Grace Lusardo

Daniel Gleason

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“Hills Like White Elephants” Research Paper

“Hills Like White Elephants” is a fictional short story written by Ernest Hemingway. It was published in 1927 and highlights Hemingway’s style of writing and consists mostly of dialogue.  The audience jumps into the middle of a conversation that a man and a woman are having over some drinks.  The story is set at a train station in Spain during the Expatriate Movement.  Hemingway uses experience from his own life in writing this story as well as inspiration from the culture he was writing in.  This text has been published numerous times and has been read by many people since its initial publication. “Hills Like White Elephants” has even been adapted by directors for television.  The story has had its critics; however, it has been generally well received by readers.  “Hills Like White Elephants” has a long rich history, stemming from its production to its circulation and reception.

The historical events of the time certainly played a role in this short story. The setting is during the Expatriate Movement of the 1920’s.  An expatriate is someone who chooses to live in a country other than their home country.  Many American soldiers stayed in Europe after the World War I, and others moved there afterward.  The average American was able to live in Europe since American currency was more valuable than European currency due to a European economic recession after the war (Gerogiannis).  These Americans are considered part of the lost generation because so many men were killed or stayed abroad. The lost generation was a term coined by Gertrude Stein who was one of Hemingway’s friends (Gerogiannis).  Plenty of authors and artists moved to Europe as well because they considered they considered America to be oppressive intellectually and artistically. Some authors include F. Scott Fitzgerald and T. S. Eliot.  Hemingway lived in Paris for most of the 1920’s.  He did not consider himself an expatriate, but he wanted to write about them, so the lost generation would not be forgotten (Gerogiannis).  Hemingway succeeds in this goal with some of his writing. “Hills Like White Elephants” is an example of a story about an expatriate and his lover who he calls Jig.  The expatriate is never named and simply referred to as the American.  Knowing about the Expatriate Movement can help the audience understand that the American is a traveler who has no intention of settling down any time in the near future.  The American is a man who is running away from his troubles and his past, so all he wants to do is travel, drink, and forget about the war he just participated in.  Hemingway and the men of his time could sympathize with this character because that was what many men did, so the story is true to the culture.

Culture certainly enhances “Hills Like White Elephants.”  However, the story is not necessarily tied to the culture because the conversation in the story could take place in any time period.  Especially in today’s culture, girls are still faced with the pressure to make the decision that Jig is faced with, and men are faced with the option of supporting girls in making the decision they feel would be best or persuading them to make the decision he wants.  Also, the American in the story does not want to settle down which seems characteristic of the majority of men now as well.  However, Hemingway wrote the story for that the specific time period, not knowing it would still ring true in the culture of today.

Hemingway used more than cultural events of the time for writing “Hills Like White Elephants.” He also drew on his own knowledge and experience for the setting of the story.  Similar to the American in the story, Hemingway served in World War I, and after the war, he thought that living in America felt “provincial and restrictive,” so he decided to move to Paris in December of 1921 and lived there for the majority of the time until 1929 (Gerogiannis). Hemingway was able to sympathize with and accurately write about a character who was a soldier that fought in the war and decided to remain abroad. Though Hemingway lived in France, he was quite familiar with Spain, having visited there numerous times. His first visit was in 1921 when he began traveling in Europe, and he went again in 1923 to see his first bullfights (Gerogiannis). Hemingway went later with his first wife, Hadley, to the Fiesta of San Fermin in Spain the month before their child was born (Gerogiannis). Hemingway actually named his first son, John Hadley Nicanor Hemingway, after a Spanish bullfighter who he esteemed called Nicanor. He visited the summer bullfights as often as he was able, especially while he lived nearby in Paris (Gerogiannis). Hemingway was intrigued by Spain and visited many more times during his life to experience the culture and attend various festivals and bullfights.

The plot and central conflict of “Hills Like White Elephants” appears to be even more personal than the setting because the story appears to draw on Hemingway’s experiences for that as well. Hemingway’s first wife, Hadley, became pregnant in 1923 which Hemingway was not excited about. Gerogiannis writes that Hemingway felt that Hadley’s pregnancy was “an interference in their lives, both professionally and personally.” Hadley wanted the child to be born in America which caused another barrier in Hemingway’s life because he enjoyed living in Paris and did want to leave for any length of time (Gerogiannis). This put extra tension in their marriage. In an early sketch of the story, the story was written in first-person in a positive tone and the woman was named “Hadley” after his wife (Nagel). This sketch was never fully written out though, but it seems as if Hemingway was projecting his fears of being a father into the story, especially with the first sketch. However, Hemingway left the story alone until 1927 after he had divorced Hadley and was planning to marry Pauline Pfeiffer. In fact, “Hills Like White Elephants” was completed in May of 1927 while Hemingway was at le Grau-du-Roi in France on his honeymoon with Pauline (Justice). In the final draft, the story was changed into third-person with characters that are given unspecified names, and another alteration was that the characters are in the middle of an unspoken conflict. However, the setting and elephant simile from the early sketch remained in the story (Nagel). Hilary Justice suggests that Hemingway may actually sympathize with Jig rather than the American because she has found herself in a situation where she is dissatisfied with her lover and her life resembling Hemingway’s discontentment with his ex-wife Hadley and desire to start again with someone new, Pauline, who he felt understood him. Based on his life, Hemingway could possibly identify with either character or both of them. Though whoever Hemingway does sympathize with, “Hills Like White Elephants” is clearly a story that is drawn from personal experience.

