



# Protagonists' Predicament in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"

Shiqi Shang 

Beijing Language and Culture University, Beijing, China.

---

**Type of Work:** Peer Reviewed.

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.21013/jems.v19.n2.p4>

**Review history:** Submitted: March 30, 2023; Revised: April 22, 2023; Accepted: April 27, 2023

**How to cite this paper:**

Shang, S. (2023). Protagonists' Predicament in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants". *IRA-International Journal of Education & Multidisciplinary Studies* (ISSN 2455-2526), 19(2), 86-90. <https://dx.doi.org/10.21013/jems.v19.n2.p4>

---

© IRA Academico Research.

 This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/) subject to a proper citation to the publication source of the work.

**Disclaimer:** The scholarly papers as reviewed and published by IRA Academico Research are the views and opinions of their respective authors and are not the views or opinions of IRA Academico Research. IRA Academico Research disclaims any harm or loss caused due to the published content to any party.

---

IRA Academico Research is an institutional publisher member of *Publishers International Linking Association Inc. (PILA-CrossRef)*, USA. Being an institutional signatory to the *Budapest Open Access Initiative*, Hungary, the content published by IRA Academico Research is available under Open Access. IRA Academico Research is also a registered content provider under *Open Access Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH)*.

This paper is peer-reviewed following IRA Academico Research's [Peer Review Program](#) .

---

Shiqi Shang  [/0009-0002-3338-2263](https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3338-2263)

### ABSTRACT

*Hills Like White Elephants* is one of the short stories written by American writer Ernest Hemingway which is mainly about conversations between an American man and a girl who are arguing about whether she should receive an abortion procedure when waiting for an express train from Barcelona to Madrid. This paper aims to analyse the protagonists' predicament through stylistics of fiction as a research perspective and come to a conclusion that facing the disillusion of traditional values and the dysfunction of original morality under the attack of wars, the protagonists are the representatives of "the lost generation" who suffers the trauma and wanders around the world, only to find out there's no corner for them to rest and elude away the loneliness.

**Keywords:** Hills like White Elephants, Hemingway, Predicament, Stylistic Analysis

### Introduction

Ernest Hemingway is a famous American novelist and short-story writer, one of the spokesmen of "the lost generation" named by Gertrude Stein. Tracing back to his career we can know that he once received orthodox literary training as a reporter and thereafter his experience forges his later journalistic style: After World War I, he served as a correspondent for the *Toronto Star* and then settled in Paris. During the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), he returned to Spain as a newspaper correspondent. In World War II (1939-1945) he again was a correspondent and later was a reporter for the United States First Army.

His economical writing style makes him distinguished from contemporary writers. The idiosyncrasy of concise language and emotional understatement not only appears in his representative works like *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms* but also in short stories, taking "Hills like White Elephants" as an example.

"Hills like White Elephants" was first published in 1927 as one of the short stories collected in *Men without Women*. The story is mainly about conversations between an American man and a girl who are waiting for an express train from Barcelona to Madrid. During their conversation, a connotation that the girl has to receive an abortion procedure is revealed.

### Stylistic Analysis of the Protagonists' Predicament in "Hills Like White Elephants"

At the beginning of the story, when the narrator tries to describe the barren landscape near the station, especially the mountains, correspondently his language style is quite simple if we analyse his sentence structure. Take the first paragraph as an example (the following sentences are all cited from the original text collected in *The Quintessence of Hemingway's Works*). (Liu 1994: 57-62)

"The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white." (1)

"The hills were long and white." (1)

The first sentence is from the original work and we rewrite it by omitting the underlined modified components like prepositive attributes and postpositive attributes as the useful complement of information to the sentence. Similarly,

"On this side, there was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun." (2)

“There was no shade and no trees and the station was between two lines of rails.” (2)

“Close against the side of the station there was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies.” (3)

“There was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain.” (3)

“The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building.” (4)

“The American and the girl sat at a table.” (4)

“It was very hot and the express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes.” (5)

