



## HEMINGWAY HILLS: SYMBOLISM IN "HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS"

Although subject, setting, point of view, characterization, dialog, irony, and compression all make "Hills Like White Elephants" one of Hemingway's most brilliant short stories, the symbolism implicit in the title and developed in the story contributes more than any other single quality to the powerful impact.

Emphasis by position and repetition clearly suggests the importance Hemingway attached to the comparison. Besides the reference in the title, there are, within this very short three-page story, two references to the whiteness of the hills and four to them as white elephants, although one of these suggests that the hills do not look like white elephants but only have their coloring.

On first reading the title, one assumes the comparison may merely be to the color and to the rounded contour of the hills that constitute part of the setting, a quite literal reference. This impression is reinforced by the first sentence, the subject of which is "long and white" hills. The second time they are mentioned, they are contrasted with the countryside, which is brown and dry, suggestive of the limitations and aridity of the relationship of the man and woman, which begins to unfold and which is the basis of the conflict and the meaning of the story.

Then only twenty lines into the story, the young woman remarks for the first time that the hills look like white elephants; and the first hint of tension between her and the man appears in his ironic reply, "I've never seen one," and her retaliation, "No, you wouldn't have." Although they seem to talk of trivia in the next four lines of dialog, the tension increases; and it is apparent that an argument is about to erupt or re-erupt. Talk of the drink Anis del Toro, that they have just tried and that tasted like licorice, leads her to say, "Everything tastes of licorice, especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe." The implication as to the casualness and triviality of their lives, in which drinks are of such importance, and the further ironic implication in the bitterness of absinthe, with its wormwood basis, is made apparent. In addition, the belief in absinthe as an aphrodisiac adds another ironic twist to its mention. Color symbolism involving the blackness of licorice and the whiteness of the hills suggests the contrast between sorrow and joy as has the already mentioned contrast between the white hills and the brown, dry countryside. The living green color of absinthe also suggests a contrast with the dry drabness of the countryside.

As the tension increases between the couple, he tries to smooth things over by saying, "Well, let's try to have a fine time." She replies, "All right, I was trying. I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn't that bright?" He agrees, and she continues, making explicit her opinion of the shallowness of their life together, "That's all we do, isn't it—look at things and try new drinks?" He tentatively acquiesces; and she looks across at the hills, saying, "They're lovely hills. They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees." His unconsciously ironic reply is to offer her another drink. Immediately afterwards and for the first time, we learn what the problem is through his reference to an "awfully simple operation . . . not really an operation at all . . . just to let the air in." She is pregnant, and he wants her to have an abortion.

Immediately the symbolic significance of the title and the reason for the frequent mention of the hills becomes apparent. A number of images and emotional reactions flood the reader's mind as the dialog swiftly makes clear that the girl wants the baby, not the abortion, which he says will make no difference in their relationship and which hypocritically he persists in assuring her he does not want if she objects to it.

The final reference to the hills occurs about halfway through the story in the girl's plaintive but skeptical appeal that, if she does go through with the abortion, "it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you'll like it?" Our immediate understanding of the white elephant reference when we learn that the story's conflict revolves around an unwanted pregnancy is probably that associated with the ubiquitous white elephant sale. These sales raise money for worthwhile causes by providing an opportunity for people to donate unwanted objects, white elephants, which will be sold at low prices to people who can find some use for them or think they can. To the man, the child is a white elephant that, in his selfishness, he wants to get rid of. To the girl, the child is a white elephant only insofar as its father rejects it; she would like to bear the child.

Another association and image surely comes to mind in terms of the comparison and is encouraged by the third reference, involving the skin of the hills. This image is of the fully pregnant woman, nude and probably lying on her back with her distended belly virtually bursting with life and with her breasts, engorged by the approaching birth, making a trinity of white hills. However, this image, stimulating as it does, the sense of wonder at the miraculous process of pregnancy and the remarkable elasticity and resiliency of the human body is one that will not blossom into birth for this couple. The man will not permit it; and the woman will be denied the fulfillment of motherhood, the loving support of the child's co-creator throughout the period of pregnancy, the shared joy of the birth, and the care and nurture of the child.

The richness, complexity, and irony of the white elephant symbol increases as we see the conflict over the unborn child develop and as we recall that the actual white elephant is a rarity in nature, is considered sacred and precious, and is revered and protected. Moreover, we may re-

member that Buddha's mother, Mahamaya, before his birth, dreamed of a beautiful silvery white elephant that entered her womb through her side. The priestly interpretation of this dream was, of course, that she would give birth to a son who would become either a universal ruler or a Buddha.

However, like the story's white elephant child, the actual white elephant is also paradoxical in its nature. On the one hand, it is rare and valuable, associated with potentates, the royal elephant, and has sacred attributes and spiritual powers. On the other hand, the figurative use of the term as a gift or possession that is worthless, a burden, even harmful, or overwhelmingly troublesome is said to derive from the fact that the white elephant has an enormous appetite and, being sacred, can neither be disposed of nor used as a beast of burden but must be cared for and treated with care, respect, and concern until it dies. Consequently, if a king or potentate had an enemy to whom he wished ill, he could present him with a white elephant, ostensibly a mark of singular favor but in reality a burden whose expensive upkeep might bring ruin and would certainly confer hardship.

Hemingway's use of the white elephant symbol in his title and throughout the story has immeasurably enriched this poignant episode, with its insight into the complexities, the disappointments, and the sadness of life's "might-have-beens." It is a particularly significant story for our times when radical changes in traditional sexual morality and the issue of legalized abortion seem to emphasize the age-old problem presented in "Hills Like White Elephants."

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## LE GRAND CAPTAIN KIDDER AND HIS BOGUS BUG

Although it is a critical commonplace to find suggestions of the aesthetic process in Poe's "tales of ratiocination" and, more particularly, to link Legrand's interest in cryptography in "The Gold Bug" (1843) with that of his creator, this tale still needs to be recognized as a satire against those readers who condemn Poe's art as pure "madness" or nonsense. Specifically, as its two-part structure implies, "The Gold Bug" is Poe's joking parable advising the most reliable criterion by which to judge his tales and to understand his true role in the creative act. In the first part, or tale proper, the bogus Narrator, representing the uninformed reader, fails to understand the "certain indications of method" in Legrand's "madness."<sup>1</sup> In the second part, which represents the correct procedure of critical interpretation itself, Legrand, a mask for Poe, assumes his rightful role as Narrator; and the first Narrator, or reader, is taught how best to analyze the "madness" of "last night's adventure" (p. 124), that is, the element of apparent mystery in Poe's art.

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1. *The Complete Works of Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. James A. Harrison (1902; rpt. New York: AMS Press, 1965), V, 117. All subsequent references are to this edition.

