

Hills Like White Elephants Literary Analysis

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Literary Analysis: Hemingway's Hills Like White Elephants

Ernest Hemingway's short story 'Hills like White Elephants' depicts a couple, "the man" and "the girl", casual conversation over drinks while awaiting the arrival of a train to Madrid. The story ends, as vaguely as it started, with the two about to embark on the train. Hemingway's use of ambiguous and vague language, dialogue, characterization, and metaphors in 'Hills like White Elephants' could leave his readers bewildered to the underlying subject matter of its plot. However, by properly citing and analyzing the literary techniques used by Hemingway, one is able to conclude that the main characters discuss their feelings and concerns about the possibility of an abortion. Throughout the short story 'Hills like White Elephants', Hemingway has chosen to address his main characters as "the man" and "the girl". By patterning these words in addressing his main characters, Hemingway alludes to their difference in age and emotional maturity towards the conflict that they face. Hemingway, to suggest the female character's younger age and her naivety about an abortion, uses the word "girl". The reader is able to confirm that Hemingway does not condescend all females to be "girls" through the introduction of the secondary character, the waitress, who brings the couple their drinks. Hemingway then continues to address this secondary character as "the woman"; and thus, alluding the word "girl" only refers to the young and naive character of Jig. On the other hand, Hemingway's usage of the word "man", in referring to his male character, indicates a more mature and realistic view of the character's opinion on the idea of an abortion as a solution to the unwanted pregnancy. The metaphor employed by Hemingway to allude towards an abortion can be found in paragraph 46, where "the man" explains to "the girl" that the operation will simply "...let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural." (p. 445). The male character then ambiguously refers to his feelings towards the pregnancy as, "...the only thing that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy." (p. 445). An earlier allusion to the differences between the main characters, and how each will respond to their conflict, has been conveyed through their conversation found in paragraphs 17-32. The dialogue by, and associated with, "the man" is confident, assuring, tentative, and slightly condescending towards "the girl". Likewise, the dialogue in paragraphs 17-32 connected with "the girl" is uncertain, passive aggressive, childlike, and earnestly striving for her partner's guidance. Ernest Hemingway's short story "Hills like White Elephants" depicts a young couple in the mist of an uncomfortable conversation regarding their choice of action towards an unwanted pregnancy. Though the subject of an abortion is not directly addressed, in "Hills like White Elephants", Hemingway uses ambiguous metaphors, vague dialogue, and generalized characters to help him set the mood between his two main characters. The reader's understanding and ability to recognize the usage of literary tools by Hemingway is the key to decode this hazy plot.

Introduction to "Hills Like White Elephants"

Hills Like White Elephants is a short story written by Ernest Hemingway in 1927. This work is a prime example of Hemingway's iceberg theory, where the underlying themes and emotions are submerged beneath a surface of simplicity and dialogue. The story's setting, characters, and symbolism work cohesively to explore profound themes such as communication, choice, and the complexities of relationships. In this literary analysis, we will delve into the various elements that contribute to the richness of this story.

Setting and Context

The story is set at a train station in the Ebro River valley of Spain, which plays a crucial role in establishing the mood and themes. The backdrop of the hills, which the female protagonist, Jig, compares to white elephants, symbolizes the conflict and emotional weight of the couple's conversation.

Geographical Symbolism

The geographical elements in the story are significant:

- **The Hills:** The hills represent the life and future that Jig envisions, filled with beauty and potential. This contrasts sharply with the flat, barren landscape that symbolizes the emptiness of their current situation.
- **The Train Station:** The train station signifies transition and choices. It is a point of departure, hinting at the couple's need to make a decision about their future.

Character Analysis

The two main characters in "Hills Like White Elephants" are Jig and the American man. Their interactions reveal their contrasting perspectives and emotional states.

Jig

Jig is a complex character grappling with the implications of an unplanned pregnancy. Her name, which is reminiscent of a dance, suggests a certain lightness, yet her character is weighed down by the gravity of her situation. Throughout the dialogue, she displays a longing for connection and understanding, which is largely thwarted by the American man's dismissive attitude.