“It was very hot and the express would come.” (5)

“It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went on to Madrid.” (6)

“It stopped and went.” (6)

Therefore, the basic sentence structure produces an effect on the view's movement. The camera lens first zooms in on the mountains, then the station, building, and curtain to the bar. The repeated “it” means the object from large to small as the subject with the movement of the shot. “There be” structure implies only the existence rather than the presence or disturbance of human beings. These impersonal descriptions and the clarity of the words draw the portraiture of the characters' unsettling life which “contains touching tears of sorrow and deep inner rhythm.” (Liu 1994: 78) Besides, crappy “th” sounds in the first paragraph is also a reminder of following obstacles (ineffective communication) among their conversation.

The debut of the two protagonists is modified with a definite article as a piece of known information for readers to form a mutual understanding. This blunt expression is obvious in Hemingway's style as one of his paradigms. He believes readers have known everything just like him and indeed there is no ambiguity which may interfere with readers' comprehension since the theme of gender relation is eternally immutable in literature and reality. This style also manifests as the absence of grammar references like “asked the woman,” especially when the two characters' conversation develops at a fast pace. The reclusion of narrator achieves the goal of “zero-degree writing.” He is only a loyal recorder in charge of writing down characters' words without any subjective remark or comment. Besides, both characters are referred to by “he” or “she,” rendering the effect of generalizability. The narrator takes a clip of two characters' life, that is, a fragment of their endless journey without background introduction or any leading voice. Except for the information that the station where they stay for 40 minutes is in Spain and they would head for Madrid is known to all, it is still not certain whether they have a home anywhere and what their aim is for travelling. We do not know where they belong and what their destination is. This unsecured lingering manifests a sort of expatriation and self-exile.

After they go to the bar, they sit outside rather than in a private space. Thereupon, the bead curtain forms the invisible third party and they could make interactions with the inner side like ordering some liquor. At the same time, the other's presence makes them obliged to talk obscurely since abortion is prohibited in Spain. With the development of the conversation, their question is still unsolved because both know exactly the subaudition and they are in great anxiety, suffering in chaos but showing in different ways. Jig is anxious because of her irresolution. She is the starter of the conversation and the decider whether have the operation or not. It is quite likely that she is pro-abortion in the subconscious so she proposes first they should have a drink. “Let's drink beer.” Later, she utilises a kind of conversation technique, that is, by changing the topic constantly to escape from reality and the haunting sense of nervousness. “The girl looked across at the hills.” The superposition of prepositions points out

the exact spot where her eyesight locates. She wants to distract herself, so everything she sees could help her create some associations though she also shows no concern for the answer. Once given a reply, she would try to end this topic no matter how the answer can satisfy her question. She understands what the man's meaning is but is reluctant to carry on the just topic. For example, the habitual as well as colloquial usage of "lovely" as her casual reply or a random conclusion for the present topic appears several times during their chatting: "They're lovely hills." "It's lovely." The frequency and repetition of the word make its ordinary meaning fade away and it fails to reveal the characters' emotions, neither their perception nor cognition. The phrase of the white elephants is also the resemblance. In the process of their specious negotiation on the operation, the girl once mentions several times that hills are like white elephants, which serves as her emotional projection and corresponds to the title as well. As we all know, the concrete object in reality and its metaphorical value of white elephants originates from India. Therefore, such an alien phrase in Western culture is less meaningful. Once readers take the perspective of Jig and try to give a definite explanation of the white elephant, it is like chasing a wild dream and also disobeys the iceberg principle. The white elephant is one of her passing references, only the indication of infertility.

