

FICTIONAL FILM ADAPTATION

“Hills Like White Elephants” (1925)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

from *Follywood* (2005)

...Faint trumpets proclaim in unison as white letters on the void announce Hills Like White Elephants. The screen brightens to a dry bare landscape with no trees at all, just a small railway station between two lines of track shining in the sun. Signs point in opposite directions. A tanned young man and a girl played by Bacall are seated opposite each other at a table in the shade outside the station. They are both wearing dark glasses, the man facing back toward Barcelona and the girl facing ahead toward Madrid. She takes off her sun-hat, revealing her long hair. Bogart and Huston both disliked and did not want to play the man and Easley would not because of the way his first wife died, so they used an unknown, dressed in sandals and a jacket over a polo shirt. An older Spanish woman brings them two glasses of beer.

The girl looks away at the hills.

“They look like white elephants,” she says.

“I’ve never seen one,” the man drinks his beer.

“No, you wouldn’t have.”

“I might have,” the man says. “Just because you say I wouldn’t have doesn’t prove anything.”

The girl asks him what is painted on the beads of the curtain hanging over the doorway. Anis del Toro, he says. It’s a drink. He orders one for each of them, what sounds like the anus of the bull, the part exposed when a deserving matador is awarded the tail.

The girl takes a sip.

“It’s bitter.”

“Let’s just have a good time.”

“I was trying,” she replies. “I said the hills look like white elephants. Wasn’t that bright? And I’m trying this new drink. That’s all we do, isn’t it--look at things and try new drinks?” Her face softens. She pulls off her dark glasses, “I’m sorry. The hills are lovely. They don’t really look like white elephants.”

They agree to have another drink.

“It’s really a simple operation,” the man says.

The girl looks down at the ground their table is standing on. Trumpets blare in the distance.

“Awfully simple,” he says. “They just let the air in. I’ve known lots of people who have done it.”

“So have I. And afterward they were all so happy.”

A breeze lifts the bead curtain into a ripple like a cape.

“Well, I think it’s the best thing to do. But I don’t want you to do it if you don’t want to.”

The crowd roars at the bull.

“If I do it, then it will be fine again if I say things are like white elephants and you’ll like it?”

“I’ll love it. But I just can’t think about it, that’s all. You know how I get when I worry.”

Deep focus defines a customer seated in the shade at a nearby table, played by Bogart in his familiar double-breasted pinstripe suit with wide shoulders and narrow hips. With a drink and a cigarette, he remains in focus in the background throughout the rest of the scene, reading a newspaper, occasionally glancing over at the girl and the man with a facial reaction to what he overhears, unseen by the girl. Sarah had resisted sticking an invented character--a romantic star no less--into the original story, making faces that distract from the girl, but Huston insisted on inserting Bogart for continuity and the extra dimension it gave an otherwise weak ending to a feature movie.

“If I do it, you won’t worry?”

Closeup of his dark glasses reflecting a hill.

“That’s the only thing that bothers us,” he says. “It’s the only thing that’s made us unhappy.”

“Then I’ll do it,” she says. “Because I don’t care about me.”

Bogart looks up from his newspaper at the girl.

The man in dark glasses shifts uncomfortably in his chair.
“I don’t want you to do it if you feel that way.”
“It’s how I feel about us.” She looks away at a field of grain with a shadow moving across it. “We could have had everything.” She puts her dark glasses back on. “Yet every day we make it more impossible.”
“We can have everything!”
“No, we can’t.”
“We can go anywhere!”
“No, we can’t. It isn’t ours anymore.”
“It’s ours!”
The camera cuts back and forth.
“No, it isn’t. And once they take it away, you never get it back!”
“Well, I don’t want you to do anything--”
“--Could we have another beer?”
“All right,” he says. “But you’ve got to realize--”
“--I realize. Can’t we maybe stop talking?”
The girl looks away at the white hills.
“You’ve got to realize that I don’t want you to do it if you don’t want to. You know? And I’m still perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you.”
She pulled off her dark glasses again. In the deep background, as radiant in sunlight as an aura, a bare white hill is a belly of earth. “Doesn’t it mean anything to you?”
“Of course it does. But I don’t want anybody but you. And I know it’s perfectly simple.”
“So I hear.”
All around the arena the crowd yells “*Ole!*”
“You can say that, but I do know it.”
She looks at the man across the little table, waiting until the moment is full of her resolve.
“Would you do something simple for me?”
Louder they yell “*Ole!*”
“I’d do anything for you.”
“Would you please please please please please stop talking?”
The man sags as if struck dead, then stares at their luggage against the wall of the station. There are labels on the bags from various hotels in Europe. The Spanish woman comes out through the bead curtain and puts down two glasses of beer.
Bacall smiles to thank her.
“Look, I really don’t want you to do it if--”
“--Move the bags, will you please?” She smiles at him. “Then come back and we’ll finish our beer.”
He sighs, gets up and lifts the heavy bags. He carries them around the station to the other tracks. Coming back, he walks through the bar where people are drinking. He sits down at the bar in his dark glasses and orders an Anis. While drinking it, he looks around at other people. Then he goes back out to the young woman sitting at the table in the shade.
“Do you feel better?” he asks.
“I feel fine,” she smiles at him. “There’s nothing wrong with me. I feel just fine.”
Watching from deep focus, Bogart grins and lifts his glass to the young woman. She notices him, smiles faintly, then looks away up the tracks in the direction of Madrid. Fade into footage with the look of a newsreel, a peasant woman in a headscarf riding a horse up a mountain, pulling two donkeys loaded with supplies. It is the actress who had played Pilar, the leader of a guerilla band fighting the fascists in Spain. The credits roll over her difficult ascent while a bell slowly tolls.

Michael Hollister
from Chapter 10
Follywood (2005)



Follywood dramatizes the 1940s and 50s, with deep focus on directors, writers and politics. Soon after the attack on Pearl Harbor, the young 20th Century Fox director Ryan Eisley films a documentary on women working in a defense plant, where he meets Sarah. They marry and settle down on a ranch in the San Fernando Valley with their two kids and their dog Boffo.

The Eisleys go on to make independent films adapting American classics, while Sarah tries to overcome Ryan's infidelities with scripts and actresses. Just after their film *Women in Hemingway* is released, the U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities resumes investigating Communist influence in Hollywood, provoking their stars John Huston, Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall to fight back by joining a delegation of stars who fly to the hearings in an airplane named Star of the Red Sea. Some suspect the Eisleys are Communists and the hearings could end their careers. They hope to clear themselves by producing the anti-Communist film *Blithedale*, starring Tracy and Hepburn.

The Eisleys become involved on both sides of the Blacklist scandal, as Sarah resists the Communists who control the Screen Writers Guild and Ryan fights the conservatives who try to impose a blacklist on the Screen Directors Guild. Like the nation, their marriage is threatened by disloyalty and the prospect of war. Orson Welles takes over their *Pierre*, then Josef Stalin courts Judy Garland in their *Flowering Judas*. Their lives interwoven with their films, the Eisleys dramatize the dominant political and aesthetic conflicts in Hollywood.