Hills Like White Elephants

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Ernest Hemingway was born in Illinois just before the turn of the century. He grew up outside a Chicago suburb, spending summers with his family in rural Michigan. After high school, he got a job writing for *The Kansas City Star*, but left after only six months to join the Red Cross Ambulance Corps during World War I, where he was injured and awarded the Silver Medal of Military Valor. Afterward, he lived in Ontario and Chicago, where he met his first wife Hadley Richardson. In 1921 they moved to Paris, where he began a long friendship with F. Scott Fitzgerald and other expatriate American writers of the "lost generation." After the 1926 publication of his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, he divorced Hadley and married Arkansas native Pauline Pfeiffer. The couple moved to Florida where Hemingway wrote *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), which became a bestseller. Hemingway then moved to Spain to serve as a war correspondent in the Spanish Civil War, a job which inspired his famous 1939 novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. After its publication, he met his third wife, Martha Gellhorn. Hemingway married his fourth and final wife, Mary Hemingway, in 1946, and the couple spent the next fourteen years in Cuba. After a final move to Ketchum, Idaho, Hemingway took his own life in 1961, just as his father had in 1928. Hemingway left behind his wife and three sons. In the literary world, his name has become synonymous with minimalist, stripped down prose.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The two wars Hemingway directly participated in, as an ambulance driver in World War I and a foreign correspondent during the Spanish Civil War, were formative periods of the writer's life, the crucible in which his famous writing style was forged. As a World War I ambulance driver at only 18 years old, Hemingway was seriously wounded by shrapnel and forced to recuperate for several months in Italy before returning to his family in the United States. Upon his return, however, Hemingway struggled to adapt to civilian life after the horrors of war, part of the inspiration for his short story "Soldier's Home." The effects of these early traumatizing exposures to war, followed by his subsequent and equally painful experiences in the Spanish Civil War, molded Hemingway's bleak and often cruel depiction of human relationships in his prose. Notably, he was present at the Battle of the Ebro in 1938, the most protracted battle of the Spanish Civil War, which lasted months and left tens of thousands dead.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Hemingway was a prolific writer, publishing poems, stories, memoirs, and novels. His most famous works are the novels *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell To Arms*, and the novella *The Old Man and the Sea*, which exemplify his minimalist, "grace under pressure" writing style. As a member of the "Lost Generation" of American writers and artists who spent their time in Europe after World War I, Hemingway was a friend (and sometimes "frenemy") of many of the significant writers of the period, including F. Scott Fitzgerald (*The Great Gatsby*, *Tender is the Night*), and his work often played with themes common in the work of other Lost Generation writers. Many writers have been inspired by Hemingway's stark, minimalist prose, including novelist Cormac McCarthy (author of *The Road* and *No Country for Old Men*), short story writer Raymond Carver (author of *Will You Please Be Quiet, Please?* and *Cathedral*), and fiction writer Denis Johnson (author of *Jesus' Son*).

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Hills Like White Elephants
- **When Written:** Approximately 1926
- **Where Written:** August 1927
- **When Published:** The literary magazine *Transition*
- **Literary Period:** Early modernism
- **Genre:** In the larger sense, this story belongs to the 20th century short story modernist fiction genre. Hemingway was famous for his "Iceberg Theory" of fiction writing, which holds that powerful writing relies most on what it omits, what is concealed out of the reader's sight. The theory's name stems from its analogy with icebergs; just as one can only see the small sliver of an iceberg exposed above the water, so should the minimalist style of fiction allude to but not reveal its implied and "deeper" meaning. Beginning his writing career as a journalist, Hemingway favored clipped, impersonal statements over subtle, emotional, or poetic styles of writing. His fiction style followed this model of objective reporting, hinting obliquely at characters' feelings and motives.
- **Setting:** Train station near the river Ebro in Spain.
- **Climax:** In such a compressed scene with such stripped down prose, it is difficult to determine an exact climax. However, tensions between the man and girl boil to the point where she threatens to scream if he keeps talking about getting an abortion. In a moment of desperation, faced with the impossibility of their talking, the man moves the luggage to the other side of the station. This moment signifies the first physical separation between the man and the girl in the story.
- **Point of View:** This story engages in delicate shifts of free indirect discourse, in which the reader slips into both the

man and the girl's points of view. However, in line with Hemingway's distinctive style, the story avoids explicit expressions of perspective in favor of journalistic precision and impersonal objectivity.

EXTRA CREDIT

American Expatriates in Paris. Hemingway was a frequent visitor to Gertrude Stein's salon in Paris where he socialized with artistic legends such as Pablo Picasso, Ezra Pound, and Joan Miro.

Hemingway the Hunter Hemingway was an avid hunter throughout his life, even going on safari in Africa in 1933, the inspiration behind his 1936 story "The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber."

PLOT SUMMARY

The story opens with the American man and the girl sitting outside a bar at a **train station** near the Ebro river in Spain. The two sit drinking beer and liquor in the sweltering heat and sun **light** as they wait for their train to Madrid. A Spanish woman, a waitress, comes in and out of the bar through a beaded curtain bringing the two beer and anise.

The man and girl have been traveling together as a romantic couple, but at the moment the two are bickering. As the two sit drinking **alcohol**, it becomes clear that the girl is pregnant and the man is encouraging her to get an abortion, though neither directly names the issue they are discussing. The man argues that getting an abortion will restore their relationship to what it was before. As the two dance around the issue at hand, the girl comments on the **barren** but beautiful hills around them and the liquor they're drinking. As the man continues to pursue the issue of the abortion however, the girl begs him to stop talking.

