

NOTES

"CAT" AND "HILLS": TWO HEMINGWAY FAIRY TALES

Hildy Coleman
College of William & Mary

In a letter to his father, Hemingway once wrote, "It is only by showing... 3 dimensions and if possible 4 that you can write the way I want to" (SL 153). A comment in *Green Hills of Africa* expands Hemingway's story-telling objectives even further to include a "fifth dimension that can be gotten" (27). Such a non-rational idea of a fifth dimension, with its implications of fantastic characters and settings, would hardly seem relevant to a study of Hemingway's naturalistic tales, "except that Hemingway suggested it explicitly, and then practiced it consciously" (Carpenter 185) in a few stories which transcended the realistic boundaries of the known world. "A Divine Gesture," for instance, features a Lord God and the angel Gabriel, along with talking bathtubs, bootjacks, and flower pots, in a supposedly heavenly or clearly otherworldly setting. Similar excursions into fantasy by Hemingway are "The Faithful Bull" and "The Good Lion," wherein, after the standard fairy-tale opening, "Once upon a time," the author follows the classical fable tradition by having animals act, think, and speak as people.

Sometimes, too, fabulist tendencies reveal themselves in Hemingway's ostensibly realistic stories; in them, on occasion, he mingles a bit of out-and-out fantasy with his naturalistic presentations. In "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," for example, Hemingway provides the reader with a glimpse of the action from the point of view of a wounded animal, offering a completely remarkable record of the "big lion's" human-like reactions to the fix it finds itself in: planning strategy, according to Hemingway, "he galloped toward the high grass where he could crouch and not be seen and make them bring the crashing thing close enough so he could make a rush and get the man that held it" (CSS 13)-- defining quite rational capabilities of canniness and such human emotions as "hatred" in an otherwise dumb beast. In addition, the fairy tale alchemy located in this passage resides not alone in the transformation of beast into human, but of human, when looked at through the lion's eyes, into beast.

But aside from occasional examples of the obviously fantastic, it is not uncommon to find in many other Hemingway stories indications of quasi-rational, "fifth-dimension" tendencies. Among those exhibiting marks of the fabulous are such stories as "Cat in the Rain" and "Hills Like White Elephants." Indeed, because of a detectable level of the ambiguous and the

illusionary energizing both of these tales, it might be appropriate to label their perceived rationality *adumbrated realism*. Thought of this way, they can be seen to possess many of what Hemingway refers to as the "not palpable" (SL 837) stock ingredients and characteristics of the fairy tale genre: a simple syntax and structure, an air of detachment, temporal and even spatial stasis, utopian dreams, supernatural and superstitious beliefs, totemic figures, foreshadowing, and, above all, a sort of misty uncertainty veiling plausible people, places, and things in numinous shadows. But more than in general ways, stories like "Cat in the Rain" and "Hills Like White Elephants"-- and others described by Hemingway as "pure inventions"-- have detailed correspondences with specific fairy tales.

"Cat in the Rain" is, in fact, striking in its resemblance to the popular Grimm's tale, "Rapunzel."¹ In "Rapunzel" a wife longs for the rampion² growing in the garden below her upper window. Her husband notices her pining away and asks why. "Oh," said she, "I shall certainly die if I don't get some of that rampion" (Zipes--Grimm 42). Thus far, there are several features which approximate "Cat in the Rain." The young wife in Hemingway's story, also looking down from her hotel window, longs for a cat in the garden below. "I wanted it so much," she said... "I wanted that poor kitty" (CSS 130). In both tales, too, the husbands offer to go for the things their wives desire.

