"HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS": THE JILTING OF JIG

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CRITICS GRAPPLING WITH Ernest Hemingway's hauntingly enigmatic "Hills Like White Elephants" have failed to reach a consensus about the ending of the story.[1] Almost all agree, however, that regardless of what actually transpires, the existing relationship between the American and the girl will deteriorate, or terminate. Three different scenarios have been seriously considered: the girl will have the abortion (albeit reluctantly) and stay with the man; the girl will have the abortion and leave the man; or, the girl will not have the abortion, having won the man over to her point of view. However, there is strong support in the narrative for a fourth outcome that fits in with the dark overall prognosis presented in other scholarly interpretations: the girl will indeed have the abortion, expecting in this way to stay on with the man, but after the operation has been performed, he will abandon her. Various verbal and non-verbal indications found in the story support this interpretation of the narrative, as does the very symbolism of the title itself.

Among the different, strongly argued readings of the story's ending suggested by various scholars is the projection, alluded to above, that the girl will have the abortion but will then leave the American. This outcome is visualized by Howard Hannum:

> She has decided to have the abortion but not in order to resume her life with the American. And this is not so much a question of her having the courage to leave him, after the abortion, as it is a clear case of her being unable to tolerate him—of her having left him in her wake. (53)

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This is a plausible reading. The conversation between the two seems to indicate that there is little love between them. Thus the girl, who now wants more than a relationship based on sex and alcohol, would have no reason to stay on with the man. However, one or two troublesome details fail to fit into this scenario: why does the girl smile at the man, whom she supposedly cannot tolerate, when he tells her he had better move the bags? Why does she urge the man to come back so they can finish the drink together? And why does she smile at him again when he returns after placing their bags closer to the point of departure? A mere smile would not be sufficient reason to cast doubt on an interpretation in the case of most writers. But this writer is Hemingway.

Turning to another interpretation, we find an innovative and challenging view of the story's ending offered by Stanley Renner through his reading of what he considers a key sentence in the story. When the woman serving drinks informs the couple of the imminent arrival of the train, the man picks up the bags to carry them to "the other side of the station"(CSS 214). Attaching great significance to the word "other," Renner argues: "What the girl's outbursts have made clear to the American is just how strong her resistance to having an abortion is." Because of this realization, and the girl's "overpowering reluctance," Renner contends, the man gives in and carries the bags to the "other" side, which he perceives as symbolizing the girl's side of the issue (34).[2] According to this interpretation, the girl smiles because the man has capitulated, and she has triumphed. Thus, in Renner's view, the girl has her way, and the train she and the man will board will not take them to the abortion clinic.

Although this is an interesting and imaginative interpretation, it does raise some questions. First of all, the only train mentioned is the train going to Madrid that arrives in five minutes, "the train" the man does not see as he looks down the tracks, and "the train" for which the people are waiting in the barroom. The man is apparently moving the bags in place for a train that is due momentarily; it is surely a bit of a stretch to assume that two trains are arriving at the same time, one going to Madrid, and the other in a different direction, particularly when there is no mention of a second train. Secondly, given the man's egocentric personality, it is difficult to believe that after using such ill-concealed pressure tactics to wear down the girl's resistance, he would meekly cave in without uttering a word to indicate his acceding to her wishes—and, of course, the magnanimity of his

doing so.[3] Finally, as Hannum has observed, "Jig and the American have no doubt argued this question of the abortion for weeks" (47). Even if it has not been debated for "weeks," allowing for a reasonable time frame, they must no doubt have had some lengthy discussion before taking the final step of proceeding to the abortion clinic in Madrid. How can we bring ourselves to accept that the man was unable to gauge the intensity of Jig's feelings during previous argument, but has realized it in a single moment and allowed it to change his entire plans for the future? Such sensitivity (or submission) does not seem to be part of the man's temperament.

A third interpretation of the outcome, having the acceptance of many readers, is that the girl accedes to the man's demands and both proceed to Madrid where the girl will have the abortion in order to stay on with the man. This interpretation is supported by Joseph DeFalco who refers to the girl's "capitulation" (172), and also by Timothy O'Brien. The latter observes that by means of its ending (Jig's agreeing to the abortion), "the story functions not only as a powerful critique of man's sexual politics, but also as a complex portrayal of woman's, not just Jig's, final compliance" (24).

