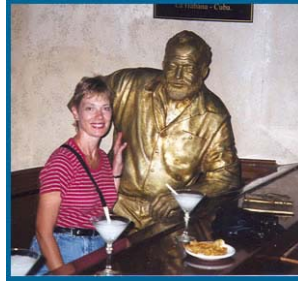


Hemingway's *Hills Like White Elephants*

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By Edward Campbell

Hemingway doesn't tell us that his story is about abortion and, without being told, one who is not



familiar with abortion would not have guessed the topic of discussion between the man and the girl. He showed his command of the techniques of realism by making his fiction correspond to the reality of people like him who have experienced similar difficulties. But only those so initiated are capable of understanding the theme of the tale.

Just as those who grew-up on a small island who may recall going fishing with their father or grandfather in a small rowboat can easily identify with his *Old Man and the Sea*, the erotic

types who place such great value on human relationships, and have no doubt gotten themselves in to a jam or two can readily identify with his *Hills Like White Elephants*. To the uninitiated both are incomprehensible.

The man and the girl are talking about something unmentionable. Hemingway does not mention it. That must have been the way Hemingway wanted it, for the theme of the story to be tacitly understood and not explicit. Women didn't just have abortions back then they way they do now. It's really no use for writing teachers to berate their students who don't understand the story. If they've never had an abortion, they would have no way of understanding it.

In this case, being uninitiated is a sign of virtue, initiation a vice.

Hemingway was speaking about a very sensitive issue to a very select audience. He was speaking no doubt to New York, its publishing scene and its very swank literary circles.

Being the type of people who would understand this sort of thing, New York must have been astir. Finally, a story that speaks to them it deals with their issues. He must have stood the art world on its head, speaking about something so common and yet so *unmentionable*. The story is *realistic*, because the dialogue between the man and the girl is representative of an intimate dialogue between a man and a woman about this sort of thing. Neither the man nor the girl mentions abortion. They cannot. In reality, a man and a woman would not. Hemingway employs the circumambles we would expect in this situation.

They are drinking. They would have to be drinking. The girl is in existential pain because she does not want to have an abortion. The man is in existential pain because the girl, being what girls are, is difficult to convince. Just one train ride to Madrid and “it’s perfectly simple.”

Drinking kills existential pain but not as well as isolation on a Caribbean island, or a shotgun. Hemingway knows this and has ostensibly made drinking the centerpiece of the story though abortion and the process of a man convincing a girl to have one is the unstated centerpiece. The thing meant for New York, for Madison Avenue, the unstated yet understood meaning of the story.

The man sounds like so many of the irreligious libertines of the Upper East Side publishing business. Hemingway knows this and speaks to

them directly but only through nuances and hidden meanings that only they could truly comprehend. They thought he was flattering them. He didn't.

The protagonist is an American and, like Hemingway, he a man of the world. The girl is but a girl. There is nothing to distinguish her except the tacit statement she is pregnant and heading for Madrid by train to get an abortion.

Hemingway demonstrates the naivety of the girl in numerous ways. She does not speak Spanish. The man orders the drinks for her, pays for them. He is in control. He knows how to get out of these little situations. He carries the bags to the other side of the tracks and explains everything. "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig...It's not really an operation at all...I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in." He

finish his drink in the bar. The train is late in Spain, as they always are.

It's all his idea; the train ride the abortion, the drinks. "That's all we do, isn't it—look at things and try new drinks?" And have sex followed by abortions. The man has done this before, had the same conversation. "I've known lots of people that have done it." Lots of women who have done it; lots of women traveling around on trains in Europe, looking at things, trying new drinks, having sex, and having abortions. The girl is apprehensive. There is no mention of the human life that is about to be destroyed.

"And you think then we'll be alright and be happy."

"I know we will."

In fact, if the girl doesn't agree to have the abortion, the man is equally sure that he will be very unhappy. The girl has transformed what is in fact her

decision into a mutual one with her repeated use of the word “we.”

In his *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud said: “Love threatens to obliterate the boundaries between ego and object.” The girl is in love with the man, hence the nuance that “we” make the decision.

To the man, it’s his decision. The girl’s immaturity is an only a minor obstacle. With a little persuasion he is confident that she will be like the “lots of people” he has known who have done it. This very conversation. This very train station. These very same drinks. These very same girls.

The girl’s difficulty in following through with the plan is that she has already partly annihilated the barrier between the unborn child and her own ego. In the end she concedes to have the abortion. “Because I don’t care about me.” Her subconsciousness has realized

that the fetus is part of herself, part of her body and her ego. Killing amounts to hurting one’s own self. It is self-mutilation, but so much more that a tattoo or a piercing. The unborn child is both genetically and physically tied to the mother. It is the chance for one’s self to grow-up again, to see the world anew. The chance at immortality through one own genes, but through another’s ego. A new ego. The feeling of nostalgia for one’s children and ancestors has never been satisfactorily explained. We only know that it exists and asserts a powerful influence on the psyche.

At this point the man’s guilt and true motive have become exposed. The girl has turned the tables on him. In order to stay in control, he reverses himself and insists now that she not have an abortion. This trope is intended to demonstrate that the only reason he

wants her to have an abortion is because he cares about her. In reality the man's carefree lifestyle is in jeopardy.

The man continues with the implication that once the baby problem is out of the way: "We can have everything...We can have the whole world...We can go everywhere...It's ours."

For the girl it's already dead. The world itself has changed. Nothing will be the same as it once was. "Once they take it away, you never get it back...I don't feel anyway...I just know things...Could we have another beer?" They finish their drinks. The story ends, but the reader can tell that they catch the train to Madrid and the girl gets an abortion. But we must wonder, were they happy?