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2-27-20
Eng 376

# "And we could have everything": Devotion and Detachment in *Hills Like White Elephants*

> The girl stood up and walked to the end of the station. Across, on the other side, were 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.
>
> "And we could have all this," she said. "And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible."
>
> "What did you say?"
>
> "I said we could have everything."
>
> "We can have everything."
>
> "No, we can't."
>
> "We can have the whole world."
>
> "No, we can't."
>
> "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."
>
> "But they haven't taken it away."
>
> "We'll wait and see."
>
> "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" (276).

We sense that they've had this conversation before. Weeks of implied conflict climax with this impasse: "We can have everything." / "No, we can't," begging the question: what does she mean by "have everything"? How are they making it "more impossible"? And why does the American insist that in fact they can still "have everything" while the girl says otherwise?

To answer, we must first recognize that—rather tragically—the two partners have vastly different expectations of the relationship. With imaginative comments and engaging demeanor, the girl shows a clear investment in substantial conversation and relationship. The American responds with detachment and unconvincing promises, suggesting that adventure, sex, and alcohol are his key investments. In the event of a pregnancy, their opposing and irreconcilable

desires collide. Although they disagree in a literal sense about how to respond to news of pregnancy, in a deeper sense they disagree about the substance and purpose of their very relationship—in particular, what it means to "have everything"—which in turn accounts for their disagreement about a certain "awfully simple operation" (275).

If their manner of conversing has any bearing on their respective conceptions of their relationship—its substance and purpose—then all of these exchanges hint at what having "everything" means to both the American and the girl. The American's utter disengagement in conversation suggests that, for him, "having everything" may actually mean a detached relationship of little vulnerability—and of much sex, booze, and adventure. From the first dialogue sequence we detect that the American does not meaningfully engage in conversation. When the girl asks what they should drink, he comments on the weather: "It's pretty hot" (273). To be fair, temperature may influence the proper beverage; but note that he does none of the initiating work to nurture a substantial conversation, contenting himself with minimal banal comments. In addition when the girl makes the—rather imaginative!—suggestion that the long hills across the valley look like white elephants, he reflects that he's "never seen one" (273). Notice that he doesn't remark on her wit, or even on the hills that she is pointing out, but explains his inability to assess her claim, choosing passivity once again. Both examples of the American's disinterest in conversation suggest that, for him, the relationship has little to do with substantial emotional investment or communication. Later she reminds him of her earlier observation about the hills and asks "wasn't that bright?" to which he responds ploddingly "that was bright" (274). As we perhaps expect by now he continues to stall the conversation with borderline phatic responses that avoid meaningful investment. Immediately next, the girl reflects that drinking and looking at things defines their entire relationship (274). In response to this

combative claim and the obvious discouragement it implies, once again the American simply says “I guess so” (274). Thus by disengaging from the conversation, he sabotages the girl’s sincere attempts at substantial conversation, further displaying his view of what it means for them both to “have everything”. Yet we witness the height of his disinterest when she asks—nearly pleads—“… if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you’ll like it?” (275). If there is ever a key moment for an engaged affirmation of the girl’s eager yearning for relationship, this is it. The man affirms that he does love it, yet also that he “can’t think about it. You know how I get when I worry” (275). In a key moment when sincerity was most desperately needed, he delivers an excuse—“I worry”—confirming that his ideal of “everything” has little to do with substantial conversation.

Yet the girl, on the other hand, longs for substantial relationship; she seeks it eagerly and hopefully, revealing that for her, their ideal relationship—having “everything"—would mean engaged conversation and substantial emotional intimacy. A quote already mentioned is perhaps the girl's most poignantly coy and girlish remark in the entire story. She sounds heartbreakingly young: “... I was trying. I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn’t that bright?” (274). With the concluding question the girl fishes for affirmation, showing a clear desire for approval—a desire, which, if she had “everything”, would be met. She resents the man’s inability—or unwillingness—to provide for this need when she says “Then I’ll do it. Because I don’t care about me” (275) She implies that since he wants her to do it, he must not care about her. (A mathematician would rebuke her assumption of the converse, but I digress.) When he insists “Well, I care about you” she snaps “Oh, yes. But I don’t care about me. And I’ll do it and then everything will be fine,” (276) which as far as she can tell, is exactly the outcome that he wants: he cares about her, she doesn’t care about herself. His insisting that “I wouldn’t

have you do it if you didn't want to" (275) reflects not an earnest concern for her preference or feelings, but his attempt to have his way entirely while sharing none of the moral anguish by making it seem like her own choice—utterly washing his hands of what is, in fact, a shared moral dilemma. Convenient. She resents, deeply, this subtle, sinister—although perhaps unconscious—manipulation. Her reaction constitutes a further hint about her "everything", her ideal relationship: it must be sincere and transparent and never manipulative. Naturally her frustrations have a climax, and one that genuinely reflects her ideal of a harmonious and sincere relationship. Whereas another might scream in frustration, she simply warns, "I'll scream" (277). The American takes the hint: stop talking. Far from simply confirming her indignation, in this ultimate assertion of will the girl rebukes the insincerity of the man across from her. Most notably she does it in a comparatively calm, civil manner. Perhaps for her "having everything" means such conduct; it means exemplifying a relationship that is sincere and true, forthright and ultimately good—which at last will explain what it is that she understands about their new circumstance that escapes the American. Why, again, does the American insist that they can have everything while the girl says they cannot? These contrasting relationship-ideals finally illuminate our key passage.

As she watches the river down in the valley through the trees, the girl reflects that "… we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible". As shown, for her "everything" means engaged and substantial relationship. Love. The American professes this. The baby promises commitment. This view of what having "everything" means to her explains why she is so embittered and so wounded by his insistence on the abortion: regardless of his verbosity about loving her, his not wanting to have the baby indicates that when he said he loves her, he didn't mean it in the way that she most desperately longs for.

The American, for his part, insists that "it's [still] ours… they haven't taken [the world] away". With a view to his contrasting ideal of disinvested relationship, then so long as they perform the "awfully simple operation"—indeed especially if they do—then the relationship will be exactly the way he wants it: sex, alcohol, and adventure—without demanding devotion, intimacy, or substance. Finally we behold the true core of their conflict: just as the operation entirely thwarts the girl's ideal relationship, it secures his own. The same is true in reverse.

When the lovers disagree about whether they can "have everything," they're not disagreeing merely about how to respond to pregnancy; they're disagreeing about the very purpose and substance of their relationship—what it is, what it isn't, and ultimately, what it is *for*. For the girl, "everything" is a relationship of devotion, but for the American, "everything" is a relationship of detachment. Indeed, we witness an irreversible choice that, for one person, fulfills their deepest desire, yet must crush someone else's—and moreover, that someone is a loved one. Such anguish of moral choice fuels all great fiction—as Faulkner put it: "the human heart in conflict with itself".