

Nia Maheshwari

Professor Urmila Seshagiri

ENGL 258

14 September 2023

Distracted to Assertive: The Role of Tone in Conveying Jig's Transformation

In Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants", we observe an unnamed American man and a European girl, Jig, sitting in a bar near the train station, awaiting the train to Madrid. In this railside bar, with its decorative bead curtain and vast windows overlooking hills and two distinct landscapes— one fertile, the other barren— the couple discuss whether or not Jig (who is seemingly pregnant) should undergo an abortion. Throughout their exchange, Jig's interactions with the man and her surroundings emphasize the intense dynamicity in her behavior. Initially, she allows herself to be distracted by the mountains in the surrounding environment, the taste of her drink, and a potentially happy future that seems to be just within her grasp— all but the tense, impending conversation. However, with the American man verging on impatience, repeatedly claiming that he will be supportive of any decision Jig makes, we notice Jig's demeanor gradually transitions into one that is increasingly focused and resistant. Through a drastic, yet gradual, shift in Jig's tone, Hemingway walks the reader through the evolution of Jig's perspective as her mindset transforms from one characterized by optimism and distraction to one that seems bothered by the man's insistence, and even assertive in her decision to keep the baby.

As the American man prompts the beginning of an inevitable, serious conversation that could permanently change both of their lives, Jig appears to be preoccupied by the landscape and optimistic thoughts about the future. One of the first objects of Jig's focus are the hills in the distance, which she believes resemble white elephants. The man begins to nudge the topic, claiming "I think it's the best thing to do..." (Hemingway 370), with 'it' implying the abortion.

In response, Jig acknowledges his opinion, and instead of staying relevant to the topic, proceeds to express her feelings about the hills in the distance: “I know. But if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you’ll like it?” (Hemingway 370). Her absence in a conversation the man is attempting to invoke is a testament to how scattered her mindset is at the moment. When she shares this thought, we also notice a tone of desperation in her voice, a subtle reach for the man’s approval of her clever metaphor– and perhaps of her personality altogether. This is another indication of how distracted she is, as she redirects the conversation from the pressing subject of abortion to the man’s opinion of her and their future. Jig continues to reach for a happy future with him, as she comments on a life of endless possibilities for the two of them, “And we could have all this... we could have everything” (Hemingway 370). Evidently, Jig is initially desperate to please him, to be happy, to have ‘the whole world’. To elaborate, we know that Jig is distracted because she is pining for his approval and a perfect future together rather than openly voicing *her* opinion about the abortion– the natural reaction we would expect from the main individual involved in the procedure.

At a turning point that closely follows the previous part of their exchange, Jig snaps back to reality as she begins resisting his idealistic mannerisms, and even mocking his exaggerated supportiveness. We notice the first of many moments of Jig’s newfound resistance to the man in the midst of their conversation about a future together; claiming at first that they can “have everything”, Jig immediately contradicts herself when the man agrees with her, “No, we can’t” (Hemingway 370). It is as if Jig begins to sense that the man is placating her in order to make her more agreeable, to convince her of making a decision she may be against. With this uncharacteristically bold dialogue, Jig seems to unlock a completely different set of emotions. In

a tone charged with sarcasm and hints of annoyance, Jig interrupts the man as he tries to appease her once again,

“‘I don’t want you to do anything that you don’t want to do—.’

Nor anything that isn’t good for me’” (Hemingway 370).

By interrupting and correctly predicting the rest of his sentence, Jig sarcastically hints to the man that she is tired of repeatedly hearing the same line, that it is losing its emotional value. Jig’s implementation of sarcasm in her interruption signifies a growth in confidence and security in her own decisions, as it demonstrates her readiness to compromise his feelings in order to express her own. She interrupts him in the following sentence as well and asks him to be quiet, which only emphasizes the presence of a switch in her perspective and her strengthened grasp on the situation. She is no longer distracted, or looking to appease the man— as indicated by the previous quote, Jig’s newfound dauntlessness in the conversation is evidence of her increased sense of control over her own thoughts and the situation.

The tension between the man and the girl continues to develop and grow until it reaches a climax as she openly expresses her annoyance with the man, and reveals her final decision. Jig, frustrated by his constant, facadial expressions of support, pleads “Would you please please please stop talking?” (Hemingway 371). As Jig asks him to stop discussing the subject for a second time, her repetition of the word “please” conveys that she is holding back on completely expressing her annoyance. Her tone suggests that the man’s behavior is starting to become bothersome and immature; Jig is beginning to view him as a whining child that needs to be firmly, yet calmly, quieted by a responsible adult. In her last dialogue, Jig responds to the man’s indirect inquiry about the abortion, “Do you feel better?”, with a statement that expresses her opinion on the subject matter with the most clarity thus far. The wording of the man’s question

implies that there was something wrong with Jig the more control she felt over the situation, a tone that recommends she return to her “fixed”, agreeable state. Whereas a previous version of Jig would resort to pacification rather than confrontation, the current, changed Jig directly addresses his question through a recently uncharacteristic final statement: “There’s nothing wrong with me, I feel fine” (Hemingway 371). She directly denotes her desire to change nothing about herself. In other words, assuming that the primary change the couple is discussing is abortion, Jig is communicating an irrevocable desire to maintain her current, pregnant state and keep the baby.

Unlike earlier behavior she exhibits, Jig’s final sentence is simple and focused. Her initially distracted demeanor seems to have vanished from her persona altogether, as there are no metaphorical descriptions nor attempts at abruptly concluding the conversation. In comparison to Jig’s previous reactions towards the man’s attempts at discussing her decision, this is clearly the most definitive she has been in communicating her opinion. As a result of this final declaration in the couples’ exchange, we can be convinced of the growth in Jig’s persona from a distracted girl into a determined, assertive woman capable of independently choosing to keep the baby.

Work Cited

Hemingway, Ernest. "Hills Like White Elephants." *The Story and Its Writer*,
Ann Charters ed., 2010, pp. 368-371