as the woman characters are so thinly portrayed. The male characters, on the other hand, have such gigantic egos that it is not possible for them to achieve any but the most unsatisfactory level of relationship with their women: a relationship of animal attraction or infatuation. Their silly interaction of the need to protect their freedom does not justify their initial need for woman. They are largely so full of themselves that they are incapable of responding to their female partners' feelings and sentiments. Male character is unable to comprehend that a love-relationship is a two-way channel that

involves give and take, sacrifice and responsibility and that a woman's feelings should be taken into consideration.

On the reading of Hemingway's short story, we may not get the true nature of man-woman relationship which Hemingway approves. His stories have many meanings sometimes and we have to catch the true meaning carefully. We may be inclined to think that Hemingway deliberately makes the woman less than the man and that the woman is subservient to the man. To blame Hemingway as an insensitive, one-dimensional man is to condemn his art. Objective readers, however, would recognize that Hemingway wants his readers to focus on the male protagonist in his fiction. This is because the male protagonist has the courage that takes into account physical power, brute force and a corresponding mental freedom from fear. Second, the world of Hemingway is the world of man where the man is guided by the sole yardstick of courage. The woman

has neither the scope nor the rightful place in it. Here man single-handedly pursues his manliness without seeking help from woman or without being dependent on her.

On the surface, Hemingway seems to portray love, marriage, and women as inevitable paths to heartache and injury. Yet, one must consider the female characters in Hemingway's works that do not intend to wound those they love. Hemingway's art so often associated with his public persona as above all the masculine, indeed macho writer beat its finest when it is dealing about men without women and about the ambiguities of sexual experience.

The woman's point of view is again central to "Hills like White Elephants". This is episode-story, presenting simply a couple's forty-minute wait at a small Spanish railway station and their conversation about (it is implicitly clear but never stated) the woman's proposed abortion. The story is almost entirely made up of simple dialogue, and its success lies in the way this dialogue is charged with tone and implication. The man's detachment and the woman's deeper emotional involvement and anxiety emerge sharply in their tense exchanges. The brevity of the story and the absence of tonal markers (adverbs, for instance) make for an active participation by the reader. In a similar way the title's relation to the story prompts the imaginative response. It evokes both the place and her response to it.

Many of Hemingway's stories, though ostensibly "without women", gain their significance and point from the fact that women's presence is still felt significantly in the background. Women seem unable to move outside of the societal boundaries without negative consequences. They may assume as the following characteristics: subservient, accommodating, dependent, unstable, weak, selfless, restrained, sacrificing, inferior and passive. Despite these claims, all of the characters in these selected stories are actually strong

characters and have strong will.

### **The Theme of Relationship**

Characters are similar to people in the real life. People are seen as either using their Valued Relating Style and feeling empowered and rewarded, or using a non-preferred style and feeling devalued and unrewarded. If the environment provides opportunities for an individual to use their Valued Relating Style and rewards the subsequent behavior, the individual usually reports feeling good about him or herself and good about their relationships. Their sense of self-esteem rises and their sense of well-being are enhanced. If, on the other hand, the person is consistently denied the opportunity to use their Valued Relating Style, there can be serious consequences. It is assumed that every individual has some quantity of each of the personal strengths in their makeup. The degree of each strength varies from individual to individual. In other words, no two people are exactly alike, even when the personal strengths that they use most frequently are the same. The story here illustrates terrific relationships. It gives us a picture of what causes tension in relationships and the quality of listening is vital to the relationship.

Move to the first story, "Hills like White Elephants", touches the issue of communication problem in a relationship. The story flows through the conversation between the two main characters, the American and the girl, called Jig. The American seems to love adventurous life, traveling and seeing new sights. He chooses his words advantageously, almost deceitfully when trying to convince the girl that an abortion is easy surgery, "It's not really an operation at all" (Hemingway 275). This remark reveals how desperate he is to make the decision for the girl. Meanwhile, by the end of the story, the girl or Jig knows that the abortion will cause their relationship to fail, but she does not want to give up. Like Jig and her boyfriend, we have to face the

similar situation. Along with the anxiety of our minds, nature also responds in a meaningful way. This feeling is quite intense. The act of abortion is not new in human culture and activity, and although we find it in this story in the American society, it is familiar as well in every part of the world.