The American Man

The American man represents a more pragmatic and detached perspective. He is insistent that the procedure (implied to be an abortion) is simply a solution to a problem. His character embodies a sense of control, but this control is ultimately superficial, as it masks his deeper insecurities and fears about commitment and responsibility.

Thematic Exploration

Several recurring themes permeate the narrative, weaving a complex tapestry of meaning that resonates with readers.

Communication and Miscommunication

One of the most significant themes in "Hills Like White Elephants" is communication, or the lack thereof. The dialogue between Jig and the American man is fraught with tension and misunderstanding.

- **Surface Conversations:** The couple engages in seemingly casual conversations about the landscape and drinks, which serve as a distraction from the pressing issue at hand.
- **Emotional Disconnect:** Jig's attempts to express her feelings and desires are continually undermined by the American's insistence on viewing the situation in terms of practicality.

Choice and Consequence

The story centers on the theme of choice, particularly the choices related to pregnancy and relationships. The couple stands at a crossroads, and the decision they make will have lasting consequences on their lives.

- **The Decision:** The American tries to persuade Jig that the procedure is simple, reflecting his desire to minimize the emotional weight of the decision.
- **Jig's Struggle:** Jig's hesitation indicates her inner turmoil and the weight of the choice she faces, emphasizing that the consequences of their decision extend beyond the immediate moment.

Gender Roles and Power Dynamics

The gender dynamics between Jig and the American man are emblematic of the power struggles within their relationship.

- **Masculine Authority:** The American man's push for Jig to undergo the procedure

reflects traditional gender roles, where male authority often dictates female choices.

- **Female Agency:** Jig's eventual resistance to the American's perspective highlights her struggle for autonomy and her desire to assert her own voice in the relationship.

Symbolism and Imagery

Hemingway's use of symbolism is crucial in conveying the story's deeper meanings. The imagery he employs creates a stark contrast between the characters' emotional states and the physical setting.

The White Elephants

The term "white elephant" traditionally refers to something that is costly to maintain and burdensome, much like the unplanned pregnancy that Jig faces.

- **Beauty and Burden:** While the hills symbolize beauty, they also represent the heavy burden of an unwanted responsibility.
- **Illusions and Reality:** Jig's comparison of the hills to white elephants suggests her awareness of the situation's complexities, yet her longing for a simpler, more beautiful life remains unfulfilled.

Drinks and Alcohol

Throughout the story, the act of drinking becomes a coping mechanism for both characters.

- **Escapism:** The characters drink to escape the gravity of their situation and to create a facade of normalcy.
- **False Comfort:** Their reliance on alcohol highlights their inability to confront their issues directly, serving as a temporary distraction from the harsh realities of their lives.

Conclusion

In "Hills Like White Elephants," Ernest Hemingway masterfully explores the complexities of communication, choice, and gender dynamics through a seemingly simple dialogue between two characters. The setting, symbolism, and nuanced character interactions all contribute to a deeper understanding of the emotional weight carried by the couple. Ultimately, the story serves as a poignant commentary on the challenges of human relationships and the profound impact of choices made in moments of crisis. Hemingway's ability to convey such intricate themes in a concise narrative leaves a lasting impression, encouraging readers to reflect on the unspoken elements of their own lives and relationships.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central theme of 'Hills Like White Elephants'?

The central theme of 'Hills Like White Elephants' is the conflict between personal choice and societal expectations, particularly regarding the issue of abortion and the complexities of communication in relationships.

How does Hemingway utilize symbolism in 'Hills Like White Elephants'?

Hemingway uses symbolism extensively, with the hills representing the potential for life and the future, while the white elephant symbolizes the burdensome nature of the decision the couple faces.

What role does dialogue play in 'Hills Like White Elephants'?

Dialogue is crucial in the story as it reveals the characters' emotions and underlying tensions. The sparse conversations reflect their inability to communicate openly about their feelings and the gravity of their situation.

How does the setting influence the narrative of 'Hills Like White Elephants'?

The setting, a train station in Spain, serves as a liminal space that underscores the characters' emotional crossroads and their indecision about the future, mirroring the tension in their relationship.

What does the character of the American man represent

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