The man excuses himself to move his bags to the other side of the station. In this moment of separation, he looks with relief at the other travelers "waiting reasonably for the train," suggesting that he is frustrated and angry with the girl for not acceding to his request. When he returns to their table at the bar and asks if she feels better, she responds that she feels fine and that there's nothing wrong.

CHARACTERS

The Man – In accordance with Hemingway's characteristically sparse style, this main character is identified only as "the man" and occasionally "the American" without any identifying descriptors or background information. When the story opens, he is waiting at a **train station** near the river Ebro in Spain with the girl, a young woman with whom he has a romantic relationship and who has recently become pregnant. The only clue as to why he and she are at this station is the luggage beside them, covered with "labels…from all the hotels where they had spent nights." As the man and the girl talk, it becomes evident that the man is unhappy about the pregnancy, though the issue is never directly mentioned. While the girl seems resistant to the idea of having an abortion, the man argues that "it's all perfectly natural" and the two will be happy as they "were before" if she goes through with the procedure. The man is clearly the one who holds the most power in this relationship, believing that he knows what is best for both of them. He undermines and ultimately grows angry with the girl's attempts to express her differing feelings about her pregnancy, and in the end seems to get his way.

The Girl (Jig) – The girl is the female companion of the story's other main character, the man. Unlike the man, the girl's name (or nickname) is revealed to the reader when the man is imploring her to get an abortion. However, this is the only information we have as to her background. She seems to be younger than the waitress, who is identified as the woman as opposed to a girl. The girl and the man are both tourists in Spain waiting for their train to Madrid when the story opens. The girl does not understand Spanish and relies on the man to translate their waitress's words. In her interactions with the man she is generally younger and more hopeful; in turn, her perspective on her pregnancy is one of opportunity, a chance to transform her relationship with the man. However, she ultimately defers to the man's decisions, silencing her own point of view despite an obvious, though unstated, sense of sadness and desperation about it.

The Woman (the Waitress) – Throughout the story the girl and the man sit drinking outside the **train station** bar where the woman is their waitress. Throughout the man and the girl's conversation about whether to get an abortion, the woman comes and goes bringing them **beer and liquor**. The woman speaks only Spanish, though Hemingway writes her words as English, and the man must translate the woman's words for the girl. This situation requiring the man's translation for the girl characterizes the relationship between the man and the girl and the man's position of power over her.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

THE LIMITS OF LANGUAGE

As in most of his fiction, Hemingway is interested in where language breaks down between individuals

and how what is unsaid or what is unspeakable can define and divide individuals. At a purely stylistic level, Hemingway exposes the inadequacy of language through his use of unnamed characters and minimalist, stripped down sentences. Without using details to describe how "the man" or "the girl" look or sound, Hemingway instead chooses to focus almost exclusively on the dialogue between the two charactersto suggest the growing alienation between them. The story's very title of "Hills Like White Elephants," with its use of simile to gesture at the story's underlying tension of a pregnancy neither character feels able to directly mention, reflects the characters' critical loss for words.

Beyond narrative style, the conversation between "the man" and "the girl" hinges on the inadequacy of what they can say or not say to one another. The man continually misunderstands or contradicts the girl, to the point that the girl begs him to stop talking at all. Though they mirror each other's language, repeating the same words, the effect is as of an echo chamber—words repeated meaninglessly without actual communication. Finally, the looming decision that drives the whole story—whether or not the girl will get an abortion—goes unnamed by either character. They both allude to it but seem unable to discuss it directly, allowing the conversation to lapse into silences or angry outbursts instead.

An added layer to the issue of the failure of language in this story is the fact that the events are unfolding between two English-speaking tourists in Spain. Throughout the story as the characters **drink,**the waitress intermittently enters the scene, speaking in Spanish, which the man must translate for the girl. This situation draws attention to the idea of translation, and yet also underscores how, ironically, even though they speak the same language, it is the man and girl who are in the most need of a translator.

CHOICE

Significantly, this story unfolds as the man and the girl wait at a **station** for a train to Madrid. The heat is oppressive and the two are forced to wait, **drinking** away the afternoon till the train arrives. This sense of agonizing waiting permeates the story from the setting itself—a hot, **dry river valley** at a literal crossroads—to the crucial decision the couple is trying to make: whether or not to have an abortion.

To leave or to stay, to embrace parenthood or to reject it,to give up one's own desires for the desires of another, are key decisions at play here.The delayed resolution of these decisions forms the driving action of the story.

FREEDOM VS FAMILY

As the story makes clear from the beginning, both the man and the girl are accustomed to a free, uncommitted lifestyle. When the man looks at their combined luggage, it is covered with "labels…from all the hotels where they had spent nights." The two of them have spent a long time traveling together, going wherever they wanted without restriction. The decision to carry through with the girl's pregnancy and create a family would completely alter the nature of their relationship. They would have to settle down. Rather than spending nights in hotel after hotel, they would have to build a home of their own. The man very definitively doesn't want to "settle down" in this way, and thinks it will be easy not to. He is firm in his conviction that this pregnancy is "the only thing that's made us unhappy" and that getting the abortion will be "perfectly simple" and "perfectly natural." In a sense, he thinks that the pregnancy is something they can just leave behind the way they would leave a hotel they'd already stayed in.

