



## Failure of Communication in Earnest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"

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### Abstract

"Hills Like White Elephants", one of Earnest Hemingway's short stories included in the short story collection *Men Without Women*, displays a different aspect of this assumed male chauvinist author. As to whether he really advocated male chauvinist attitudes there are certain disagreements among the critics, but regarding this specific short story they generally agree on the fact that he sides with Jig, i.e. the female character of "Hills Like White Elephants". It is one of the few short stories of Hemingway in which a female character is assigned the role of the protagonist. In this story, we are led through a young couple's argument; an argument with no definite resolution. Apparently there is something "wrong" with one of them or their relationship; the argument & counter-argument set them to two parties. As a rule, it is the stronger party that turns the outcome of the argument to their advantage and usually leaves the weak party with "nothing". But who is the strong party here? This paper intends to study the failure in communication in Hemingway's short story "Hills Like White Elephants".

**Keywords:** Failure; Communication; "Hills Like White Elephants"; Earnest Hemingway

### 1. Introduction

The title, i.e. "Hills Like White Elephants", is highly suggestive; it occurs five times in the story, the emphasis laid on this comparison is more about value rather than appearance. It stands for the girl's last hope of establishing a family and making sure of the man's being hers forever. The hills' being white is suggestive of Jig's innocence and pure love; they also symbolize her hopes and dreams' being out of reach, as it finally proves so in the end when she finally gives up clinging to the hope and capitulates. Some critics do not consider the hills as representative of the girl's hopes & dreams; they instead insist on the fact that the American man thinks of the unborn baby as a "white elephant" which connotes "a costly, burdensome possession (originally given as gifts by kings of Siam to obnoxious courtiers in order to ruin them. Surely his comments regarding the inhibiting effects that a child would have on his lifestyle testify to his self-centered, irresponsible attitude" (Abdoo 1991, p. 35). And also, in a North American context a "white elephant is not only a rare and sacred creature, but also a metaphor for an expensive and burdensome property" (45). But then again, some critics like Hannum suggest that "the American man

himself is a costly white elephant" (Hanuum 1991, p.53) not the fetus, most critics, however, consider the unborn child as a "white elephant", i.e. the troublesome burden.

## ***2. The Objectives of the Study***

This paper intends to go through the elements comprising the arguments included in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" in order to analyze how and why a failure occurs in the communication between the two principal characters of this short story.

## ***3. The Significance of the Study***

Even though several studies have been done on this well-known short story written by Hemingway, no such study concerning the failure of communication between the two chief characters of this short story has ever been done.

## ***4. Theoretical Framework and Methodology***

This analytical study is eclectic descriptive and intends to analyze the devastating elements leading to the failure in communication between the two involved main characters of Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants".

## ***5. Discussion***

### ***5.1. Arguments VS. Counter-argument***

If we agree with the critics who believe that the American man views the fetus as a kind of troublesome burden that must be removed from his life, then his love for the girl cannot be a true love. Apparently their relationship is devoid of love; though the girl seems to have some special feelings for the man, the man does not return her love as he ought to. He says, "I love you, you know that I love you" (Hemingway 1947, p.362), but he does not really love her; he is rather infatuated with her and his feelings bespeak of physical love. The way he regards the girl is hinted at through the girl's name, i.e. Jig; Jig is a quick and lively kind of dance and music which connotes the intensity of sexual love and pleasure. It is absolutely physical love and pleasure that binds the man to the girl. He wants to love without commitment and since keeping the fetus might entangle him in a web of responsibilities and even force him to marry the girl and take leave of the pleasures of a free life, he crosses out the option of keeping the baby. Jig does want to keep it though, since the feelings of motherhood is capable of releasing her from the emptiness she feels. She does not want to go through the abortion, since "once they take it away, you can never get it back" (362). Here, the man knows he can lead the argument to his advantage with patience and fake display of love and care for the girl and he does it perfectly. "I don't want you to do it if you feel that way" (367) does not really encourage the girl to do what she wants to do, since it is another version of "I do want you to do it and I do want you to want to do it." The girl gets the message and starts to realize that if she really wants to keep the lover, she has to forget about the fetus.

The American knows how to handle the argument more than the girl does. He knows the girl's mentality so well and makes use of his knowledge and experiences in the best way to achieve his goal. He knows that drinks especially new ones have a strong effect on her, that is why he orders Anis Del Toro. The girl's helpless state and ignorance of what is going on is best pictured in her not knowing Spanish and how to drink Anis Del Toro; it is the man who is cognizant of such things and tells her what to do. It appears that he has lost his strong interest in her and does not need her as before; to him Jig has really turned to a kind of jig which is a device that holds something in position and guides the tools that are working on it. Now, it does seem quite probable that the man would leave the girl as soon as he gets her to go through the operation.