While Jig's yielding to the man's wishes is a highly plausible scenario in the light of the conversation and innuendos found in the narrative, a significant question arises relating to what will follow if Jig undergoes the abortion in hopes of retaining the existing partnership. The question is: will the man choose to stay on with her afterwards? Or is he more likely to abandon her after the abortion has been performed? Strong reasons can be found to support the latter eventuality. While Jig may or may not have any option other than to continue to be the man's companion, is he under any compulsion to be with her if he no longer wants her? The apparent answer to this question leads to the possibility of a fourth outcome to the story: the girl will, of necessity or of choice, accede to the man's wishes, but once she has had the abortion, he will jilt her because he has no further use for her and is not obliged to stay on with her. This outcome not only finds support in the given circumstances of the situation, but is also strongly indicated by the underlying subtleties of the story's title, to which we now must turn for guidance.

As Doris Lanier observes, "everything in the story contributes in some way to its meaning" (281). The title, however, has particularly fascinated scholars, in terms of its imperviousness to obvious interpretation on the one hand, and of the importance given to it by Hemingway on the other. Critics have found themselves searching in various directions for an "expla-

nation," including the suggestive appearance and color of the hills (Abdoo 238), the connotation of an unwanted gift implied in the term "white elephant" (Kozikowski 107), and the contradictory implications of "an annoyingly useless gift" and "a possession of great value" (DeFalco 169).[4]

All of the above, and similar other interpretations, enrich our overall perception, and none can or need be excluded. Paul Smith alludes, in his discussion of Hemingway's "The End of Something," to "the rich extensions of meaning with which Hemingway invests the landscape of his stories" (52). Certainly, this is true of "Hills Like White Elephants." In this case, however, the title may additionally, and more importantly, have a deeper underlying symbolism that sheds light on the outcome of the conflict presented here and may well hold the key to the question, "How does it all end?"

To begin with, a basic question needs to be asked: why *has* Hemingway chosen the girl's unusual simile concerning the hills as the title of the story—unless, as suggested earlier, it contains a meaning significant enough to aid our understanding of the entire narrative? Her observation is generally considered to be imaginative,[5] but even if we accept its poetic quality, questions remain. Why is it underscored through heavy repetition? Why is the American shown, more than once, responding brusquely to the girl's "white elephants" comment? And why is the remoteness of the hills emphasized, the girl seeing them "across the valley"? (*CSS* 211). To answer these questions—and others—we must view the story as a situation of dramatic irony at its most intense. The girl clings to a dream of family and togetherness until the last minute, and finally decides to give it all up as the requisite price of staying with the man—not knowing, as the reader does, from the many hints provided by Hemingway, that the man is likely to leave her, even if she goes through with the abortion. From this viewpoint, another layer of significance emerges behind the phrase "hills like white elephants." The hills can represent, on the one hand, the precious dream of a family relationship, so ardently desired by the girl, and on the other, the harsh stifling of the dream, manifested in the man's cold response to her comment about white elephants. For the girl, the sunlit hills are "lovely" (*CSS* 212), like rare and precious white elephants.[6] They appear to symbolize the glimmering hope, remote yet real like the hills themselves, that her sexual relationship with the man[7] might change into a solid relationship of family and permanence. The man has little empathy for the white elephants simile, finding it unappealing, and the girl's repeated reference to it irksome. Thus, while the girl's

view of the hills can be seen as a wistful projection of her dream for the future, the man's unwillingness to endorse it surely signifies the killing of the dream. It is not that he fails to understand what the girl is trying to communicate. Hannum has pointed out that, contrary to what has been suggested by some critics, the American does have "metaphorical capacity," and if he seems unable to grasp the white elephants simile it is because he "sees nothing of the beauty or the promise of a more romantic life that prompts Jig's simile"(48). He simply chooses to "shut off" the discussion. Smiley, who sees Jig's remark as a light-hearted conversational gambit to promote intimacy, aptly notes:

> ...Jig's initial remark becomes an invitation to join in the intimacy of shared banter. The American's reply, "I've never seen one [white elephant]," effectively ends that conversational tactic. (3)

And it is not just Jig's dream for the future that the man finds irritating and that he rejects; it is now the girl herself.