In "Rapunzel," procuring the rampion prompts a series of events: the woman's first-born, a daughter named Rapunzel, is locked up by a wicked witch in a high tower (tempting much Freudian speculation). The witch then sounds the familiar refrain, "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair" (Zipes--Grimm 49). Subsequently, she cuts Rapunzel's hair, attempting to thwart her rightful feminine urges, and has her spirited away by, of all things, a cat. "The cat got her... Rapunzel is lost to you" (Zipes--Grimm 49). Now the cat and the hair motifs figure prominently in the Hemingway story as well. Although a cat is a more telling presence in Hemingway, it is no less an elusive specter than the one in Grimm's fairy tale, a fantasy element which alters relationships, for the American wife as for Rapunzel. In Hemingway, too, when the young wife asks, "Don't you think it would be a good idea if I let my hair grow out" (CSS 131) the husband, wishing to deny her feminine urge, as the fairy tale witch denied Rapunzel hers, replies that he likes it short, "the way it is" (CSS 131). The American wife (a "child" herself, really, and therefore perfectly suited as a fairy tale persona) is cloistered by a possessive husband no less than Rapunzel by a proprietary witch. And there are further significant resemblances between the Grimm's fairy tale and the Hemingway story. After all, the fairy tale husband trades his wife's first-born for rampion, making the root a child substitute. The short story husband is similarly indifferent to his wife's maternal yearning, triggered by the cat, a

metaphorical child. He denies his wife her potential first-born just as the fairy tale's thoughtless husband denies Rapunzel's mother.

Although Hemingway treats his story empirically, beneath the common stuff of ordinary life and talk there lurks a secondary reality, a subreality, transforming men and women and all visible objects into a magical tableau. A standard procreant metaphor prominent in several Grimm's *märchen*, the pervading rain in "Cat in the Rain" seems to submerge the tale's ensemble of parts-- the old padrone, the maid, the waiter in the café doorway, the man in a rubber cape, the war monument, the artists, the dark muted sea, the man, the girl, the elusive Alice-in-Wonderland cat-- into a watery dream, creating a motionless collage of strange, almost ghostly, impressions. This quasi still-life is the key to Hemingway's best story-telling, which is his fifth dimensional attempt "to communicate the immediate experience of 'the perpetual now'" (Carpenter 185). The present, in other words, is frozen in human consciousness by an intensity of experience, and by cyclical and repetitive discourse,³ a style common to most children's stories and one which has become part of Hemingway's narrative trademark.

An even more graphic example of a world where life exists in a perpetual now, and time appears suspended, is to be found in "Hills Like White Elephants." The action, or rather inaction in this story, takes place in the peculiar ambience of a landscape parched and dead. Suffocating stasis overwhelms the whole flat scene, like those shown in the bleached southwestern designs of Georgia O'Keefe. The dry, barren terrain, the somber cadence of relentlessly discouraging talk, the languorous mood of fatigue and dismay, portray not only a waste land but wasted lives. The basic motif of "Hills Like White Elephants" seems to be that of T.S. Eliot's signature poem, the features of which are described by Jessie Weston in her study of medieval romance, *From Ritual to Romance*. Very simply, a curse blights the land and this spiritual curse can only be removed by a hero who clarifies the meaning of various symbols and riddles presented to him.

"Hills Like White Elephants" abounds in symbols and riddles comparable to the test-tales of medieval romance. Hemingway's young man is not only a knight-errant who carries bags with "labels on them from all the hotels where they had spent nights" (CSS 214); he proves himself to be a knight-manqué, one who fails. A product of the modern vulgar and vulgarizing civilization, rendered impotent (ironically) by the adoption of irresponsible values; he is incapable of summoning the powers needed to break the spell of selfishness that taints his character. When the young man is put to the test, the chance to dispel the emotional torpor of their condition, he fails miserably. Responding to the distraught girl's poetic description of the hills as white elephants, the man says unimaginatively, "I've never seen one" (CSS 211). When the girl asks what is painted on the

beaded curtain, he answers matter-of-factly, "Anis del Toro. It's a drink" (CSS 211). When she comments that the liquor tastes like licorice, he says insensitively, "That's the way with everything" (CSS 212). At the mention of absinthe, he replies, impatiently, "Oh, cut it out" (CSS 212). And such a telling remark from the girl as, "Everything tastes of licorice. Especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe" (CSS 212) can be read as a statement flavored with fairy-tale implications, licorice being the succulent candy of childhood (the chronological sanctuary from adult life), and, according to the old wives' tale, an aphrodisiac securing happy endings.

While "Hills Like White Elephants" possesses casual elements of the medieval geste, it bears more striking and perhaps more cogent resemblance to yet another Grimm's fairy tale, "Clever Hans." Told almost entirely in dialogue, exactly like the Hemingway story, "Clever Hans" cyclically details the relationship between an obtuse and selfish young man and a patient, giving girl. The tale is framed around several short scenes of repetitious talk and action, each scene having a characteristic Hemingway look and sound to it.⁴

"Where are you going, Hans?" the Mother asked.

