

On *Hills like white elephants*

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Characteristic of Hemingway's writing style, *Hills like white elephants* is mostly made up of conversation between an American man and his girlfriend Jig. The man kept convincing the girl to take an abortion, so they can return to their carefree life of travelling and drinking, while the girl rejected the idea and proposed a new life of family and permanence. The conflict shown in the conversation is undoubtedly intense, containing plentiful messages for readers to interpret. As for the man's position in the couple's relationship, we can also make deductions by collecting information from their conversation and piercing those pieces together.

Firstly, the man wanted to be in control over their relationship. He wanted it to be just the way he expected it to be — having fun travelling, drinking and shouldering no responsibility. Thus, when Jig asked him 'What will we do afterwards', he replied 'We'll be fine afterwards. Just like we were before'. And when Jig proposed a relationship more than that, he refused to give it any bit of consideration. The girl's voice and visions on life were dismissed in his asserting of 'That's the only thing that bothers us' and 'It's the only thing that's made us unhappy'.

Also, although the man claimed to care about Jig's feelings and opinions, he is otherwise totally ignorant of them. When Jig suggested that the man wouldn't have tried the beer, he replied: 'I might have. Just because you say I wouldn't doesn't prove anything'. His eagerness to dispute Jig's guesses shows his disregard for Jig's opinions. And when he kept stressing 'I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to' and 'I'm perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you', both the readers and the girl know that it's just a lie, an empty promise — the man's putting on a hypocritical mask and pretending to care about Jig was either a way to persuade Jig into taking the abortion, or to reduce the guilt in his own mind.

As for the girl, she tried to propose a bright future but received no positive reply. Her disappointment could be seen in lines such as 'We could have everything' and 'it isn't ours anymore'. She has come to the realization that the man can't help her build her ideal life together. When she pleaded 'Could you please stop talking', it's out of

the sad yet correct realization that ‘stop talking’ may be the only thing she could ask of the man, for the man can never go down to offer her anything else, whether it’s family or understanding.

And instead of fighting for her ideal life, Jig’s only choice was to accept such a truth and compromise. She knew clearly in her mind that she needs to submit to the man to please him if she wanted to keep this relationship. We don’t know whether her choice to stay with the man was out of emotional or economical need, but it’s true that she has the tendency to ingratiate herself with the man to please him — she had realized that if she wants to keep the relationship, she must give up her hopes for the future and her visions on life. When she asked the man ‘If I do you’ll be happy and things will be like they were and you’ll love me?’, she was humbly pleading for the man’s love by giving up her former expectation of family and permanent relationship. And when she sarcastically said ‘I don’t care about me’, her love for the man (or need of the relationship) was taking over. The last expression and words shown by the girl — her smile and her saying that ‘I feel fine’ — can also be seen as a posture of ingratiation and compromise.

I like the ending of the story. Every corner of the novel is packed up with hints and metaphors, offering people various interpretations on the story, and providing a deeply aesthetic atmosphere at the same time. The girl’s smiling and saying that she felt fine at the end of the story, for example, is a sign that could be interpreted differently. Was it a sign of compromise and resignation? Or was it a symbol of awakening and abandoning of the unbalanced relationship? We can never know, but only make guesses based on her previous words and actions.

I think several different interpretations made by critics all make sense to some extent. The girl may agree to take the abortion and stay with the man, or she may leave the man, or oppositely, the man may jilt her.¹ But one thing is for sure, that she has realized the unbalanced, inharmonious relationship has deteriorated since this this conflict over the abortion. When she said to the man ‘We would have everything’ and

¹ HASHMI N. Hills Like White Elephants: The Jilting of Jig[J]. The Hemingway Review, 2003, 23(1): 72.

‘It isn’t ours anymore’, she was facing the heartbreaking truth that they cannot share a promising future together. I think she understands the situation she was in, and that’s the part I like best about this story, that she was not making the choice out of false interpretation or wishful beliefs — whichever way she may choose, it’s based on her truthful grasp of the situation.

And as a reader myself, I would like to let the girl smile a smile of independence and toughness, making up her mind to end the relationship that she did not took joy in. Or she may smile out of irony, when she finally realized her pathetic position in their relationship and joked at herself. But out of all possibilities, I don’t want it to be a smile of submission and ingratiation, of giving in to the man’s wishes and expectations. Above is my interpretation of the ending.