Jig used to be the American's good-time girl, which was all he wanted of her. Because of the pregnancy, and Jig's attitude towards it, the man now finds her boring and demanding, in short, a nuisance—one is tempted to say, a white elephant. His hypocrisy is transparent in the following responses to the girl's questions:

> "Then what will we do afterward?"
> "We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before."
> "What makes you think so?"
> "That's the only thing [the pregnancy] that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy." (*CSS* 212)

But things are never again going to be "fine" between them, a view subscribed to by almost all scholars with the probable exception of Renner, who visualizes a "happy" ending (34). The girl's new expectations have altered irreparably the earlier equation of her relationship with the man. He has no use for her in the new role she wants for herself, as mother and presumably wife. In fact, he sees her as a different person and recognizes that it will not be possible for her to play the previous part of carefree, pleasure-giving partner even if she agrees to the operation. She would be living with

the painful memory of an abortion he forced upon her. Because of his frustration and annoyance with the situation, and with Jig who has created it, the man can barely control his irritation when she asks if her comment about the hills looking like white elephants wasn't bright, responding with a curt "That was bright" (*CSS* 212). When she reminds him that at one time he would have thought it bright, she is right—at one time he probably would have found it amusing. But she was then a different person, a "fun person," with whom he could have shared "fun things." As Barry Stampfl puts it:

> The American's failure to find the association amusing registers the deterioration of their relation, as measured against previous, happier times when he would have relished her comment. (36)

Jig has now become dissatisfied with the earlier superficial lifestyle and wants more, as evident in her remark: "That's all we do, isn't it—look at things and try new drinks?" (*CSS* 212). He doesn't even bother to dispute the fact, or argue that at one time she apparently enjoyed or at least accepted this way of living—the labels on the bags from all the hotels where they had spent nights are proof. There is no need to engage in argument if he plans to be rid of her.

Faith Pullin contends that the American is keen to return to this earlier lifestyle and "refuses to understand that his relationship with the girl will be radically impaired, whether he persuades her to have an abortion or not" (189). Renner refers to the "unencumbered sexual playhouse the American has been enjoying that he stubbornly tries to preserve throughout the struggle over the abortion decision" (33). While these interpretations cannot be disregarded, it is more likely Jig who fails to recognize that, with the fun gone out of the relationship, the man would have no reason to return to it, because all he wanted from the start was fun. This is not to say Jig has any illusions about what lies ahead; in giving up her dream of family and choosing to stay with the man on his terms she by no means expects a future filled with tenderness. Her sarcastic remarks make it abundantly clear that she recognizes the relationship will be devoid of love.

Why, then, would she be willing to put up with it? Two possible explanations can be offered. "Love" was probably never an element in the equation; Jig knowingly entered into an arrangement that was to be largely limited to

sex and fun—traveling, drinking, and nights of physical pleasure—and her fleeting hope of shifting it into higher emotional gear is in the nature of wishful thinking, little more than a dream. A second possible reason is that the factors that induced or compelled her to accept this relationship in the first place (such as economic dependency) might still exist. She may or may not love the man, and knows he does not love her; yet she may have no choice but to hold on to the apparently well-off American. It is doubtful that he has any such compulsion to stay on with her.

If the man is planning to leave the girl in any case, why does he persuade her to have the abortion? Why doesn't he adopt the simpler course of just leaving her to deal with the problem? Several possible answers suggest themselves. Having shared a pleasurable period of his life with her, he may care for her on some level, even though he is not interested in a permanent relationship—not with her, and maybe not with anyone else. When he says he will stay with her all the time the operation is being performed, he no doubt means it. Although he tells her "it's not really an operation at all" (*CSS* 212), his anxiety is evident. At one point he says, rather incongruously considering that he has consistently downplayed the seriousness of the procedure, "You know how I get when I worry" (213).

A second possible explanation is that, assuming he is a cad without moral scruples, the man nonetheless feels that the practical course for him to adopt is to see Jig out of the predicament in which he has landed her—a young girl alone and pregnant in a Catholic country—after which he will be able to leave her without remorse or guilt (and, it may be added, fear of legal or other consequences). All scores would have been settled.