The girl, on the other hand, maintains a wholly different attitude toward her pregnancy. To her, having a child with her partner promises a world where "we could have everything," an altogether different definition of freedom. Ultimately, however, she tentatively agrees to the procedure, surrendering her own freedom of choice to a different sort of idea of "family," as she hopes that doing so will restore the man's love for her. The story implies, though, through the girl's initial resistance and then her perhaps too-strong statement that nothing is wrong, that the girl will not be able to so "freely" move on from the pregnancy, and that the man's insistence on maintaining *his* definition of freedom has impinged on the girl's own freedom.

MEN, WOMEN, AND RELATIONSHIPS

At the heart of "Hills Like White Elephants" is Hemingway's examination of the man and girl's deeply flawed relationship, a relationship that champions "freedom" at the cost of honesty, respect, and commitment. In this sense, the man and girl represent stereotypes of male and female roles: the male as active and the female as passive. In this gender framework, the man makes the decisions and the female complies. However, as the story illustrates, such a power dynamic is fundamentally flawed and destructive. The man is domineering in all his interactions, andthough he pays lip service to wanting to make the girl happy, his decisions are ultimately guided by his own desires. He wants the girl to seekan abortion in order to maintain the freedom he enjoys, but he wants it to be her decision. For the man,it is not enough for her to do what he wants, but she must also *want* what he wants. The man seeks to control both the girl's actions and intentions as though she were a child, a deeply unhealthy and damaging pattern of behavior.

At first the girl is resistant to the man's emotional manipulation. She attempts to paint a picture of the future life she and the man could have together if they were to have a child. The man, though, is unwilling even to entertain these notions, and yet he

phrases his refusal in the manipulative language of love, claiming that "I don't want anybody but you." Eventually the girl acquiesces to the man's overbearing insistence, surrendering her personal freedom to his wishes. At the story's conclusion, when he asks her if she feels better, the girl's stiff reply reveals her true feelings: "I feel fine. There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine." This final act of concealment and self-suppression suggests that this relationship, so representative of the traditional dynamic between men and women at the time,will remain stalled in its present unhealthy stateuntil it likely falls apart completely.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BARREN/FERTILE LAND

As the story opens, we are introduced first and foremost to the setting's barren landscape, which is described as "brown and dry," with "no shade" and "no trees." Yet while the story feels as though it were taking place in a desert—both because of the literal dryness of the landscape and in the sense of loneliness and alienation between the man and the woman—we are told at the beginning that the story is in fact unfolding beside the Ebro River. And, as the girl notes, this is not a place totally devoid of beauty. She describes the hills along the river, in fact, as "lovely hills," particularly "the coloring of their skin through the trees." The girl, who is pregnant and on the precipice of deciding whether or not to end the pregnancy, is sensitive to the latent beauty and fertility of this environment, though both of these things are invisible to her male companion. In this way the land itself represents both the girl with her possibility of motherhood and the conflicting barrenness of her relationship with a man who urges an abortion she doesn't want.

LIGHT

The events in the story are suffused with the pounding light of the sun and the heat it produces. From the story's opening we are aware of the sun's heat, drying the grass of the hills, driving passengers into the shade of the station's bar and the comfort of **drink**. Yet while the light can be seen as harsh, it also represents the light of truth and honesty, which neither the man nor the girl is willing to face. Instead, the two prefer to avoid honestly discussing the serious problems in their relationship. Neither has the strength to face the issue of the abortion head on, and as a result, both spar in the "warm shadow" of the bar, discussing everything except the real terms of their crumbling relationship. The light may be harsh then, but avoiding the light as the man and girl do is portrayed as destructive.

ALCOHOL

Drinking is the only source of relief that the man and the girl can find from both the harsh, hot **sunlight** and the complications of their own relationship. For such a short story, both characters consume an extraordinary amount of beer and liquor. In fact, the only pause in their bickering occurs when they are ordering or consuming their drinks. It is important to note, however, that alcohol is not portrayed as a positive force here. While water produces life and nurtures living things, making them grow, the alcohol in the story affords only temporary relief—the relief of avoidance and the chance to briefly lose one's self.

THE TRAIN STATION

In literature, crossroads often represent a situation in which a character needs to make a crucial decision—just as the character must choose a physical path, they must symbolically choose a life path. In this story the couple's prolonged stay at a train station beside the Ebro river plays such a symbolic role. Their wait at the train station suggests a stage of suspension, the sense of things coming to an intolerable standstill until they resolve whether or not to get an abortion and, accordingly, which direction their relationship will go next.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* published in 1987.

Hills Like White Elephants Quotes

"They look like white elephants," she said.
"I've never seen one," the man drank his beer.
"No, you wouldn't have."

Related Characters: The Girl (Jig), The Man (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

In this statement, the girl is describing the landscape around the train station bar where she and her boyfriend are drinking. The landscape is described as hot, barren, and dry, and from the girl's observation that the hills "look like white elephants" comes the title to the piece. This is an important observation because it means so much more than it appears to. As the story continues, we learn that the girl is pregnant and the man is pressuring her to have an abortion. The girl's declaration that the hills look like white elephants, then, is her coded acknowledgement that there is a problem between them that the two of them cannot speak of openly. The man's response, that he has never seen a white elephant, reveals his wish that this problem would just disappear, and the girl's rebuttal that, "no, you wouldn't have," lets us understand that this kind of manipulation and denial is typical of him. Significantly, the girl only seems comfortable asserting herself in a coded manner.

