White Elephants, Railroad Tracks, and a Confusing Couple

Hemingway’s “Hills like White Elephants” can be a very confusing story and countless conclusions can be drawn from the text. The puzzling dialogue between the characters can leave several questions unanswered, and it can be difficult to understand what the couple is talking about. There are many things left unsaid in the story so the reader has to look at symbolism to understand what is going on. Hemingway uses the symbolism of the title, the scenery, and the drinks to reveal the truth about the couple’s relationship.

“Hills like White Elephants” was first published in 1927. It was written by Ernest Hemingway an American writer and journalist. He is famous for his stories about everyday people that his readers can relate to. “Hills like White Elephants” is a story about a couple who is traveling in Spain and trying new drinks everywhere they go. After their stay in many hotels the girl, Jig, becomes pregnant. She is trying to tell the American man that she wants to keep the baby but he wants her to get an abortion. She is scared of losing the man so she doesn’t know what to do. Although he says she doesn’t have to get the abortion she is sure he won’t be happy unless she does. Symbolism is important to this story because it brings it to life. Through symbolism the reader can get a complete understanding of the couple’s situation and feelings.

Hemingway uses the title “Hills like White Elephants” to symbolize that Jig is pregnant. The term white elephant means something that is a great burden (Martin). In Asian countries albino elephants were worshiped, but anyone who owned one had to feed it special food and build a place for others to come pray. It was a great burden on money and time, but anyone who owned one was considered blessed (Martin). Jig sees the baby as a blessing even though she knows it will be hard to take care of. The man says he has never seen a white elephant and Jig
says, “No you wouldn’t have” (Hemingway 654). This symbolizes that the man doesn’t see the baby as a living, breathing human and just wants it gone. He doesn’t appreciate the blessing he could receive.

The scenery symbolizes the life Jig is living and her decision. “On this side there was no shade and no trees” (Hemingway 654) suggests that the scenery is bare and lifeless much like Jig’s life. Because there is no shade it is most likely very hot and uncomfortable. This symbolizes how Jig is uncomfortable in her situation not only with the baby but also with her decision to keep traveling. No trees on this side suggests that there are trees on the other side. It symbolizes the divide between the two decisions. One side is bare and lifeless while the other side is full of life and happiness. Jig can either choose to have the baby and go to the life full of happiness or get the abortion and stay in this lifeless boring situation.

Another part of the scenery that symbolizes the couple’s relationship is the two railroad tracks. The two tracks are parallel meaning that they never touch each other. This represents that although the two are intimate they are very distant. They are having trouble communicating what they want and this keeps them from connecting. The tracks also only have two directions which symbolizes that there is no compromise. It is either keep the baby or get rid of it. The tracks never come together symbolizing that they will never be able to come to a joined decision which pleases them both.

The way that Jig talks about the alcohol also symbolizes the relationship. After trying a new drink Jig says, “Everything tastes like licorice. Especially all the things you’ve waited so long for like absinthe” (Hemingway 655). The pregnancy has made the couple unhappy and the drink absinthe symbolizes it. Absinthe has a bitter aftertaste which hides the initial sweetness (Blakemore). This symbolizes that Jig is now feeling bittersweet because she wants to settle
down, but now that the man is faced with the decision he has turned her down and suggests an abortion. Sherlyn Abdoo agrees saying, “Absinthe leaves a bitter aftertaste, which hides the initial sweetness, so absinthe could be suggestive of their sexual encounters, sweet at first, now marred by pregnancy and the threat of abortion” (qtd. in Critics and Other Commentators).

Sherlyn Abdoo argues that the white color of the hills symbolizes the color of a stillborn baby. It is unlikely that the white color symbolizes that because when a woman has an abortion the baby is not born a still born. The white color is being used to describe the elephants which symbolize the baby in Jig. Jig is referring to the baby as a white elephant to the man because she knows it will be a burden on his good time just like the albino elephants in Asia. If it were representing a stillborn then it would suggest that the two were planning on keeping the baby when in reality they aren’t. In the end Jig agrees to the abortion so a stillborn isn’t the likely result.

Hemingway’s “Hills like White Elephants” can be a very confusing story. By looking at the symbolism of the title, the scenery, and the drinks the reader can see the truth in the couple’s relationship. The two are unhappy now that the baby has been added to the equation. Jig wants to keep the baby but the man has already decided it is best to get an abortion. The two are very distant from each other and they will never be able to make a decision which makes them both happy.
Works Cited