A third explanation has also been advanced. Lionel Trilling, among others, has suggested that if the child is not aborted, the man might have to marry the girl (730). This could be a realistic scenario in the Catholic country where the action takes place, and where, in all likelihood, there would have been little tolerance of pregnancy out of wedlock. No doubt, there would be even less tolerance of abortion, which would be regarded as tantamount to murder. However, an illegal abortion could be performed in secrecy in a matter of hours, whereas it would be difficult to conceal an illegitimate child over the years.

Whatever the reason, the man obviously considers it expedient to see the girl go through with the operation,[8] liberating him from responsibility and guilt alike before he abandons her.

Despite trying to reconcile herself mentally to returning to what has now become a loveless sexual relationship, Jig does not give up her efforts to win the man over to her point of view through sarcastic gibes that prove ineffective. Although he keeps telling her that she doesn't have to go through with the abortion if she doesn't want to, his hypocrisy is not only patent but also unbearable, leading to her hysterical outburst asking him to stop talking. She realizes that further attempts to convince him will be useless, and she has little desire to hear more of his protestations of how much he cares for her, and only wants what is good for her. Thus, what Renner has described as "the girl's near-hysterical aversion to the idea of abortion"(32), is equally or even more so a violent, near-hysterical response to the man's repeated hypocritical assertion that the choice is up to her. Supporting this view, Jauss writes: "Eventually, his protestations of selfless concern for her wear out her patience and she asks him to 'please, please, please, please, please, please, please stop talking'"(5). Jig knows the battle is already over, and the man doesn't need to keep up the duplicity—which was always transparent. The final decision is now up to her—either have the abortion to satisfy the man and stay with him, as she imagines, or face the future on her own. The time for talk is over.

Yet another interesting and important detail in the unfolding narrative, the girl reaching out for the strings of the bead curtain carrying the significant words "Anis del Toro," can also be explained in terms of the reading advocated here. For the girl, keeping the man means foregoing the dream of family and togetherness symbolized by the hills like white elephants, going through with the abortion, and returning to the role of sexual partner. She realizes it is time to turn her back on the faraway hills and face the reality of the curtain.

This unpleasant option stares her harshly in the face, demanding immediate recognition, as symbolized by the wind blowing the bead curtain against the table at which she is sitting. The fact that she catches hold of just two of the strings seems to suggest that she is reluctantly and hesitantly, and with only a small measure of acceptance, trying to force herself to face a distasteful but seemingly unavoidable choice.[9] The situation acquires added pathos when we keep in mind that any positive outcome from her forced sacrifice is doubtful; as suggested here, the man is likely to leave her, regardless.

The sequence of Jig arriving at a decision leads to the final incidents of the narrative, regarded, by common consensus among scholars, as highly

symbolic, and the subject of much discussion and disagreement. The woman serving the drinks tells the man that the train to Madrid (where the operation will be performed) is due in five minutes. Jig smiles at the man as he picks up the bags to carry them to the point where the couple can quickly board the train, an express which will stop for just two minutes. After putting down the bags he looks up the tracks but, we are told, "[can]not see the train" (*CSS* 214). Jauss contends that when Hemingway writes that the man "looked up the tracks but could not see the train," he is abandoning the objective, dramatic point of view and is taking us inside the character (5). In other words, looking into the mind of the man, we are made to realize that he does not physically see the train because he is mentally unable to see it.

An alternative explanation is also possible—the man does not see the train because it is not there, because it is not due for a few more minutes. But why would so trivial and insignificant a detail even be worth mentioning? Perhaps because the few minutes now chronologically available in the story give the man the time for his next action, which *is* highly significant in relation to the outcome of the narrative suggested here. Time, we must not allow ourselves to forget, is of great importance in the story. As DeFalco observes:

> The dramatic time is given, so the whole of the action is telescoped into "forty minutes." Placing the action in the waiting room of a train station, and having the characters awaiting a train which will stop for only two minutes, provides an intense focus upon the decision to be reached by the characters in the short span of time available. (170)

Not seeing the train gives the man the time he needs to step into the barroom for a quick drink by himself, an action decidedly symbolic of his decision to be free of the girl. She had asked him to come back so they could finish the beer together. His using up the few available minutes to have a drink by himself eliminates the possibility of sharing a drink with her; he is clearly dismissing her from his life.