"I might have," the man said. "Just because you say I wouldn't have doesn't prove anything."

Related Characters: The Man (speaker), The Girl (Jig)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 211

Explanation and Analysis

Until this moment, it is at least plausible that the couple is literally talking about white elephants. However, the man's extreme reply to the girl's assertion that he wouldn't have seen a white elephant reveals that their conversation is actually about something much deeper. The man's comment gets at the politics between the two of them--the man seems to feel burdened, annoyed, or even impinged upon by the girl's assertion about him. It seems that he feels that her desires or the way she sees the world limits him in some way and that he is more than what she tells him he is. This is a theme throughout the story, the ways in which two people with desires and realities that are at odds can hurt one another. In this example, the man is indignant about what he perceives as a verbal representation of the ways in which the girl is capable of limiting his life by having the baby.

"Oh, cut it out."
"You started it," the girl said. "I was being amused. I was having a fine time."
"Well, let's try and have a fine time."
"All right. I was trying. I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn't that bright?"

Related Characters: The Girl (Jig), The Man (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout the story the two main characters bicker relentlessly--everything seems to be a source of conflict, no matter how small. The fact that they seem to have lost the ability to find joy in one another or foster mutual compassion shows the deep fault lines in their relationship, and makes it clear that it's disingenuous when the girl says, "I was having a fine time." It is disingenuous, too, when the girl says, "You started it" and "I was trying." In this exchange, the words that these characters speak seem to have very little relationship to their literal meaning (all the dialogue has become a coded reference to the abortion, of which they cannot directly speak, and its potential effect on their relationship). The girl clearly brought up the white elephant simile in order to raise the contentious topic of the abortion, though here she denies this to try to claim the moral high ground, an obfuscation enabled by the vague way the two of them are using language. Throughout the story, we see the girl's passive-aggressive conversational tactics at war with the man's emotionally manipulative ones.

"I wanted to try this new drink. That's all we do, isn't it—look at things and try new drinks?"

Related Characters: The Girl (Jig) (speaker), The Man

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

In this statement, the girl expresses a major dissatisfaction with their relationship and with their life. While the man seems to enjoy their life of traveling and drinking, the girl seems to want something more—perhaps to start a family

and have the stability of a home. Obviously, though, because of the splintered communication between the two of them, she can only allude to this disconnect. This statement, however, is a marked departure from their previous chattering and bickering, in that it comes closest to expressing a concrete problem and the corresponding desire that this problem implies. When the man simply responds, "I guess so," the girl seems frightened or regretful, since she walks back her statement by denying that the hills look like white elephants after all. Again, this is an example of the girl's desires being at odds with the man's desires, and the mismatched power between the two of them.

"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. "It's not really an operation at all."

Related Characters: The Man (speaker), The Girl (Jig)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

When the man says this, the girl has just made a small overture towards him by reversing her earlier claim that the hills look like white elephants, which symbolically indicated her willingness to bury the topic of the abortion in favor of having a more cordial time. However, the man sees an opening for manipulation in the girl's sudden kindness. This is the first time in the story in which the man uses the girl's pet name, Jig, and he seems to do it to offer her a glimpse of the tenderness and love he has been withholding. Because of the tremendous power his love seems to have over her, this is a manipulative gesture. He does not introduce the pet name in the context of offering her a choice about her pregnancy, but rather in the context of telling her that the operation will be simple, or not even an operation at all.

"I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in."
The girl did not say anything.

Related Characters: The Man (speaker), The Girl (Jig)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

Here, the man is continuing to use the girl's pet name to manipulate her into feeling like he will love her more if she has the abortion. He is also, in this statement, continuing to use language to try to paper over the reality of the situation they are facing. Before, he told the girl that the operation wasn't "really an operation at all," and now he's saying it's "not anything" and it's "just to let the air in." These words are obviously literally untrue, but his rhetoric is meant to manipulate the girl into believing that the abortion is the best choice, and that it isn't even something worth speaking of directly. That the girl falls silent here is significant, too--we can't tell at first if it's because she's angry at his attempts at manipulation, or if it's because the manipulation is working and she is listening to him, but Hemingway uses this ambiguity to build tension.

"Then what will we do afterward?"
"We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before."
"What makes you think so?"
"That's the only thing that bothers us. It's the only that's made us unhappy."

Related Characters: The Girl (Jig), The Man (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

It is at this moment that the reader realizes that the girl has been silent not entirely out of anger, but also because the man's manipulation of her is beginning to work. He has promised her several improbable things, and now, by asking what they will do afterwards, she shows that she is seriously considering the abortion as a result. His manipulation continues as he tells her an obvious untruth, that the pregnancy is the only thing wrong with their relationship. This is a clear instance in which the the girl's and the man's conceptions of happiness are at odds. The girl no longer seems to want a nomadic lifestyle of traveling and heavy drinking, but the man promises her the happiness of "before" the pregnancy. He is essentially referring to them resuming the lifestyle that the girl has already expressed is inadequate for her. The only reason that the man's logic prevails is that the girl is swayed by his promises of love and happiness. These promises ring hollow, though, as we see them being made as a way to manipulate the girl out of

making the choice that she wants.