## 5.2. The Intervention of Drinks

The conflicting point of view of the girl and the man are revealed by further examining the denotation of Anis:

Its seed helps expelling gas from the alimentary canal, a passage to that functions in the elimination of residual waste. The man urges the girl to go through with the abortion, to eliminate the residual waste, the baby from her body. Residual waste denotes a residuum or an internal aftereffect of experience or activity that influences later behavior, especially a disability remaining from a disease or operation (Passey 1988, p 32 ).

To the man, the baby is the aftereffect of intercourse and now has a negative influence on their relationship. The troublesome burden of impregnating the girl whom he considered as a mere sex partner worries him to the extent that he needs this Anis Del Toro to rest his worries at least for a while and also to help him in convincing the girl to succumb to his wishes. Interestingly enough, The Anis seed is often used in flavoring medicines because of its distinct licorice flavor. Thus, it is perfectly natural that they unconsciously view it as a kind of relief or possibly a cure for their problems; it helps the girl calm down and aids the man in bringing the girl's thoughts and decisions under his control.

Beside Anis, two other drinks are mentioned basically to put light on the past and the present state of their relationship. When the girl comments that the drink tastes like liquorices, the man jumps to the conclusion that "everything tastes of liquorice" (Hemingway 1947, p.365) and this is the first and the last instance of the straightforward declaration of his dissatisfaction with the relationship. This "everything" does include the fetus and obviously does not exclude the girl. The girl tastes like liquorice too, but it is still too soon to vomit her up and out of his life; the issue of the fetus should be settled first. The girl notices the meaning beneath the man's words and reminds him of how things were different in the past by saying "everything tastes of liquorice, especially all the things you have waited so long for, like absinthe" (365). Absinthe's strong and bitter taste flavored by aromatic bitterness of wormwood symbolizes the bitterness of life and a short-term relationship that has a sweet and promising beginning, but ends in bitter frustration and disillusionment. The aromatic smell of absinthe stands for the transient joyful pleasure and excitement of making love and its bitter taste is suggestive of the aftereffect of an irresponsible act, i.e. having intercourse without taking heed of the consequence, which is dealing with a burdensome trouble, i.e. the fetus.

The mere reference to absinthe with the above-mentioned connotations sets the man in an uneasy state, it even endangers his dominance over the argument; that is apparently why he rushes to " Oh, cut it out"(365). He obviously is cognizant of the fact that submission to the girl's statements which are mostly logical and accepted by him as true deep down his heart, might lead to his taking responsibility for causing the problem. The problem has much more effects on the girl's life than his, they are not in the US and in European countries where Catholicism is practiced (Spain for instance), having an illegitimate child is by no means a pleasant fate for an unmarried girl. The girl is apparently from a European background and the man's being nameless and referred to as merely " the American man" obviously connotes the man's insignificant personality and also the girl's not being American. The man knows the fact that he has been exploiting and abusing the girl right from the start, but his irresponsible nature does not let him do the honorable thing, i.e. marry the girl and give the child his name. As Margaret D Bauer

puts it, " this story is set post-World -War I... the man is willing to risk his lover's life in order to preserve his carefree way of life"(Bauer 2003, p.124).