"To Gretel's," Hans replied.

"Take care, Hans."

"Don't worry. Good-bye, Mother."

Hans arrived at Gretel's place.

"Good day, Gretel."

"Good day, Hans. Have you brought me anything nice?"

"Didn't bring anything. Want something from you."

(Zipes--Grimm 12)

Gretel gives Hans a needle; stupidly, he puts it in a haystack. On a second visit, Gretel gives Hans a knife; carelessly, he puts it in a loose sleeve. A series of similar actions take place with nothing altered in the dialogue except the particular gift Gretel gives to Hans. Each time Hans demonstrates his foolishness by the manner in which he mishandles the tokens of Gretel's affection, and is more oblivious to her yearnings. On the final visit, Gretel says:

"Good day, Hans. Have you brought me anything nice?"

"Didn't bring anything. Want something from you."

[Gretel offers herself.]

He took Gretel, put a rope around her neck and led her into the stable, tied her to a stall, and threw her some grass... Then Gretel got angry, tore herself loose, and ran away. That was how Hans lost his bride. (Zipes-Grimm 127)

The young man in Hemingway's story, equally doltish, obtuse, and irresponsible, is more than a reasonable facsimile of Hans. He also reacts unwisely and unlovingly to the girl's pregnant comments and emotional needs. Much like Clever Hans, he disregards and mishandles the gifts of love and family offered to him by the girl.

The prevailing symbol of the tale, the hills like white elephants, evokes what Eliot refers to in *The Waste Land* as "memory and desire." In the girl's mind, the mundane panorama assumes a majestic shape, a saintly color, and a special meaning. There is an element of magic in this. The girl's hope and vision, in a way, transform the ordinary hills into allusive white elephants. (Here, it is worth noting that, according to East Asian mythology, Buddha's mother dreamed that it was a beautiful white elephant who impregnated her with the seed embodying the divine wisdom and virtue of the Enlightened One.⁵) But the young man is oblivious to the elicitations of "memory and desire" which possess the girl. To his unfanciful view, the hills are prosaically "brown and dry" (CSS 211). Child-like, the girl laments: "We could have all this... and every day we make it more impossible" (CSS 213). Like "Cat in the Rain," where the "kitty" that the American girl wanted "so much" eluded her, "Hills Like White Elephants" concludes sadly, too, as "the shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain" (CSS 213). This is the major difference between traditional fairy tales and Hemingway's fifth dimensional variants; the former usually end happily, whereas his generally do not. Unhappy endings notwithstanding, if what J.R.R. Tolkien says has merit, the fundamental test of a fairy tale is its "enchantment" quotient (52-3), and the enchantment quotient is certainly very high in both these Hemingway stories.

Notes

1. In *Hemingway's Reading, 1910-1940*, Michael Reynolds lists among the many books in Hemingway's library such titles as *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Arabian Nights*, *The Faerie Queene*, *Grimm's Fairy Tales*, and Kipling's *Animal Stories*.

2. Rampion (It. *raponzo*; the name Rapunzel an obvious derivative), *Campanula rapunculus* L., a congener of the common harebell. It has a white spindle-shaped root which is eaten raw like radish and has a pleasant sweet flavor. Its leaves and young shoots are used in salads, and so are the roots, sliced.

3. According to P.D. Ouspensky in his *A New Model of the Universe*, "the Fifth Dimension is a movement in the circle, repetition, recurrence" (375).

4. Of the more than 140 sentences which make up the fairy tale, "Prudent Hans," over 120 are in dialogue, most without speaker tags. Less than 20 lines of exposition and narration make up the rest of the text, which number is somewhat inflated since one line, "Hans arrived at Gretel's place," is repeated six times without variation, and another, "Hans took the needle... and went home," is also repeated six times with the only variation being the gift-name, "needle," "knife," "bacon," etc., in each case.

5. In Gertrude Jobes' *Dictionary of Mythology, Folklore and Symbols*, one entry explains "that a white elephant is the form in which Buddha entered the womb of Maya, his mother" (502).

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