"They're lovely hills," she said. "They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees."

Related Characters: The Girl (Jig) (speaker), The Man

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 212

Explanation and Analysis

This is a crucial passage in the story, because this exchange becomes the man's opening to begin his most intense manipulation. The girl has just made a reasonably provocative claim, that all they do is look at things and drink (which, like everything else in this story, refers to so much more), but she seems unable to stand firm in this statement. Instead of requiring the man to respond to her and address her concerns, she symbolically retracts herself. When she brought up the hills looking like white elephants, she was seemingly trying to bring up the topic of her pregnancy, and by telling the man that the hills don't actually look like white elephants she signals her willingness to bury the topic once more. Significantly, in this observation the girl refers to the organic features of the landscape, making it seem less barren than it had before. She refers to the trees, and to the "skin" of the hills. This shows that, even as she tries to bury the topic of fertility, it still has a grip on her subconscious.

"And you think then we'll be all right and be happy."
"I know we will. You don't have to be afraid. I've known lots of people that have done it."
"So have I," said the girl. "And afterward they were all so happy."

Related Characters: The Man, The Girl (Jig) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

Until now readers could not be entirely sure of the tone of the conversation that the man and the girl are having--we're not sure to what extent the girl is actually buying his manipulation. In her statement that she has known lots of people who had abortions and "afterward they were all so happy," though, we realize that the girl's statements have a twinge of sarcasm; she is still resisting, after all. This is another instance of the complexity of language in the story--we've seen it working as a code, as a smokescreen, and now saying one thing and meaning the opposite. This exchange also shows that the girl's and the man's interests are at odds, and it gestures towards the idea that the reason for the opposed interests could be gendered. Though we have no reason to trust that the man is truthful when he implies that the people he knows who have been in their situation have been happy with the choice to abort, it's certainly possible that the man is telling the truth, that his (male) friends have found freedom in the choice to terminate a pregnancy, while the girl's (female) friends have been saddened by the same choice. This points to the ways in which the same choice will have an opposite effect on the girl and the man, and how this choice might break across gender lines.

"Well," the man said, "if you don't want to you don't have to. I wouldn't have you do it if you didn't want to. But I know it's perfectly simple."

Related Characters: The Girl (Jig), The Man (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

After the girl's sarcastic reply, the man knows he needs to change tactics. Since presenting the abortion as the choice that would make the girl happiest is not giving him the result he wants, he moves on to disingenuously defending his good intentions by saying that "I wouldn't have you do it if you didn't want to." Hemingway subtly modulates the tone of the dialogue here. While before the man was using the girl's pet name and describing how good things could be, his voice now seems a little more flippant and frustrated. The disingenuousness of his statement is confirmed when he adds, "But I know it's perfectly simple." It seems, then, that he is patronizingly telling her that she is free to make the wrong decision if that's what she really wants. Throughout this story the man's manipulation rests on the supposed choice that the girl has about her pregnancy, but the man has never seriously entertained allowing her to make that

choice uncoerced.

"...But if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you'll like it?"

Related Characters: The Man, The Girl (Jig) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

Now it seems clear that the girl is leaning towards agreeing to terminate her pregnancy, but it certainly doesn't seem like a choice that she has freely made. Instead of choosing abortion because she is genuinely convinced by the man's appeals, she uses the abortion as a bargaining chip, essentially making him promise that he'll love her and that they will communicate better and have a nicer relationship if she does what he wants. This question of hers is particularly significant because it implies that their elliptical and evasive conversational style is also something that she wants to address in their relationship. It seems that she would like them to be able to speak openly about their problems and needs, but, ironically, she doesn't feel free to openly express this desire. This exchange also demonstrates the power inequality between the man and the girl. The girl is in a position in which she feels that in order to obtain things that should be given freely in a good relationship, she must give up a pregnancy that she really wants. The story demonstrates the powerlessness of this woman, and the ease with which the man can manipulate her into a significant and painful choice.

"Then I'll do it. Because I don't care about me."

Related Characters: The Man, The Girl (Jig) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

A major theme in this story is the ways in which our words become estranged from their meanings in tense situations, and this is a perfect example. The girl, who is by now irrevocably entangled in the man's web of manipulation, seems to feel that she has few options left for resistance.

Her disingenuous avowal that "I don't care about me" is framed as a selfless offer to follow the man's wishes, but is actually meant as an appeal to him to recognize his own selfishness. By seemingly embracing his consuming power, she is attempting to passive-aggressively critique it, hoping to make him see that he is forcing her into making a choice that is not her own. This is clearly gendered--and the story was written at a time when, even more than today, women were expected to give up their own ambitions and desires in order to accommodate their men. This statement also touches on the ways in which each person's desire appears to impinge on the other's freedom. The man doesn't want to be responsible for a child, and the woman doesn't want to terminate her pregnancy. It then seems oddly honest to say that if she did terminate it, it wouldn't be because she cared about herself.

"And we could have all this," she said "And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible."

Related Characters: The Girl (Jig) (speaker), The Man

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

Like her statement that the hills look like white elephants, this is the girl's attempt to make a coded appeal to the reality she envisions. Just before saying this she looks out on the landscape that had been formerly described as barren and suddenly she sees grain and trees. The hills are fertile to her, while to the man they were dusty and empty, which symbolizes their conflicted views of their situation. By this point in the story the girl has been manipulated thoroughly, and it seemed that her ability to resist the man was limited to small disruptions of his own script ("Then I'll do it. Because I don't care about me."). This outburst, though, is an unexpectedly radical appeal to the man to see things wholly on her terms--that she should have the baby, and that it would give them "everything." She is letting him know here unequivocally that this is the life that she wants.

