

# ALLUSION, WORD-PLAY, AND THE CENTRAL CONFLICT

IN

## HEMINGWAY'S "HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS"

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Commentary on Hemingway's "Hills like White Elephants" has generally focused on its two most striking features: the setting, especially the mysterious white hills, and the dialogue, which, with the exception of several brief paragraphs, carries the entire story. In the setting some critics mark a conflict between sterility and fertility, though the demarcations of that conflict are not always clear. Even the symbolic value of the white hills is a matter of taste: where in one case the white hills symbolize fertility (Weeks 75); in another they represent barrenness (Fletcher 17); and in another they suggest both values (Hollander 214). At any rate, the contrast these readers perceive in the natural setting between fertility and sterility mirrors the tension between the girl's desire to have the baby and the man's "sterile" wish to continue their relationship without it. Those critics who read the natural setting more generally as bleak and infertile still do so in order to explain how it mirrors the bleak and infertile outcome of the couple's journey to Madrid. As illuminating as such commentary has been, however, it has ignored the train station and the tracks as significant elements in the setting. Recognized as a significant part of the story's setting, these elements contribute to a conflict between "the natural" and "the artificial" that, better than any of the previously perceived contrasts within the natural surroundings, mirrors the tension between the girl's discourse and desire and the man's.

As the other focus of critical commentary, the story's dialogue has received praise for the way in which it authentically captures the feel of a private conversation while at the same time communicating the necessary narrative background. Most recently, Pamela Smiley has demonstrated how this dialogue includes features that such "sociolinguists" as Deborah Tannen and Robin Lakoff identify as distinguishing the discourses of the genders (2-5). Importantly, these distinguishing features-- the male's rejection of emotional language and his goal-oriented vocabulary and the woman's imprecise, emotional, relational language, for instance-- support the central contrast in the story's setting between the artificial and the natural.

Even in the thoroughly analyzed dialogue, however, an important feature has not received the attention it deserves. This feature is really a combination of techniques employed by Hemingway-- repetition of key words, even a tendency to construct puns from them and at the very least to call attention to their alternative meanings, and a subtle allusiveness to the Biblical implications of the conflict between the man and woman. These practices enrich what has often been recognized as the story's intense portrayal of an emotional conflict, but at the same time they complicate the story's tone by distancing us from the very conflict in which we are to become involved.

The man's telling Jig that abortion is a "perfectly *natural*" procedure (SS 275) reveals perhaps better than any other part of the story the terms of the central conflict. Aligned with the natural surroundings are the girl and her metaphorical, suggestive discourse; connected with the artificial elements in the setting are the man and the goal-oriented, apparently logical style of his discourse. She feels somehow disenchanted from nature and what it represents in the story; he, from a "simple" solution to a clear problem. Almost at the beginning of the dialogue this conflict emerges in the brief but sharp disagreement over who has and has not seen white elephants. After Jig compares the hills to white elephants, the man, refusing to participate in the imaginative discourse, remarks that he's "never seen one" (273). The man counters her imaginative discourse with the language of proofs and reasons. Her comment that, of course, he "wouldn't have" seen a white elephant, according to him, "doesn't *prove* anything" (273, emphasis added). His frequent use of "really" and "just" (and it should be added, "simply"), pointed out by Trilling (731) and Smiley (3), further marks his speech as that of a western male. In fact, Hemingway's striking selection of the word "reasonably" (278) in his description of how the man views the people waiting in the bar for the train-- a selection that resulted from what Smith shows are Hemingway's careful revisions of this part of the story (205)-- emphasizes the way in which the man stands as an exaggerated version of the male approach to the problems of life.

Inside the artificial shelter, not in that limbo between inside and outside where he and Jig quarrel, people are behaving "reasonably" (278). The opposite of what is "reasonable" is the realm outside the bar, the area exposed to the natural surroundings. Hemingway clearly develops this dichotomy by avoiding any description of the man looking at the natural surroundings and by linking him in other ways to the setting's artificial, even mechanical aspects. The man stands out in sharp contrast to the girl, who is described several times as looking out at the natural surroundings. She sees "the river through the trees" (276), gazes "across at the hills on the dry side of the valley" (277), and, in an unusually phrased description, even finds nature below her feet as she sits in the shade of the station looking down "at the ground the table legs rested on" (277). Oblivious to the

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natural surroundings, the man looks, for instance, "at her and at the table" (277) and later at their "bags against the wall of the station" (277). Through these details Hemingway affiliates them with the central conflict in the setting between the railway station and its tracks on the one hand and the natural world on the other. The man is connected with the linear, artificial progress of the one, she with the more formless, associative patterns of the other. Fittingly he advocates the "operation" by insidiously appropriating the girl's system of felt values through the description of the procedure as "perfectly natural" (275).