"I'll love it. I love it now but I just can't think about it. You know how I get when I worry." Here the man's words reveal his inner fear when facing such a harrowing situation, no matter their emotional dilemma now or the further predicament of survival. He is trying to comfort her by keeping talking about one thing. The girl is inclined to distract herself by leading nowhere and meaning nothing. The man is the minatory figure who keeps exerting pressure by gripping one topic invariably though neither did he illustrate the problem directly in order to cover up his anxiety. Therefore, to some degree, he is responsible, and helplessly both of them cannot get out of the scrape. "'But I don't want you to,' he said, 'I don't care anything about it.'" The man's reply indicates that whether Jig agrees to take the operation or not, the issue between them is still unsolved. "The girl looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two of the strings of beads." "I'll scream." She is in extreme misery while he is also impotent and anxious, so he leaves her alone for five minutes, carries their package and drinks a glass of spirit. "When the American drinks a solitary anise at the bar, he exposes the strain that this argument has had on his facade of reason and detachment." (Smiley 1990: 339) He did not say anything but looked at the bags against the wall of the station. There were labels on them from all the hotels where they had spent nights." These lines indicate that the man is not poor but they do not have a stable home. They cannot integrate into society and the estrangement with surroundings is irreversible. The movement of view adheres to the male character, so there is some blank area in the perspective of Jig. The man is also one of Hemingway's "Code Heroes" who is on the verge of collapse under great tension and pressure. "In Hemingway's writing, the male image is dominated by ordinary people, emphasizing the strong side of ordinary people: maintaining dignity in failure, and not losing demeanour under pressure." (Shang-guan 2003: 62) "Doesn't it mean anything to you? We could get along." The modal verb indicates their tragic agreement, while Jig's smile at the end of the story reveals the common "sorrow and pain latent in covert confession." (Ma 2002: 27)

## **Conclusion**

Hemingway observes the strangeness and ceaseless strife in interpersonal relationships so he creates the American and the girl as the model to illuminate the prevalent phenomenon--the absence of security and the loss of expectations for the future in America and Europe after World War I. "A sense of emptiness and decadence of human beings is clearly manifested between the lines, which is closely

related to the status quo of the Western countries where Hemingway wrote his work at that time.” (Fang& Li 2002: 114) Facing the disillusion of traditional values and the dysfunction of original morality under the attack of wars, the protagonists are the representatives of “the lost generation” who suffers the trauma and wanders around the world, only to find out there’s no corner for them to rest and elude away the loneliness. Through the final failure of the characters’ assumption of mutual sympathy, the open ending has anticipated the following generation’s living situation which is imbued with alienation and perplexity. Their chaotic state of mind and ineffective communication reflects upon the sense of “lost” and the survival condition between man and woman. Nobody can comfort anybody, no matter how intimate they are. Even if they share one roof, people of anonymity and universality still feel desperately lonely. The constant travelling and time-wasting on the journey as a way to release desolation suggest the unsettling lifestyle permeating the young people after world wars.

#### **Acknowledgement**

I want to thank Prof. Zhang Shengzhen, my respected supervisor, for all the help she gave me while I was writing this paper. Without her help, the whole process of writing the paper will be harder and more exhausting than I could ever imagine. My profound appreciation for her kindness transcends words.

#### **References**

- Fang, Wenkai & Li, Zuming. (2002) “The Motif of Estrangement and the Frame and Image of ‘Hills Like White Elephant’”. *Journal of Jingzhou Normal University (Humanities & Social Sciences)*, (1): 112-15.
- Liu, Xiongjun. (1994) *The Quintessence of Hemingway’s Works*. Shijiazhuang: Hebei Education Publishing.
- Ma, Jianjun. (2002) “Obstacles to Discourse Communication between Genders---An Analysis of the Dialogue in ‘Hills Like White Elephant’”. *Journal of Guangdong University of Foreign Studies*, 13 (04): 24-27.
- Shang-guan, Yan. (2003) “Antiheroes of Peculiar Type in Hemingway’s Short Stories-on Male Characters in ‘Hills Like White Elephant’ and ‘Cat in the Rain’”. *Journal of China Three Gorges University (Humanities & Social Sciences)*, 7 (04): 62-64.
- Smiley, Pamela. (1990) “Gender-Linked Miscommunication in ‘Hills Like White Elephants’”. *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of ERNEST HEMINGWAY*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.
-