"What did you say?"
"I said we could have everything."
"We can have everything."
"No, we can't."

Related Characters: The Girl (Jig), The Man (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

As the conversation progresses, the girl's seeming optimism is tempered. The tone of their conversation makes it seem like she was only capable of making such a sweeping statement ("we could have everything") because she already felt that the possibility was closed. This also shows the conflicting realities of the man and the girl--while for her having everything would mean starting a family, for him having everything means returning to their life of superficial adventure. They appear here to be having the same conversation, but they are arguing about different things. This conversation is poignant, too, because it shows the ways in which the girl perceives her choice to be limited. She has not yet had the abortion, but she seems to understand that the choice has essentially already been made by the man. Because she does not seem open to sacrificing her relationship and having the child without his support, she is powerless to oppose him. This draws attention to the cruelty of his giving lip service to the idea that this is fully her choice, even though he is withholding the support that would make it truly her choice.

"We can go everywhere."
"No, we can't. It isn't ours any more."
"It's ours."
"No, it isn't. And once they take it away, you never get it back."

Related Characters: The Girl (Jig), The Man (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 213

Explanation and Analysis

While in the above quote it wasn't entirely clear that the man and the girl were having two different conversations, here it is obvious. The man is talking quite literally about their freedom to travel, which he values above all else, and the woman is talking about several things at once. On one level, she is talking about the baby, which she sees as already gone. On another level, she seems to be talking more abstractly about a togetherness or a sympathy between the two of them that seems to have been destroyed in the course of deciding to have the abortion. When framed this way, the girl was given no choice at all--the only way to make the family that she desires work would have been for both of them to want it. Since the man has never been willing to entertain the idea, her hopes were dashed, even though he technically said she could do what she wanted. This is a further indication of the power imbalance between the two of them, in which the man is in a much better position to get what he wants.

"Come on back in the shade," he said. "You mustn't feel that way."
"I don't feel any way," the girl said. "I just know things."

Related Characters: The Girl (Jig), The Man (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

The light in this story has been described as beating and harsh--the characters go to the shade of the train station bar just to avoid it. But this avoidance, like their strange and elliptical conversation, represents their unwillingness to talk about the girl's pregnancy, the huge issue in their relationship. In this exchange, the girl has just been fairly honest (in a coded way) about wanting to keep the baby and about feeling that they can't "have everything" without it. In response, the man tells her to "come back into the shade," which represents his desire not to dwell in the harsh truth of her emotions. The man tells the girl that she "mustn't feel that way," referring to her sense of loss, and she recognizes that this is diminutive and manipulative, responding that she doesn't "feel" something, she "knows" something. The man here seems to be playing into stereotypes that men are more rational and that women are more emotional, but when he tries to reduce her choice about the abortion to "feeling" the girl pushes back.

"All right. But you've got to realize—"
"I realize," the girl said. "Can't we maybe stop talking?"

Related Characters: The Girl (Jig), The Man (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

By this point the girl is exhausted by their coded bickering and the man's relentless manipulation. She's not able to get the upper hand through conversation, so, reaching the limit at which language can no longer productively address the problems in their relationship, she asks him to stop talking altogether. Significantly, before she requests silence, the man is beginning to launch into another line of reasoning for why she should have the abortion. He implies, with the phrase "you've got to realize," that the girl is not making an informed decision. He seems to be chalking her choice up to emotional reasoning rather than rational thought, and he frames his statement as though he is about to enlighten her. The girl rejects this by interrupting him and saying that she *does* realize--the girl wants to communicate that she knows all the things he's going to say to her, and her desire is still hers. Throughout the story we see the man trying to get his way by reframing her choice in his own terms rather than allowing her to choose based on her own values and hopes.

"Doesn't it mean anything to you? We could get along."
"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."

Related Characters: The Man, The Girl (Jig) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

This is one of the most crass manipulations of all. Here the girl is clumsily trying to win the man over to her perspective on the abortion and their potential family, and the man reframes it in a way that preys on her hopes. Throughout the story, the love lost between them has been frequently alluded to, and it's clear that the woman wants kindness and love to return to their relationship very badly. While she believes their relationship would be better if they had the baby, he believes that it would improve by not having the baby and returning to their carefree lifestyle. The man here tries to get his way by framing his desire for the abortion as being wrapped up in his unrivaled love for her. "I don't want anybody but you," he says, though that's a hard thing to believe after the way he has treated her throughout the story. He seems to be promising her a familial love only if she has the abortion--which will, ironically, destroy the possibility of the real family that the girl wants.

"Would you do something for me now?"
"I'd do anything for you."
"Would you please please please please please please please stop talking?"