Even the nickname "Jig" develops this central conflict. The name suggests a dance, the music for the dance, and a joke, for instance, and thereby exposes the man's ultimately condescending attitude toward her: she is entertainment, material for an interlude, perhaps. However, "Jig" also has a number of associations with mechanical devices that go beyond both this set of meanings and, given the couple's main activity, its appropriate connection with "jigger," the whiskey measurer. The "jig" is a mechanism used in mining to separate ore from other elements. Even more relevant to the man's sexual dehumanizing of the girl, it is the name for a sheath or tool holding a device that moves up and down. It is related also to "jigger" and "jig" as general terms for any trivial device, as in "thinger ma jigger" or "thingamajig." If it is merely a coincidence, it is nevertheless significant that the first appearance of "Jig" occurs immediately after the mechanical-sounding "operation": "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig" (275). So much a technique in Hemingway's reproduction of a private conversation, this nickname also suggests a variety of public, culturally shared associations that give the story a strong archetypal significance. The railroad tracks running through the valley of the Ebro, the man calling the girl Jig, and his urging her to have an abortion (an "operation") all represent *man's*, not just this man's, aggressive, progressive, mechanical manipulation of the natural world. In fact, his discourse, his goal-oriented part of the story's conversation, is aptly captured by what Hemingway, in the opening paragraph, calls the Madrid-bound train for which they wait: it is an *express* (273); it arrives in forty minutes, stops at the station for two minutes, and then takes the couple directly toward an expedient solution to the problem.

This movement in the story from private to public significance occurs also as a result of Hemingway's subtle use of the key words, "know" and "fine." The frequent appearance of the word "know" as it plays back and forth between the couple (it occurs thirteen times in the two pages from the middle of the story to the point at which the girl tells the man to stop talking) adds considerably to the theme of Jig's disenchantment from the man and the world he creates through his language:

"I love you now. You know I love you."

"I know. But if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you'll like it?"

"I'll love it. I love it now but I just can't think about it. You know how I get when I worry." (275)

"Doesn't it mean anything to you? We could get along."

"Of course it does. But I don't want anybody but you. I don't want any one else. And I know it's perfectly simple."

"Yes, you know it's perfectly simple." (277)

The argument is essentially about the way the two talk about their relationship, and about the way in which the male's language overpowers hers. Despite her sarcastic repetition of "know" in the last line above, his language of distance and control dominates so that she is asking if her language will once again be heard should she go ahead with the abortion. Especially significant here, however, is the way in which her talk involves a desire to return to the nature from which she feels so alienated, almost a return to the innocence suggested by the white elephants. The girl asks for a retreat from knowledge, particularly that knowledge which the details of the story associate with those artificial features promoting the linear advancement of the couple toward Madrid and the technological intervention that awaits them there. The complicating factor in this conflict is that the man's "knowledge" is not enlightening but controlling. When the girl is expressing her most extreme sense of alienation, her own awareness of her condition-- "once they take it away, you never get it back" (276)-- she is outside the shade of the station. The man's response is predictable, as it works against her connection with the natural surroundings and tries to rearrange, even deny her feelings: "Come back in the shade," he said. "You mustn't *feel* that way" (276, emphasis added).

In the King James version of Genesis, "know" or "knowledge" is part help describe Adam and Eve's dissatisfaction over their harmony with nature and their sudden awareness of their separation from it. The repetitive use of the word in this story suggests that the conflict between the man and woman rewrites elements of the Eden story. The correspondences between the girl and the man and Eve and Adam are far from precise, but they do broaden the story's meaning. Essentially the girl mourns her postlapsarian differentiation from the natural world, from the innocence of the white hills, from man, and even from her body. The man, in contrast, tries to re-achieve a paradise-- where things can be "perfectly simple"--through his utopianizing outlook, his language, and his technology. The

allusive repetition of the word "know" implies also that the abortion should be seen, in part, as a repetition of the original loss of paradise: as the girl says, "It isn't ours any more," and ". . .once they take it away, you never get it back" (276). "It" in both of these remarks refers to both the world (the man has just asserted that they "can have the whole world") and the fetus. The polysemous image of the white elephant(s) only emphasizes this meaning, for as DeFalco points out, an object referred to as a white elephant is, depending on one's point of view, both an "annoyingly useless" and a precious gift, something to be discarded and something to be reclaimed and/or cherished (169). In these terms the exchange between this man and woman rewrites the Eden story as a paternalistic conspiracy, the woman's threatening, individualizing awareness of her lost connection with nature having to be denied and redirected toward the male's artificial, "reasonable," and ultimately selfish paradise.