Hemingway begins the story by giving the details of the setting. The openness and loneliness around the railroad station imply that there is no way to back out of the problem at hand and that the man and the girl must address it now. The heat turns the scene into a virtual teakettle, boiling and screaming under pressure. The landscape that encompasses the station plays a fundamental role in the conflict of the story through its extensive symbolism. The train tracks form a dividing line between the barren expanse of land stretching toward the hills on one side and the green, fertile farmland on the other, symbolizing the choice faced by each of them and their differing interpretations of the dilemma of pregnancy. *Jig* focuses on the landscape during the conversation, rarely making eye contact with the man (Fletcher, 1980).

When the girl sees the long and white hills she says "they look like white elephants". As she observes the white hills she foresees elatedly the birth of her baby which is something unique like the uncommon white elephant. The color white symbolizes the innocence and purity of her unborn child. She also admires the rest of the scenery. The girl stood up and walked to the end of the station. Across, on the other side, were the fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro. Far away, beyond the river, were mountains. The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees... (Hemingway 276). The fields of grain and trees represent fertility and fruitfulness, which symbolize her current pregnant state and the life in her womb. The Ebro River also represents life, as it germinates the fields. Just as the girl appreciates the panorama and its connection

to her unborn child the "shadow of a cloud", which represents the abortion of the fetus, overcomes her happiness. After an exchange of words with the man, she again looks at the scenery, but this time in a different way, as the following sentence illustrates, "They sat down at the table and the girl looked across the hills on the dry side of the valley and the man looked at her and at the table" (Hemingway 277). The man is obviously in favor of the abortion, and everything he says is an effort to persuade her into it. As she considers his point of view she looks at the dry side of the valley, which is barren and sterile, symbolizing her body after the abortion.

The man further complicates the discussion by contradicting himself. For each time he reassures the girl he wants what she wants, he spends at least one line identifying exactly what he wants. This is clearly seen in the following conversation, "You've got to realize ... that I don't want you to do it if you don't want to. I'm perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you" (Hemingway 277). So far it sounds as if his only wish is for her to do what she wants. But when she asks if it means anything to him, he immediately responds, "Of course it does. But I don't want anybody but you. I don't want anyone else. And I know it's perfectly simple" (Hemingway 277).

Right away the girl seems to show what is going on in her mind. When the man initially directs the conversation to the operation (abortion), her reaction is described, "The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on ... did not say anything" (Hemingway 275). "Once they take it away, you never get it back" (Hemingway 276). An obvious hint, yet she never clearly voices her hunger to have the baby. She continues to desire his will over hers in lines such as this one, "Then I'll do it. Because I don't care about me" (Hemingway 275). After a few of these vain attempts to convince the man to consider having the baby, she implores him to "Would you please

please please please please please please stop talking” (Hemingway 277). These words do not show the girl’s weakness and dependent nature anymore but it implies something more. She wants his man to stop pushing her to do the abortion.

Hemingway also uses a component of the setting, a beaded curtain which serves as a partition in the bar, to show the conflict between the characters. At one point during their conversation, “the girl looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two of the strings of beads” (Hemingway 275). It seems that she diverts her attention by busying herself. Others symbolisms are the curtain, drinking and Jig’s name. The curtain includes the man’s opinion which may be said to represent the man’s desire to maintain the status quo in their relationship and indeed, drinking is a part of the man’s present lifestyle. Upon entering the bar the man orders a pair of alcoholic drinks for the couple, then another. The girl later comments about how their relationship seems to revolve around looking at things and trying new drinks.