Related Characters: The Man, The Girl (Jig) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

This is another situation where Hemingway builds tension through the ambiguity of not knowing exactly what the girl is thinking. The man clearly believes, when she asks him to do something for her, that he has gotten his way and that she is about to ask for something as a concession in return. Out of relief, he says he would do anything. However, the girl surprises us by pleading with him to stop talking, implying that she has still not been won over by his manipulation. The girl recognizes at this point that language is not her friend--any battle between the two of them fought verbally will be won by the man because he has no scruples about manipulating and reframing the situation any which way for his benefit. Within their relationship, language has little correspondence with truth or reality, and the girl sees that she just won't be able to use language to win him over. It's poignant to understand that the girl realizes that her only power is in silence, as she cannot make the man comprehend her reality through language. This seems allegorical for the ways in which women as a whole have been culturally silenced for so long.

He did not say anything but looked at the bags against the wall of the station. There were labels on them from all the hotels where they had spent nights.

Related Characters: The Man

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

This is a poignant moment, as the man glances at the luggage after recognizing that he has not yet persuaded the girl to see the abortion his way. The luggage, with all the labels from far-flung hotels, is symbolic both of the life of freedom and adventure that they've had so far, and of the burden (the "baggage") that the pregnancy has placed on their relationship and the limits that a baby (in his opinion) would place on their future. It's powerful that the same luggage can simultaneously symbolize opposite realities--this is emblematic of the impasse in their relationship, as they cannot agree about whether the baby would be a good or a bad thing. It is significant, too, that the man is having this reckoning inside the train station. To board the train represents a choice; it represents the way in which they will go forward with their lives. The man must move the luggage because he knows that the train, like this significant choice, is coming soon, even though they have reached no resolution.

> He drank an Anis at the bar and looked at the people. They were all waiting reasonably for the train.

Related Characters: The Man (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 214

Explanation and Analysis

Throughout this story, the man and the girl drink copious amounts of alcohol as a means of escaping their reality. So much of this story is about finding ways to avoid confronting their difficult choice: their refusal to speak about it literally, their symbolic preference of the shade over the light, and their relentless drinking, for instance. This moment represents a whole new level of evasiveness, as the man stops at the bar to drink apart from the girl, even though he has a beer waiting at their table. His observation that everyone else is "waiting reasonably for the train" seems to imply that he believes that the girl is out of line, or that she is the only person who is not facing a significant choice with dignity and reason. This condescending and unempathetic observation is emblematic of the sexism that the man displays toward the girl, and the uneven power in their relationship. Even as the man does everything he can not to listen to the girl's perspective and confront their choice head on, he still judges her for not approaching the situation rationally, as he presumably believes he has done.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS

The story opens with an extended description of a **train station** located in Spain's Ebro valley. In these opening details the landscape's **barren**, hot, and **shadeless** nature is emphasized. Into this landscape appear an American man and his female partner, called the girl or "Jig," who are waiting for an express train to Madrid from Barcelona. They seat themselves at a bar in the shadow of the train station and begin to discuss what they should **drink**. The man, who speaks Spanish while the girl does not, orders two beers from the Spanish waitress, who is referred to as the woman.

Hemingway immediately emphasizes the oppressive nature of the setting, and the couple escapes into the only shade available for temporary relief through alcohol. Significantly, their conversation begins with a discussion of what to drink, suggesting how central alcohol has become to their avoidance of real communication. The fact that the man speaks Spanish and must translate the waitress's words to the girl further highlights the uneven power dynamic in the couple's relationship, and is also another way Hemingway emphasizes the limits of language, a major theme of the story.

When the woman serves the couple their **drinks**, they are not talking. The girl is staring at the distant hills, which are brightly lit in the **sunlight**, though otherwise **barren** in appearance. The girl makes a seemingly innocent remark to the man that the hills "look like white elephants," to which the man responds that he has never seen one. This comment leads to a brief bickering match over whether the man may or may not have seen a white elephant.

The relationship between the man and the girl is characterized by silence, small talk, and outbursts of irritation, along with drink after drink. This tension suggests that the two are desperately trying to avoid talking about the unnamed "white elephant" between them. The many descriptions of the landscape as both barren and fertile already hint at the idea of pregnancy, and the emphasis on the harshness of the sunlight suggests a glaring truth the couple is trying to avoid by staying in the "shade"—and by not communicating. Hemingway is typically sparse with his language and doesn't give away any real plot points in this story, so it's important to examine his descriptions of the setting, as these are in many ways more revealing than the actual dialogue between the characters.

The girl, seeing a Spanish ad for a special **liquor** painted on the bar's beaded curtain, asks the man to translate what it says. He responds that the drink is called Anis del Toro. The girl asks if they can try it, and the man immediately tells the woman to get them two Anis del Toro. The girl isn't sure whether she should drink the liquor with water or not and asks the man what he thinks. He orders the drinks with water.

The man's controlling position of authority in relation to the girl dominates this scene, even as the action remains innocuous. Besides choosing to remain silent, there are very few decisions or comments the girl can make without the man's direction or agreement.

The girl makes another seemingly benign comment about the licorice taste of the **Anis drink** and how everything tastes like licorice. The man snaps at her, asking her to "cut it out." The girl says that she was simply trying to have "a fine time," and the man agrees that they should "try and have a fine time." The sporadic conversation between the man and the girl continues, interspersed with more drinking. The girl remarks that it seems all they do is "look at things and try new drinks," and gazes off at the hills, adding that "they don't really look like white elephants."

The man and girl are unable to approach any issue, however small, without their anger spilling out, yet they continue to try to maintain an appearance of normalcy, leisure, and "freedom." However, the girl is skeptical of this performance of happiness, hinting at the serious problems in their relationship they refuse to openly discuss.

