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Hills Like White Elephants

Ernest Hemingway's "*Hills Like White Elephants*" is a genius narration of a pivotal moment in the lives of two characters as they grapple with a decision over an unplanned pregnancy. The title is the girl's vivid description of the nearby mountains and has a symbolic significance that reveals the complexity of their situation and the contrasting viewpoints. Deeper into the story, it becomes clear that the title serves as a powerful symbolism for the unique nature of pregnancy and shapes the way each character's perspectives (Hemingway). A white elephant is a euphemism for something rare and sacred but burdensome and costly with low value, often used with a sense of irony (Yirinec). The conversation between the two characters, Jig and the American boyfriend, further exposes their contrasting perspectives, tension, and emotional struggles that define the narrative and choices they face. Therefore, the title symbolizes the rare and sacred but burdensome nature of unplanned pregnancy, shaping the characters' contrasting perspectives about having a child.

As Jig and the American wait for the train, her attention is primarily drawn to the Hills despite the many physical elements that could have attracted her attention. The thought about the hills is likely influenced by her impending thoughts and worries about the pregnancy, as later revealed in their conversation. But surprisingly, her first thought is that hills look like white elephants. This first observation of hills signifies Jig's perspective of a huge and irreversible action or situation, like the conception of life that cannot be undone (Yirinec). Comparing the hills to white elephants introduces the figurative significance of something likely rare and sacred but burdensome, just like the white elephants. However, despite Jig's vivid observation of the hills, the American seems not to see any of it. He replies,

⁹ “I’ve never seen one,” and the man drinks his beer without further concern about the hills, which prompts Jig to respond, “No, you wouldn’t have” (Hemingway). Therefore, comparing the hills to white elephants, which only Jig could see, signifies a complex situation that only affects Jig, and the American is oblivious to its nature.

The symbolism of “white elephants” as an obvious and inescapable problem underscores the central issue of unplanned pregnancy. The characters are aware of this looming dilemma, yet their communication tactics parallel the girl’s description of the hills, evading direct confrontation with the problem (Yirinec). They engage in indirect conversations and employ evasive tactics, addressing everything but the metaphorical “white elephant” in their midst. This symbolism portrays their reluctance to confront the issue head-on and reflects the girl’s unique perspective on pregnancy. She perceives their situation’s emotional and irreversible aspects, emphasizing that the baby represents more than a mere financial burden—it signifies a profound, life-altering event (Yirinec). Her concerns extend beyond financial considerations to the emotional consequences and potential strains it may impose on their relationship. Therefore, while the mountains signify the huge decision at hand, the white elephants symbolize the evasive tactics and low importance given to solving it.

The complex situation that appears only to affect Jig is the unplanned pregnancy, which leads to the tough decision of life versus abortion, which Jig compares to hills like white elephants. Hills are technically permanent, and Jig uses this symbolism to refer to the conception of life as an action that cannot be undone and irreversible (Yirinec). And despite the American arguing that the pregnancy can be undone through abortion, Jig is convinced that the action is irreversible. Jig is troubled by the tough choice of keeping the pregnancy or terminating it through abortion from a philosophical perspective of undoing conception of life or transforming a living fetus into a dead fetus. Jig argues that abortion does not reverse the conception of life and that “once they take it away, you never get it back” (Hemingway). While her arguments for life and against abortion are metaphoric to huge and permanent hills, the American sees abortion as a solution to reverse unwanted pregnancy with unconsciousness of the value of

life. This contrast fits the definition of Hills Like White Elephants – huge, rare, and burdensome but worthless to some people.

Furthermore, the symbolism of Hills Like White Elephants signifies the conflicting perspectives that Jig and American have over the tough decision of life or abortion. Likening hills to elephants is ironic since mountains are larger and typically do not resemble living white elephants. Similarly, Jig considers the decision to abort as something so large and powerful that it requires attention and critical reflection, but the dialogue with American is valueless like white elephants (Yirinec). ² When the American says, “Well, let’s try and have a fine time.” She replies, “All right. I was trying. I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn’t that bright?” (Hemingway). She considers this discussion about ‘hills’ and ‘white elephants’ as an essential discussion that amounts to having a good time, unlike the American who insists on drinking as having a good time. ³ Moreover, the American’s response, “I think it’s the best thing to do, But I don’t want you to do it if you don’t really want to” (Hemingway). Due to the burden of having children, American considers abortion the best thing without proper consideration. Therefore, the two characters have contradictory thoughts and perspectives about a huge issue, but their burdensome dialogue is valueless as it does not offer viable solutions for both.

Hills like White Elephants also signify the difference between talking and communication, which is the central theme of the story. Likening mountains to living things like elephants sounds unrealistic but strongly symbolizes the vivid contrast between communication and talking. When Jig ¹ says, “They look like white elephants,” American responds, “I’ve never seen one,” she then adds, “No, you wouldn’t have” (Hemingway). And he interjects, “I might have. Just because you say I wouldn’t have doesn’t prove anything” (Hemingway). This is the first instance of conflict between communication and talking; Jig uses rhetorical language to communicate an important message, but American talk shallowly without comprehending the topic (Yirinec). ⁴ Moreover, he says, “I don’t want you to do anything that you don’t want to do,” but simultaneously, he asks Jig to abort their unborn child, a decision he knows she does not like. ⁶ Jig continues this contrast by asking, “Would you do something for me now... “would you please

please please please please stop talking?" (Hemingway). This is intense frustration as her communication is highly misunderstood by American who keeps talking without comprehension. Therefore, the contrast between Jig's communication and American's talking is symbolized by likening hills to white elephants.

Finally, the title signifies the theme of reality vs. fantasy as portrayed by the conflicting perspectives of Jig and American. Likening mountains to white elephants is imaginative since their realistic traits are dissimilar; this is symbolic of the dialogue where Jig's realities contradict the American fantasies (Yirinec). As Jig argues for the sacred nature of conception, pregnancy, loss of an unborn child, and risks of abortion, American remain oblivious to these factors and only see the burden reversed. He says, "it's really an awfully simple operation... it's not really an operation at all" because he is ignorant of the medical risks (Hemingway). But when asked about what they will do afterward, he claims, "we'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before" because he is unrealistic about the ramifications of abortion on women. This man is unaware of the realities, psychological and physical dangers of abortion, or the value of children. Therefore, Hills Like White Elephants is an opposing comparison that symbolizes the contrast between the characters conflicted about having a child and having an abortion.

In conclusion, the title symbolizes the rare and sacred but burdensome nature of unplanned pregnancy, shaping the characters' contrasting perspectives about having a child. Jig's first observation of the hills symbolizes the huge issue worrying her, and then she likens it to the white elephants, known to be sacred but burdensome with little value. The title symbolizes Jig's unwanted pregnancy, the huge decision about keeping it vs. abortion, and the contrast in arguments between Jig and American. Similarly, the title signifies the conflicted perspectives of Jig and American, including their understanding of the value of having a child, the risks of abortion, and the emotional loss to the woman. The idea of hills looking like white elephants also signifies the contrast between communication and talking about reality and imagination. Therefore, Hills Like White Elephants is an accurate title and description depicting Jig and American discussion.

Works Cited

Hemingway, Ernest. *Hills like white elephants*. Open Road Media, 2023.

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