

What Isn't Seen and What Isn't Said:
Hiding Meaning in Both Setting and Dialogue

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Modernism was a radical movement shaped by a younger generation cast adrift and questioning many of their central beliefs after World War One. Many fought to break from a society that they felt was corrupt and too bound by its own traditions to even want to change. In the Arts and Literature, many

authors choose to explore more honest subjects, as well as, feelings and aspirations that had been kept under the surface. A permissiveness of not only the style of writing; but of the subjects authors chose to write about prevailed. In this new artistic environment, freedom allowed for a break from the predictable and ordinary topics of the time. *In Hills Like White Elephants*, Ernest Hemingway, takes a unmentionable subject and places it center stage. Yet, in the manner of a truly gifted modernist writer, he succeeds in concealing the true theme of his story. As a reader, one hears descriptions of the setting surrounding the characters and is even able to eavesdrop on a conversation between them; but it is what isn't seen and what isn't said that will lead to true understanding. Through an almost continuous use of symbolism and oblique dialogue, Hemingway showcases the conflict between the two main characters without ever openly mentioning it.

There is symbolism used throughout the story, but I think it is important to note that the characters are literally surrounded by it. The setting of the story is a train station; in the opening paragraph, Hemingway introduces the reader to an express train stopping "at this junction for two minutes and went on...". This seems to let the reader in on that fact that this will just be a stop and then life will continue on its way; but will both our characters be on-board? The symbolism of the train station being a stop or a crossroads is reflective of the couple's conflict. They are here to make a decision and the idea of the train leaving creates a sense of urgency, even though we still do not know what the crisis is. In another description of the setting, Hemingway writes, "there was no shade and no trees", yet on the opposite side of the valley there were hills. The couple seems to be stuck not just physically in a valley, but emotionally at a breaking point in their relationship. There is a decision to be made and they are uncertain which side of the hill they will end up on in the end. Once again, the reader does not know the struggle between the two characters; but one feels the implication that one side offers success and the other offers discord. Probably the most obvious use of symbolism is the metaphor in the title of the story. The opening line of the story describes the "hills across the valley of the Ebro" as "long and white", and Jig soon describes them as "white elephants". The reader now has a bit more information, though it is

certainly not direct. This reference of a white elephant, a rare but expensive possession, is part of the setting; but it is also a key piece of dialogue.

Just as Hemingway uses hidden meaning in the setting, he also hides the true meaning of the characters conversation. However, the technique he uses to obscure the underlying conflict in the dialogue is many times just a simple act of omission. When examining the story, there are so many things left unsaid in the conversation between Jig and the American; the vast majority of their conversation is directed at deflecting or redirecting rather than advancing their discussion. You feel the struggle between them early on when Jig replies sarcastically to the American, after he says he has never seen a white elephant 'No, you wouldn't have'. She seems to have judged him and found him lacking; but the reader doesn't know why. He defends himself somewhat, but she immediately changes the subject. Again after a few drinks she again replies "I wanted to try this new drink. That's all we do, isn't it – look at things and try new drinks." The conflict between the characters is almost a physical thing that you can feel punching its way out through the one sided dialogue. Right after Jig agrees to have another drink, the American utters the line of dialogue that finally lets the reader in behind the curtain, "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig." As a reader, one still doesn't know exactly what is going on; but now each word of this discussion seems different. One starts to see this casual conversation as more of a negotiation, a conflict between Jig and the American; and if given enough examination, a conflict between Jig and herself.

It is amazing how much can remain unsaid with so many descriptive words. In this work, Hemingway uses symbolic scenery to surround his characters. They are immersed in a setting that he so skillfully sprinkles with hints of the central theme. At the same time, he gives those characters ambiguous yet thought-provoking dialogue that keeps the reader engaged as they are shown the inner workings of this doomed relationship. The reader is audience to the crisis in the character's relationship and becomes invested in the story long before one really knows what it is to come. Hemingway's writing proves that sometimes it's much more important about what isn't said.

Works Cited:

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Reflection

In my analysis of Ernest Hemmingway's Hills like White Elephants, I used the critical style with an analytical approach. After finishing my paper, I realized that writing was not what I had worked it out to be. The writing process has always been difficult for me. I believe that the most important part during this process is expressionism; your wordage. I have always struggled with self-expressionism and it almost always carried over into my writing--I always knew what I wanted to say but did not know how to say it. Needless to say, it proved to be quite troublesome; however, I managed to overcome it through motivation and persistence. When the assignment was getting too stressful, I broke it up into bite-sized pieces to make it more manageable.

The process of writing this paper has helped me achieve the Student learning outcome of *Demonstrate the knowledge of the impact of one or more of the following issues of the discipline: culture, environment, race, gender, and/or values and ethics*; specifically the cultural, ethical and gender values. I examined these values as I researched the story I had selected. I realized that the topic of this story was what, at the time, would have been considered a taboo subject. Reading about Modernist writers and their motivation, was helpful when examining different stories from that time period. They had ample reasons for breaking away from a society and culture that they felt had betrayed their trust. Writing has always been a powerful force and through literature, this new generation of artists envelope in society can be pushed.