The conversation lapses into small talk, as the two comment on the **beer** they are drinking, until the man suddenly brings up the subject of "an awfully simple operation…not really an operation at all." For the first time he also addresses the girl by her nickname, "Jig." The girl remains silent as the man continues to describe how easy, simple, and natural "the operation" is.

The operation goes unnamed throughout the story, but it is clearly a euphemism for an abortion. At the time abortions were illegal and often very dangerous, adding to the coded nature of their conversation.

Finally the girl breaks her silence and asks the man what they will do after the operation. The man insists that everything will go back to the way it was and the two will be happy together again. But the girl is skeptical, responding sarcastically to the man's confident optimism and casual description of the operation. She repeatedly asks whether he will love her if she does what he wants. The man says he doesn't want her to have the operation if she doesn't want to, but continues to urge her to get the operation, arguing that "it's perfectly simple." The girl eventually agrees to do it, claiming that she doesn't care about herself. To this the man replies that he doesn't want her to have the operation if she feels that way.

The man's insistence that the abortion is the simplest and most reasonable thing to do is at direct odds with the girl's feelings about her pregnancy. While the man sees an abortion as a chance to return to their former easygoing, pleasure-seeking relationship, the girl's sarcasm indicates that she is doubtful and resistant. But the man is unrelenting in his persuasive efforts to coerce her into getting the operation—and to make her feel that it's what she wants. His domination of the girl is more subtle but also more sinister than simple bullying—he doesn't just want her to do *what he wants, he wants her to* want *what he wants.*

The girl gets up from their table and walks to "the end of the **station**," taking in the landscape around her. Through her eyes the **barren** hills look fertile, full of grain and trees, a river far off, and "the **shadow** of a cloud." The beauty of the scene compels her to remark aloud that she and the man "could have all this…and we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible." The man argues that they still can have everything, but the girl is firm in her opposition, claiming that "it isn't ours any more."

This moment reveals the crucially different ways in which the man and girl view her pregnancy. To the man the pregnancy is something they can leave behind them, like a piece of extra baggage in their many travels. But for the girl, the pregnancy holds the promise of a beautiful new type of life together, one that he cannot or refuses to see. Once again Hemingway's descriptions of the landscape (now seen from the girl's point of view, as she sees beauty and fertility where there was only barrenness before) are powerful signifiers of the characters' thoughts and emotions—more powerful, seemingly, than the characters' words themselves.

The man begs the girl to sit down again at the table and not to "feel that way." The girl replies that she doesn't feel one way or another but just knows. The man persists in arguing in favor of the operation, while claiming that he doesn't want her to do anything against her will. The girl, in turn, asks him to stop talking. The man, however, is unable to stop, backpedaling to say that if she wants to "go through with it," then he's "perfectly willing." This only upsets the girl further, making her question whether their potential future together means anything to him. He says it does, but significantly adds that he doesn't "want anybody but you," returning the conversation to the subject of the "perfectly simple" operation.

The man continues to try to control the girl, down to where she walks and what she feels and wants. It is not enough for him that she get the operation, which she agrees to, but she must also want *to get the operation and return to their life of "freedom" and leisure. The girl probes the man's feelings about the pregnancy to see whether he can imagine having a family with her. But as always their views are at odds, and the man's seemingly romantic claim to not want anyone but her is the opposite of what she wants to hear. He is asking her to abort their child, but manipulatively phrasing his request as something romantic and selfless.*

At this point the girl asks the man to do her a favor, to which he instantly agrees. With surprising intensity, she begs him to stop talking. The man does not respond but looks at their luggage, which is stamped with all sorts of stickers from their stays in various hotels. When he eventually speaks again, he claims not to care about the operation, and the girl threatens to scream. The woman appears from the **bar** to let the couple know that their **train** will be arriving in five minutes, which the man translates for the girl. The girl smiles at the waitress, as though everything is fine.

The girl has reached her breaking point, smothered into silence and agreement by the man's controlling nature and endless talking. Here her feelings are closest to the surface and there is the sense that there will be an emotional explosion, and then perhaps even some real communication and confrontation of the truth. Instead the waitress reappears, and once more the couple's conversation is postponed in favor of maintaining appearances.

The man excuses himself from the table, explaining that he should move their bags to the other side of the **station**. The man carries the heavy luggage to their tracks where the train is not yet visible. As he walks back through the **bar** he stops to get another Anis del Toro alone. As he looks at the people around him, he notes how they are "all waiting perfectly reasonably for the train." When he rejoins the girl at their table, she smiles at him. He asks if she feels better, to which she responds that she is "fine" and that nothing is wrong.

As the man walks, we feel the oppressiveness of the pregnancy from his perspective, a worry he carries with him like heavy luggage. His frustration is palpable, yet when he rejoins the girl, both once again feign normalcy, refusing to communicate honestly in favor of further avoidance and concealment. Hemingway ends his brief but powerful story on this tense and ambiguous note—the couple is preparing to board a train (a traditional symbol of choice, a "crossroads," and some sort of transition or "middle ground" state), but they seem to have accomplished nothing by this conversation, and their impending journey will lead them nowhere new. They continue to avoid the harsh "light" of their real feelings and instead hide behind the "shade" of niceties and double-speak, drowning their emotions in alcohol and mindless travel. It's suggested that the couple's relationship won't last much longer, even though they continue to keep up the pretense that everything is "fine."

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