Hemingway's playful use of the word "fine" is almost as complex as his use of "know"; and in terms of the central conflict we have been examining, it is a key to understanding the tone of the story's conclusion--something that has caused considerable disagreement among the story's commentators (Smith 210-12). A "fine time" (274) is what the couple is *trying to have* in the station. It is the condition to which the man aims to return them by advocating the abortion: "We'll be fine afterward" (275). Or in Jig's words: "And I'll do it and then everything will be fine" (276). "Fine" is also Jig's description of her condition at the story's end: "I feel fine" (278). The prevalent meaning of "fine" in the story is the informal "very well," as in "doing fine." But it carries other meanings also. It describes something that has been made free of impurities, particularly something "refined" by breeding or art, something in fact quite different from a gift called a "white elephant," with which Jig is associated. As the last word of the story, it self-reflexively means "the end," *fine*. Coming from the Latin *finis*, it furthermore implies the setting of boundaries.

In the context of the central conflict I have been delineating, the word expresses the artificial processes with which the man is associated and also the linear view of life, in which the tracks lead to completion, to an end, even to a false "coming to term" of her pregnancy. Thus "fine," here at the end of the story, suggests "confinement," the girl's separation from that natural, various world with which the story's language has connected her; it defines as a kind of death her boarding a train bound for "madre," the ironically fitting destination implied by "Madrid," the site of the artificial intervention advocated by the male.

Along with the allusive appearances of "know," Hemingway's self-reflexive use of "fine" to end his story controls the story's meaning in quite another way: it produces an irony almost akin to that of Greek tragedy. As I have been arguing, Hemingway's playful and sometimes allusive use of

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words places a private event within a broader, culturally significant context, but it does so for us readers rather than for the characters, who remain horribly limited by the private world Hemingway creates for them. Jig is imaginative, and for us her ability to extend her sight beyond the shadows of the station toward the hills, toward *both* the barren and fertile land, highlights a "noble" potential. Still, she seems entirely unaware, for instance, of the suggestive value of her comparison between the hills and white elephants. In fact, when she tries to explain the simile to her skeptical, rational mate, her language becomes more clinical than poetic, as she succumbs to the "really" of his discourse: "They don't *really* look like white elephants. I just mean the coloring of their skin through the trees" (274, emphasis added). She is aware enough to use the man's "know" against him, as we have seen, but she remains unaware of the way in which the repetition of that word, along with the image of the hills like white elephants, places her in the story of the Fall. As for the word "fine," Jig *seems* to be using it with some renewed assertiveness and self-esteem at the end of the story. After the man asks, "Do you feel better?," she responds: "I feel fine . . . There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine" (278). Her response can be seen as an attempt to correct what Smiley describes as the man's assumption throughout the story that her pregnancy is some sort of illness from which she must recover (10). According to this view, Jig rejects her lover's values and successfully protects her identity from the story's masculine point of view. However, by self-reflexively concluding the story with the word "fine," Hemingway calls attention to his authorial control over his character and thus undermines any autonomy she tries to express. So Jig's use of "fine" is not only circumscribed by allusion and the destiny implied by the story's details-- the distance of the mountains like white elephants versus the inevitable arrival of the train in five minutes-- but also subsumed in a male's authorial control. Whatever the gains Jig seems to make against her sense of personal loss and disenchantment, they take place within a broader understanding of her culturally representative predicament as already having occurred-- the loss of paradise and woman's submission to man's progressive, utopian attempts to make a paradise through proof, reason, and artifice. This ironic joining of a private and limited, but faintly hopeful perspective with a broad, public one builds a bleak view of Jig's future. The smiling look she gives the waitress (277) and the two times she smiles at the man (277 and 278) in the very last stages of the story imply the male world closing around her, not the strengthening sense she has of her own independence and the man's stupidity. She looks only at him, not past him and toward the hills. In this way, then, 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.

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