

ANALYSIS

“Hills Like White Elephants” (1927)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

An American man and a “girl” are sitting at a table in the shade of a railway station in Spain. They are “between two lines of rails in the sun”—at a “junction.” The question is, Which direction will they go? “It was very hot and the express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes,” then would go on to Madrid. The hills across the valley are bare. So is the landscape on this side of the station. So is the prose style. The story is mostly dialogue—extremely objective.

The serving woman brings them beers. Looking away from the man, the girl comments that the hills across the valley look like white elephants. A white elephant in common usage is something unwanted and difficult to get rid of—a common attitude toward pregnancy. But in some cultures, as in India, a white elephant is holy. Since the girl compares the hills to literal white elephants, the connotation to her must be holy. The man replies without agreement or even sympathy for her point of view, dissociating himself: “I’ve never seen one.” The girl, thinking of the holy connotation, expresses dissatisfaction with the man: “No, you wouldn’t have.” He begins to argue with petty irritation: “I might have.... Just because you say I wouldn’t have doesn’t prove anything.”

The girl changes the subject to what is painted on the bead curtain hanging over the doorway into the bar. The man translates the Spanish for her, suggesting that he is more worldly as well as older than she is, though she seems more mature for not arguing: “Anis del Toro. It’s a drink.” A common likely English mispronunciation of “Anis” sounds like anus. The drink tastes like licorice and its name sounds like the anus of a bull, under the tail which is awarded to bullfighters who perform well in killing a bull. The same drink appears with the same connotation in *The Sun Also Rises* (1926).

When the girl says the drink tastes like licorice the man expresses a reductive cynicism: “That’s the way with everything.” This time the girl reacts to his negative attitude with mock cynicism, implying that their relationship has become like drinking absinthe, popular among bohemians though known to be gradually lethal. In Christian tradition, drinking absinthe means accepting the bitterness of life and death, just as Christ drank vinegar before his death. This man and this girl are damned souls like the hedonists on the Left Bank—Mike Campbell, Robert Cohn, Brett Ashley—in *The Sun Also Rises*. Their mood has turned dark and she tried to brighten it by comparing the hills to white elephants. Now her feelings have changed and she qualifies her poetic simile: “They don’t really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees.” Now she is also looking at their relationship objectively, tiring of their aimless hedonism: “That’s all we do, isn’t it—look at things and try new drinks?”

Now the man raises the issue that has brought them to this junction, “the only thing that’s made us unhappy”: “It’s really an awfully simple operation, Jig.” Her name evokes an expression common in that day, “The jig is up.” This girl is more experienced than the girl in “Up in Michigan” and she is “up” in a different sense: The jig is up for this man. “The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.” She is considering what their relationship is based on. The man proceeds to argue that she should get an abortion, minimizing its significance: “I know you wouldn’t mind it, Jig.” He does not know her very well. “It’s really not anything. It’s just to let the air in.”

She reaches out to the bead curtain over the doorway into the bar and “took hold of two of the strings of beads.” She is grasping to hold on to their relationship, but this gesture identifies them with “Anis del Toro,” the anus rather than the tail of the bull. “I’ve known lots of people that have done it,” he says. “So have I,” said the girl. “And afterward they were all so happy.” He keeps saying she does not have to get an abortion if she does not want to, but it is clear how much he wants her to get one: “I think it’s the best thing to do. But I don’t want you to do it if you don’t want to.” Bull. Nevertheless the girl is still

hopeful, like Marjorie in “The End of Something.” She wants to save the relationship: “And if I do it you’ll be happy and things will be like they were and you’ll love me?” Under this pressure to reassure her, the worldly older man is evasive and childish, in ironic contrast to her maturity: “I just can’t think about it. You know how I get when I worry.” Poor thing. Bull. As if he is a victim here.

Finally, under his pressure, she consents: “Then I’ll do it. Because I don’t care about me.” She cares about Us. Feminists hate this attitude, but of course this is the evidence of true love: transcendence of self and a desire to sacrifice for another, like the exemplar Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms*, who dies in childbirth. Like a Feminist, this man does not appreciate true love: “I don’t want you to do it if you feel that way.” Bull. Jig stands up, walks away and looks at the mountains “far away.” Unlike Catherine and Frederick Henry this couple will never make it up to the spiritual heights, as Jig now realizes: “And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible.” The world “isn’t ours anymore.” Her pregnancy forces her to be realistic rather than romantic: “You mustn’t feel that way,” he says. “I don’t feel any way,” the girl said. “I just know things’.” He claims that if she has an abortion, “We could have the whole world.” To her the significance of her pregnancy grows like the fetus: “And once they take it away, you never get it back.” Ironically, the conflation of the world with the fetus invests the little word “it” with ambiguity and totality. It means everything to this girl.

She reaches the end of her patience when he says, “But you’ve got to realize--” Bull. “‘I realize,’ the girl said. ‘Can’t we maybe stop talking?’” She has had enough of his bull. But he keeps on talking, condescending and pretentious. “‘You’ve got to realize,’ he said, ‘that I don’t want you to do it if you don’t want to. I’m perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you’.” Bull. He reduces having a child to a sacrifice that *he* would be making and reduces the fetus to an It. She pleads, “‘Doesn’t it mean anything to you? We could get along’.” Now she is considering that she may have the child after all. Her comparison of the hills to white elephants expressed a feeling that her pregnancy is holy. “Of course it does,” he says. “But I don’t want anybody but you. I don’t want any one else. And I know it’s perfectly simple.” Bull. Obviously the question is not simple for her. Huge bull: “I’d do anything for you.” Finally she kills his bull with ironic grace under pressure by “pleasing” him to death: “Would you please please please please please stop talking?”

The dying bull makes one last desperate lurch to regain its feet: “‘But I don’t want you to,’ he said, ‘I don’t care anything about it.’ ‘I’ll scream,’ the girl said.” He is dead to her now. The jig is up. She feels so exalted she does not even hear the serving woman say the train is coming in five minutes. “The girl smiled brightly at the woman, to thank her.” She has brightened, as when she said the hills looked like white elephants. When the man feels obliged to carry the bags over to the other side of the station, he is accepting her decision. He has made her feel like a white elephant for being pregnant, like she had become something unwanted and difficult to get rid of. By the end, however, he has become *her* white elephant, like unwanted baggage. She smiles at him and even invites him to come back and they will finish their beers. She is going on to Madrid, on a high plain, locale of the best bullfights. The man goes into the bar and drinks an Anis. He is bitter and certainly an ass if not an anus.

The man envies the people in the bar who are “all waiting reasonably for the train,” implying that Jig is being unreasonable. When he returns to their table, we have been led to think that he feels that something is wrong with her, rather than truly caring about her: “Do you feel better?” She proves her transcendence by not telling him to go to hell: “‘I feel fine,’ she said. ‘There’s nothing wrong with me. I feel fine’.” She no longer feels intimidated by his bull that something is wrong with her if she does not get an abortion and she begins to feel better when he is gone. She aborts *him*.

It is not indicated whether the girl will decide to get a literal abortion. Hemingway leaves that decision up to her. In that sense the story is pro-choice. However, the story is politically incorrect in affirming that the unborn are holy. At the beginning of his career Hemingway wrote a number of stories identifying with females and expressing great sympathy and admiration for them while severely criticizing selfish males—“Up in Michigan,” “On the Quai at Smyrna,” “Indian Camp,” “The End of Something,” “Hills Like White Elephants.” Nevertheless, Feminists stereotyped him as a “misogynist” insensitive to the problems of women and persuaded many people not to read or teach his writing.

Michael Hollister (2012)