### 5.3. Who is the Winner, Who is the Loser?

Now, it is the girl's turn to declare her dissatisfaction with this hollow kind of relationship they have: "I wanted to try this new drink .That's all we do, isn't it ...look at things and try new drinks?"(Hemingway 1947, p. 365) She is perfectly aware that she will most probably be the loser, so she tries to put substance into her words to elicit the needed support and affirmation from the man .She does need to keep the fetus to release her from the emptiness she has felt through the unstable relationship. She needs it to help her base a family of her own and fill the voids in her mentality that have been caused by an affair based on sexual pleasure and trying new drinks here and there. Now, she wants to put an end to her aimless wanderings with the man, settle down and enjoy a warm and stable family life with him and their child. A sweet dream it is that makes her look across at the hills and change her prior statement in a way as to encourage or rather seduce the man to succumb to her wishes:" They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees" (365). If at first glance the hills reminded her of how sweet and rewarding having a baby might appear, this time she makes use of them as seducers to arouse the man's passions as she used to do in the good old days. She knows the bitter fact that she might have no option but going through the abortion to keep the man by her side; she agrees to have another drink and does it to suggest compromise on her side. The "warm wind that blows the curtain against the table "( 365) suggests a brief pause in the argument; this pause brought by with the help of the drink puts them in a romantic phase for a few moments, it also stands for the sweet past and the bitter present. The pause invites the man to seize the chance to convince the girl to go through the operation. It seems this is not their first argument and discussion over the abortion; they have probably had long discussions before coming to this bar. It is interesting that the man calls it "a simple operation: "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig... It's not really an operation at all" (365). Doesn't he know that by undergoing such an operation the girl somehow risks her life? He surely knows all this, but he needs to assure the girl that everything would be alright. Even more interesting that that is his calling the process of abortion "natural": "They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural"(365). Letting the air in and removing the fetus is as unnatural as it may seem, but he again has to pretend that there is nothing wrong with going under an operation since "We'll be fine afterwards. Just like we were before "(365).The outlooks they hold to the issue of the unborn baby are basically disparate; the man senses an imminent danger in keeping the baby and wants to get rid of it instantly, while the girl views it as part of her out -of -reach hopes and dreams and cannot let go of it as easily as the man does, specially now that the motherhood feeling has started growing inside of her. That is why when the man says," That's the only thing that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy"(365), she looks at the bead curtain, puts her hand out and takes hold of just two of the strings of bead. Critics argue that the bamboo curtain that is hung across the doorway in the station bar where they sit is a symbolic barrier between Jig and her American lover. But then again they have tended to associate the curtain primarily with Jig identifying it as strings of rosary beads symbolizing her Catholicism The fact that she holds just two beads of the string might be suggestive of her yearning for togetherness. The mentioning of the operation suddenly awakes her from dreaming; she feels that her stable new-fledged state is put in dander, but she is still reluctant to forget about the sweet dream of settling down.

### 5.4. Fake Reassurance

Having started to assure the girl of the operation's being simple and natural, he now adds reasons to his argument to prove why it is necessary: "I'll love it. I love it now, but I just can't think about it. You know how I get when I worry...I won't worry about that because it's perfectly simple " (366). His attempts prove successful eventually and he elicits the answer he longs to hear:" Oh, yes. But I don't care about me. And I'll do it and then everything will be fine"(366). But as a matter of fact he must say something to show how much he cares for the girl herself; he really needs to cover up his meanness in

evading responsibility in a way or another. His fake reassurance of his caring for the girl comes right after the girl's declaring her decision: "I don't want you to do it if you feel that way" (366). But then again he doesn't really mean it; up to this moment his dominance over the argument gets higher and higher and the girl is on the verge of capitulation.

The girl hesitates as to whether totally forget about her "white" hopes and dreams. The man's dominance over the argument is about to overwhelm her, so she needs to keep her distance from him for a few minutes at least and think over the whole issue, maybe for the last time. The "fields of grain and trees along the Ebro" (366) she looks at, represent the fertile and promising state of their relationship in the past. The mountains' being far away, beyond the river resembles the girl's faraway and out-of-reach hopes and dreams. The shadow of a cloud that moves across the field of grain foreshadows the unpleasant and uncertain outcome of their relationship. Now, she can feel her upcoming defeat and that's why when the man tries to assure her that "we can have everything afterward" (366), she can't bring herself to believe it. The influence of the drink fades away and she starts to realize things: "I don't feel anyway....I just know things" (366). Her standing in the sun while saying these is suggestive of her starting to detach herself from her distant dreams. The man notices the sudden change in the girl's way of looking at things and tries once again to bring her under his control: "Come on back in the shade ... You mustn't feel that way" (367). Coming back in the shade symbolizes the girl's returning under the man's manipulation of her thoughts; he once again reminds her of the simplicity of the operation. The fetus is still important for the girl, that's why she doesn't like it when the man refers to it as "thing": "I'm perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you" (367). The girl views it quite differently; if to the man it means nothing, to the girl it means everything: "Doesn't it mean anything to you? We could get along" (367). This vast chasm between the two outlooks once again threatens the man's dominance over the argument; the girl starts to articulate her thoughts and wishes and it sure does not appeal to the man. He has to pretend that he cares for the baby and that it does mean something to him on the spot to calm the girl: "Of course it does. But I don't want anybody but you. I don't want anyone else" (367). The girl knows that the man does not really mean what he says; all he is