This personal story by Hemingway was initially published in August 1927 in a literary magazine entitled *transition* (“Overview: ‘Hills Like White Elephants,’” 1999). In February 1927, Hemingway was approached by Maxwell Perkins about publishing a collection of his short stories, and the contents of the collection were decided by the middle of May of the same year (Gerogiannis). The collected works included “Hills Like White Elephants” and thirteen other short stories. The collection was published by Scribner’s in October 1927, and the book was called *Men Without Women*. Since its publication in *Men* *Without Women*, “Hills Like White Elephants” has been re-printed in many anthologies for the high school and college classroom. The name of the collection is ironic because at the end of “Hills Like White Elephants,” the audience is left wondering if Jig will choose to stay with the American, so the title of the collection the story is in could be foreshadowing what her decision ultimately was.

“Hills Like White Elephants” has been interpreted by screenwriters and adapted to film multiple times. Since it is a short story, some elements are usually added to the story to make it longer. One adaption of the story was completed by Joan Didion and John Gregory Dunne in August of 1990 for the Home Box Office cable television network for a series of stories called *Men and Women*, but they played on Hemingway’s background as an expatriate and decided to give the American an identity and an occupation as a writer (Hannum). Hannum writes that they changed the plot to where the man is exploiting the girl and the consequence of their love affair for a new piece of fiction since he is a writer, and the girl is left crying after realizing this. Didion and Dunne gave the girl a name as well, calling her “Hash” which was Hemingway’s nickname for his first wife, Hadley (Hannum). In 2002, a thirty-eight minute version adapted by Paige Cameron was made. In 2005, it was adapted into a visual essay by Scott Biggs that explores the issues presented by the story and makes it applicable to today. “Hills Like White Elephants” has also been modified for many video projects by students as well.

*Men Without Women*, which “Hills Like White Elephants” was a part of, was usually well-received by its readers. In “Overview: ‘Hills Like White Elephants,’” Hemingway’s book is described as “embraced by the expatriate literary community in Paris” and that it “received strong reviews on his work in the United States and abroad,” showing his work connected to the audience of his time, and the article goes on to describe “Hills Like White Elephants” as a “widely-anthologized and much-discussed story” since its publication. This is proof of the universal appeal Hemingway’s writing had since it was initially published. In 1994, Nagel wrote that “Hills Like White Elephants” has been “regarded as the quintessential Hemingway story for its restraint and subtlety.”

Fellow authors tended to be more critical of Hemingway’s *Men Without Women* than the average audience. Virginia Woolf wrote a review in the *New York Herald Tribune* where she complained that he used too much dialogue and that his short stories were dry and sterile compared to his novels which upset Hemingway (Gerogiannis). Gerogiannis mentions two other writers that offered disapproving reactions who were Joseph Wood Krutch of *Nation* and Lee Wilson Dodd of the *Saturday Review of Literature*. Krutch wrote that with Hemingway’s book "the subject matter of literature becomes sordid little catastrophes in the lives of very vulgar people" (Gerogiannis). Hemingway did not appreciate the negative comments made by Krutch and Dodd about his characters, so he retaliated by writing a poem called “Valentine” where he ridicules their evaluation of his work by sarcastically saying he does not care what they think since they are only critics (Gerogiannis). Concerning “Hills Like White Elephants,” Frank O’ Connor, another writer, objected to Hemingway’s decision to omit certain information because he felt that the story did “not provide the reader with enough information to make the necessary moral judgments” (Johnston).

Not every fellow author was critical of Hemingway’s work though. Percy Hutchinson wrote in the *New York Herald Tribune* that Hemingway was “the supreme reporter” and equated him to Lord Byron, but in the *New Yorker*, Dorothy Parker expounded on Hutchinson’s comment, saying Hemingway was more than a reporter and called him a genius with an “unerring sense of selection” (Gerogiannis). Concerning “Hills Like White Elephants,” Parker labeled the story as “delicate and tragic” (Henningfeld). Gerogiannis notes that a writer in the *New Republic*, Edmund Wilson, believed that Hemingway had become quite popular so quickly since *Men Without Women* that “it has already become fashionable to disparage him.” N. L. Rothman was another writer who looked at Hemingway’s works favorably and went so far as to make comparisons between Hemingway and Shakespeare (Gerogiannis).

Despite critics, Hemingway’s writing is still popular today. His writings are read all the time by students in classrooms and by many others for pleasure. It is fair to say that Hemingway’s stories have stood the test of time which proves the merit of his work. “Hills Like White Elephants” is simply one example of his many wonderful stories. Henningfeld notes that the story still “continues to generate scholarly interest and heated debate among students” despite being written over eighty years ago. Overall, Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants” is a story that has a fantastic past and bright future.

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