When the conversation begins, Jig asks the man what they should have to drink. They decide on beer, and he orders two “big ones”. The hot weather, the relief sought in beer and cold alcoholic drinks mirror a disagreement between the two people. They spend the time drinking and waiting for the train to arrive. Jig comments on the beaded curtains and asks what it says. The American replies “Anis del Toro. It’s a drink” (Hemingway 274). They order this because they want to try new things, perhaps considering the possibility of having a new relationship or a new experience in life, but when she tastes it she says “it tastes like licorice” (Hemingway 274) which is very common and not exotic taste, and she adds that “Everything tastes of licorice. Especially all the things you’ve waited so long for...” (Hemingway 274) implies that when you wait for something for a long time, once you get it, it loses its appeal. Later on there is a reference

to the routine they seem to be in when she says “that’s all we do, isn’t it—look at things and try new drinks?” (Hemingway 274). This seems to be saying that she is dissatisfied with their life together. She could want more from life, thinking about a possible life including a baby. After trying the new, they order another round of beer and continue their conversation about the abortion. Jig’s name is symbolically significant, as in the fact that her real name is never given, that “Jig” is only her lover’s pet name for her. In addition to being a dated slang term for sexual intercourse, the word jig can mean a sprightly Celtic dance or any of several different kinds of tools; this implies that the American views Jig as more of a loving object or tool than a person with feelings and values to be respected (O’Brien, 1982).

“Hills like White Elephants” suggests a relationship between the meaning of white elephants and the man’s attitude toward the unborn child. One definition of white elephant as given by Webster’s 21st Century Dictionary: “[An] awkward, useless possession”. A white elephant has also been defined as an item that is worthless to one but priceless to another, bringing to mind the saying, one man’s trash is another man’s treasure. In the case of Hemingway’s couple, the baby represents something of no apparent value to the man, yet priceless to the girl. Jig’s reference to white elephants might be a characterization of the emotional neglect occurring in the relationship. Jig’s statement that she “[doesn’t] care about [herself]”, would seem to indicate that her lover’s inability to recognize her emotional needs leaves her life, which is implicitly spent entirely with the American, meaningless. Her submission to his will, in conceding to have the operation, reflects an underlying feeling of worthlessness that the American, perhaps unconsciously, exploits to gain individual happiness from her. In this way, Jig might feel that she is the American’s white elephant; a useless artifact that serves only to bolster the pride of its owner.

The story also can be defined into a two-part theme. The first is a commentary about the way selfishness can corrupt a relationship. The second comments on life and what it means to bear life. The way the girl sees part of the valley as brown and dry image symbolizes what her womb will be like when the abortion is over. Later she looks out over the fertile side of the valley and a cloud passes over it, symbolizing the loss of fertility that can come with abortion. She has a choice to make between death or fertility and life. Hemingway even uses something as seemingly insignificant as the curtain as a symbol. The curtain is a barrier, much like the cervical opening is to the womb, which the man disturbs by walking through it in the end.

The topic of the conversation and the way both characters handle it, is the main element that draws their characters into sharp round focus. Though the girl does not want to talk about the issue, they do anyway. From this, the reader gets a clear picture of how each character feels, and reacts to such a brash topic. The man seems to think its no big deal to have an abortion and is drawn as a manipulative jerk. The girl, on the other hand, is submissive, but would like to keep the child growing in her womb. Both characters are drawn quickly, but very effectively, by their viewpoints.

The man in the story is the antagonist. He is the jerk who knocked up the girl, and doesn't want to take responsibility. He tries to convince her about having an abortion is the only thing that will help their relationship. Apparently he has grown cold towards her since she found out that she is pregnant. She asks him whether he still loves her again if she has it done. He insists that he already does love her, but the reader can see only his selfishness, in only wanting her, has already begun to take its toll on the relationship. He tries to convince her that the surgery is a "simple operation," all they do is "let the air in". He tries to tell her that everyone is doing it these

days. He is a manipulative person who has no respect for life. He also manipulates her further by saying he doesn't care if she does it, that he would be just fine if she didn't. He doesn't really mean it. He continually pushes her when she doesn't want to talk about it. He really has no respect for her. He corrupts their relationship with his selfishness, which eventually causes it to fall apart.