thinking of is the removal of the fetus from his life. She can see her own removal too; this puts her into a mental conflict with herself. Jig does not know what to do, since going through the operation would obviously obliterate her chance of ever marrying the man and enjoying a stable family life; insisting on keeping the fetus, on the other hand, would endanger her relationship with the man. She needs to think over the whole issue once again, since her mind is in a disturbed state and the man's repeating the sentence "I do know it's perfectly simple" (366) and his insincere statement "I'd do anything for you" (366) which is there primarily to dupe the girl into confirming his suggestion as the best possible one, infuriate her and she doesn't want to hear more of that. The man more than once refers to the fact that he knows; he wants to convince the girl that he knows how things are much better than her and that his words must be regarded as the best solution for their problem. It appears that the man's voice and suggestion now turns to a kind of "troublesome burden" for the girl: "Would you please please please please please please stop talking?" (367). But what makes the girl smile at the man in the end? Most critics agree on the fact that the girl capitulates to the man & is going to go through the operation, since she gives the priority to the lover not the baby; few critics like Scott Cosigney believe that "perceiving his lack of comprehension, Jig dismisses his entreaties for the abortion, as hollow as the bamboo beads of the curtain. The jig is up and she sees that in his eyes, she as well as her unborn child, has become a 'white elephant'" (Cosigney 1989, p. 54). Considering the issue in this way might be led to the conclusion that the girl does not capitulate to the man; she is the one to end the argument triumphantly and that her smile bespeaks of her victory.

### 5.5. Reconciliation or Submission?

Realizing in what disturbed a state the girl's mind is, the man decides to give her and himself some time to refresh their minds; he takes the bags to the other side of the station to convince her of his good

will. It apparently proves successful, since the girl smiles at him and even invites him to come back and have a beer with her. She seems to have started to take a realistic view on the issue; she comes to realize that the man is by no means willing to go through the responsibilities of matrimony. In this way, her insistence upon keeping the unborn child would expel her out of the man's life for good; moreover, it might lead to living alone with an illegitimate child in a Catholic world where she would only be resented and be looked upon as nothing. By admitting the man's solution as the best, she at least would be able to make him keep her company for some time; she is so afraid of being left all by herself. Thus, she reconsiders the whole issue, capitulates to the man's wishes and wears a smile to wipe out the image of a "troublesome burden" from his mind and once more retain her almost lost position as the love of his life.

The two heavy bags that the man carries to the other tracks have labels on them from all the hotels where they spent nights; they represent the bitter aftertaste of their sexual pleasures, they are heavy and burdensome and so is the outcome of their irresponsible act. The man carries the bags to prove to the girl that he will stand by her side and will accompany her to Madrid where she is going to have an operation. The characterization of the American man is worth noting; he seems to be as Bauer calls him, "adolescent, selfish and misdirected" (Bauer 2003, p.129), this specific characterization can be thought of as Hemingway's much sympathy for the female characters he portrays. Jig is more positively characterized and obviously is the one who receives more of the author's approval. When the man asks the girl whether she feels better, she replies "there is nothing wrong with me. I feel fine" (Hemingway 1947, p. 368). This reply of hers which concludes the story suggests that if there is something wrong with their relationship, it is because of the man not the girl. It is hinted at even prior to this sentence; his failure to see the reality of things is suggested through "He looked up the tracks but could not see the train" (367). In the bar-room, people are "all waiting reasonably for the train" (367) and he is apparently the one whose waiting for the train does not seem reasonable; he is waiting to remove meaning from his life, again the author sides with the girl.

The argument eventually ends up with the girl's capitulation. As to whether she is the loser, there are certain disagreements; the characters, however, are characterized in a way as to advocate the girl's position in the argument. The girl fails in attaining what she aims at, but at least the reader comes to realize that there was "nothing wrong" with her and if the communication fails, again it is not her fault; it is rather the man's. We do not see much action involved in the story which is suggestive of the barren state of their relationship; the couple tries hard to avoid the discussion of the operation which is the center of their argument. According to Alex Link almost all action taken deliberately by the couple is restricted to communication, "as in saying and asking (36 examples) or looking (10 examples)" (Link 2004, p.66). It is a literal illustration of their failure to meet eye to eye until the text's end, when the girl is eventually able to smile at the man twice. Whatever the reason for the girl's smile in the end is, one thing is worth noting; that the man's dominance over the argument is less assured in the end.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper has endeavored to analyze the failure of communication occurring between the two characters in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants". In order to attain insight into this issue, it has attempted to go through both the arguments and counters-arguments deployed in the discussions involved in this short story. His study has attempted to analyze how in this story we are led through the young couple's argument, and whether it offers any definite resolution. It has also tried to illustrate how they have been separated into two parties consequently leading to the failure in communication.

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