The above incident leads to a final meaningful detail, the girl's smile. Why does she smile at the man when he tells her he is moving the bags, and again when he rejoins her after placing the bags at the boarding point? To answer this question we need to go back to the girl's earlier hysterical outburst and sarcastic remarks which could have given offense to the man who

claims to love her and with whom she apparently plans to stay. She knows that she has lost the argument. The train is due any minute, and the bags are in place to be carried on board. Anger and sarcasm serve no purpose now that she has decided to go through with the abortion and stay with the man (or so she thinks). The practical course is to act agreeably and show her willing acquiescence. In fact, the girl tries to treat her earlier behavior as a thing of the past, a momentary lapse from which she has recovered. When the man asks her if she feels better, she responds that she feels fine, and adds, "There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine" (CSS 214). The statement is almost an apology, an acknowledgment that there was something wrong with her earlier, but she is now back to her normal self.[10] DeFalco provides a highly perceptive insight on her comment. He observes: "The pathos of her plight is ultimately sublimated into a pose of unconcern. But the repetition of the phrase 'I feel fine' captures the emotional pitch of near-hysteria" (172). So does the unnaturally bright smile. The girl has now suppressed her real feelings, but they are surely evident in the reiteration of the statement that she feels fine, and in the artificial brightness she brings to her smile, a smile as bright as a tear.

As the tale comes to a close, Hemingway lets the omniscient reader obtain a "wide-angle" view of the concluding scene in its tragic entirety. We see the man and girl getting ready to board the train, the girl with a heavy heart but cheerful exterior, willing to sacrifice that which is precious to her in order to preserve the partnership, the man eager for the girl to be done with the abortion so he can be free of her. And in the distance loom the hills, no longer like precious white elephants or elusive, shimmering dreams, but more like silent, white tombstones for fond hopes that flickered awhile—and then died.

NOTES

1. One writer goes so far as to suggest that critics have been deterred from writing about the story because of its unclear outcome. In his words: "Although 'Hills Like White Elephants' is one of Hemingway's most powerful short stories, it has received scant critical attention since its publication in 1928. One of the reasons underlying the critical neglect is the story's problematic ending" (Sipiora 50).
2. Mary Dell Fletcher, on the other hand, observes that when the man carries the bags to the "other side," he is not necessarily reversing his decision, as the symbolism might appear to suggest. She believes it is quite likely that "this side" is a switch line (or siding) and the "other side" is a main line and boarding place for trains going in either direction (18).

3. Justice regards Renner's "revolutionary reading of the story's conclusion" to be credible, but she finds both projections of the outcome—the girl's capitulation or the man's—to be "very nearly equally convincing" (17, 18).
4. Renner, associating the white elephant with the burden of the unwanted child Jig is carrying, notes that it is "something she cannot just throw away but for which, in her present circumstances, she has no use; something that is awkwardly, burdensomely, in the way" (29).
5. Joseph Flora writes: "Imaginatively, creatively, she observes that the hills in the distance look like white elephants" (34). O'Brien refers to her "imaginative discourse" (20), and Hildy Coleman to "the distraught girl's poetic description of the hills as white elephants" (69). However, not all writers see it in this light. Mary Dell Fletcher, referring to Jig's simile, uses the words "whatever it means," and later alludes to "spontaneous and inane remarks" which may have had a "private meaning" (17). Pamela Smiley refers to it as "Jig's lightness and humor" (4).
6. About the hills, John Hollander notes that "their beauty is nobler than their narrowed emblematic meaning, and that beauty calls up a wider and stronger evocation" (215).
7. Hemingway describes the couple's bags as carrying labels "from all the hotels where they had spent *nights*" (*CSS* 214. Emphasis added).
8. Joseph Flora has made an interesting observation on Hemingway's avoidance of the word "abortion." He writes: "The narrator makes the moral quality of the story the more intense by never using the word *abortion*, and the characters themselves do not use it either—she because the concept is morally degrading to her, because she would like a home, a family, the sanctioned products of love once dominant in the Western world and exemplified by Spain, and he because abortion is something else if it is not named, something 'perfectly simple,' he insists" (34).
9. Sherlyn Abdoo also sees the girl's grasping of the strings of beads as her symbolic consent to the abortion (239).
10. Smith sees it as a final sarcastic fling, which he suggests could be read as follows: "*I* feel fine...There's *nothing* wrong with *me*," with the implication that there is nothing wrong with her, but something wrong with him (212).

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