The girl juxtaposes the man manipulative nature in that she is submissive, willing to please, even though she feels otherwise. She is thinking about the life she carries inside of her, but she wants the love of her man. She tries to avoid the conversation, so she won't have to deal with what he is making her do. When she does talk, they end up ordering several drinks. She seems to want to drown out her misery. One of the most character defining places in the story is when she says, "And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible" (Hemingway 276). She wants a full life with her husband but because of his attitude towards the life within her it is impossible. He says they could have everything, but "No, it isn't. And once they take it away, you can never get it back" (Hemingway 276). She knows they can't have everything. They can't have their child. She values life, but to save their relationship she feels she has to submit.

Hemingway uses the word "abortion" which is a well-known phenomenon in the story. In reality, we know that a woman has to abort because of her physical problems. Often the husband or the male figure in the family wants the abortion because he wants to spend more and longer time with his wife or his female counterpart or the husband feels that he will lose his wife's uninterrupted love and attention if she gives birth to a child. His wife's love and attention has to be shared with the baby. Because of the baby, his wife will not be able to give him company as before and will not be able to accompany him anywhere at the spur of the moment. For these reasons,

the wife is compelled to resort to abortion. Mis-understandings arise when the wife lacks interest in doing so. Because of this issue of abortion, the two main characters of the story run into conflict between themselves.

There is only one reason here, that is, the man cannot assure his girl that the abortion is no big deal and that if she goes for it things will be all right as before. The girl says, "And if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you'll love me?" (Hemingway 275). The girl in the story all along is torn by this conflict, to be or not to be. If she does it "it will be nice again" and the hills will look "like white elephants". Their agony, misunderstandings, anxiety, and restlessness have been depicted so adroitly by Hemingway. Generally the pressure comes from the male partner.

This incident may apparently be an insignificant one for some, but it has changed our perspectives on life. Obviously, the man has more control and authority than the girl. The man is the protagonist so he takes more space in the story and the story is based on what he wants. His goal is to convince Jig to get aborted while Jig has an opposed idea, which is not getting an abortion. Her man has insisted so much that she can not express her words, opinion and feeling. The man's power over woman is demonstrated clearly. The girl is a weak person, someone who can not decide an important thing in her whole life without asking her husband, someone who is unable to use her own judgment; someone who needs her man's approval before doing anything, in the eyes of the man. She says "And you think then we'll be all right and be happy?" "And you really want to?" "And if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you'll love me?" (Hemingway 275). All these questions seem sacrifice her desire. She tends to care about his happiness than hers. She does not mean it. She gives the question in order to make her man think and open his eyes.

On the contrary, the man is forceful and

dominant. He insists her and puts a lot of pressure on her to do the abortion. He is so persistent and almost commands her to get the abortion in order to push her to have no choices and accept it. By saying these following sentences, for example, "But I don't want anybody but you. I don't want any one else". "I don't care anything about it". "It's really an awfully simple operation". "You don't have to be afraid, I know lots of people that have done it". "I won't worry about that because it's perfectly simple" (Hemingway 277) over and over again, he has applied his strategy to win. Of course, the girl is very tempted but she still confused because she really wants the baby.

The interesting words come from the girl when she says "Would you please please please...stop talking". It is very important to the writer of the thesis to pay more attention to these girl's words. She feels powerless about the depressed situation. Maybe she is so fed up of hearing her man's words. Truly she is in a weakly position. However it is not the end to the girl. She needs a little courage to say that words. "Please stop talking" is not directly stated that the winner is the man, not yet. It is a kind of self-reliance and a protest not only to the man but also to her, to her surrounding. It is the time to stop hearing to the man. In short, Hemingway transmitted the message that man's power over woman is noticeable in this story. The man is the boss and he still leads the society. On the other hand, Hemingway also digs out the deepest thing in woman heart and mind. Through the female character, that is the girl, he shows that woman actually needs more space to breath in their life. Their relationship is not a comfort thing to go on living. Sometimes man must stop talking or stop asking. At the end of the story, the man takes the initiative to pick up the couple's luggage and port it to the "other tracks" on the opposite side of the station, symbolizing his sense of primacy in making the decision to give up their child and betray-

ing his insistence to Jig that the decision is entirely in her hands.

## CONCLUSION

Hemingway responded to every pressure of his time, recording its progress and aging as it aged. His life seemed to embody the promise of America with good fortune, hard work, talent, ambition, and a little ruthlessness a man can create himself in the image of his choosing. As a young man in Paris, Hemingway dedicated himself to his writing, and he let nothing interfere with his goal. He created a public persona to match his prose, becoming the person he wanted to be. Like that of other self-made Americans, however, Hemingway's invented self was a mask that he wore with less and less ease as he grew older. Despite his public image, despite his raucous life and several wives, and despite the critics who turned on him, he left stories and novels so starkly moving that some have become a permanent part of the American cultural inheritance.

It is to know one of the main issues faced especially by women in Hemingway's stories. It is Hemingway's own intention to explore the theme which is based on his life experiences. This theme is one of the general issues in ordinarily human life. The theme reflects Hemingway's approach to life in general. His literature was his own interests in hunting, love, military services, adventure, and so on. Hemingway's talent lies in deep psychological insight into human nature. Moreover, the way Hemingway portrayed characters in the stories are dynamic, deep, and open ended.

The theme of relationships cover the very basic matter in human life, for instance, man-woman relationship in marriage, son-mother relationship, daughter-mother relationship, and son-father relationship. It describes the pressure in the human relationship and always a failed relationship or the relationship finally ends in abandonment. The relation-

ship presents the representation of boredom, desperateness of life, the sense of lost happiness, and the awareness of the failure of love. The man has authority about language, money, science, and reason (all cultural bases). Woman's authority is physical in that she is imaginative and resistant to the man's cultural weapons.

Next, namely the importance to connect Hemingway's stories to his own life. Whether or not one believes Hemingway's works to be semi-autobiographical, his characters undoubtedly reflect Hemingway's experiences, connecting life and fiction. Many parallels have been drawn between Hemingway's life and fiction. Most of Hemingway's fiction is based on his own personal experience. When creating the fiction, he invents from his experience. Hemingway led a troubled life. The suffering he experienced due to injury, illness, love, multiple wars, and unsuccessful relationships undoubtedly inspired much of his writing, and ultimately culminated with his suicide in 1961. He suffered a number of accidents as well, both war-related and not. Hemingway badly injured his leg while he was as an ambulance driver, suffered a car crash, plane crashes and a variety of serious health problems throughout his life.

Perpetually afflicted by illness, Hemingway used writing and his numerous relationships to try to remedy his ailments. Writing, illness, and love were intimately connected in Hemingway's life and his literature. Love, body, country, and mind are all at least somewhat infected. In his short stories, Hemingway depicts the injured nature of humankind. No one is spared pain or death. Living, for Hemingway's characters, is a struggle to accept and survive. Hemingway suggests that, in term of the human condition, Hemingway chooses risk in his own life and literature, opting for life, pain, and love rather than emptiness. Refer to his stories, a Hemingway hero would take notice of this ill fate and make the best of it. The motive behind his heroic figure is not

glory, or fortune, or the justice, or the need for experience. They are inspired neither by vanity or ambition nor a desire to better the world. Instead, their behavior is a reaction to

the moral emptiness of the universe, an emptiness that they feel compelled to fill by their own special efforts.

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