

## ***Two as a Double Rhythmic Movement in Hemingway's Hills Like White Elephants***

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### **Abstract**

Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" leaves so many unanswered questions for its readers. The story presents typical Hemingway's male and female characters in both dialogue and dilemma. This essay studies the use of *two* as a double rhythmic movement in the story. It also presents an analysis of different duality objects in the story, in which *two* entities of each duality are alike, though most of these objects are paradoxical in their nature, complex and ironic. In accordance with his so-called Iceberg Theory, Hemingway stripped his work of everything but the bare essentials, leaving readers to fish through dialogue and bits of narration on their own.

"إثنان" كحركة إيقاعية مزدوجة في قصة إرنست همنغواي  
"تلال كالفيلة البيض"

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### **ملخص**

يخلق إرنست همنغواي في قصته القصيرة "تلال كالفيلة البيض" العديد من التساؤلات. وتقدم القصة من خلال الحوار والمعضلة، رجلاً وامرأة هما من شخصيات همنغواي النموذجية. تتناول هذه الدراسة استخدام كلمة "اثنان" "two" في القصة كحركة متكررة وإيقاعية مزدوجة. كما تقدم تحليلاً عن الأشياء الثنائية في القصة، والتي يكون فيها كلا الوجودين في كل ثنائي متشابهين، على الرغم من أن أغلب هذه الأشياء بطبيعتها متناقضة، معقدة، وتهكمية. وانسجاماً مع نظريته المعروفة بجبل الجليد، فقد جرد همنغواي النص من كل شيء إلا العناصر الأساسية لعمله، تاركاً للقارئ حرية الاختيار من خلال الحوار، والمقاطع السردية القصيرة.

## **1. The Story: Different Origins**

A speculation on the origin of Hemingway's *Hill Like White Elephants*, published in 1927, could offer no complete account of the origin of the story. Robert Mc Almon (1938: 159), Hemingway's first publisher, recalls in his autobiographical work, that

one night in February 1923, in Rapallo, the lot of us were talking of birth control, and spoke of the cruelty of the law which did not allow young unmarried women to avoid having an unwanted child. Recalling an incident of college days I told a story of a girl who had managed to have herself taken care of.

Her attitude was very casual. 'Oh, it was nothing. The doctor just let the air in and few hours later, it was over.'.. Later Hemingway informed me that my remark suggested the story.

But in spring 1958, Hemingway himself gave a very different account.

He told George Plimpton, from the *Paris Review*:

I met a girl in Prunier where I'd gone to eat oyster before lunch. I know she'd had an abortion. I went over and talked, not about that, but on the way home I thought of the story, skipped lunch and spent that afternoon writing it.

(Dick, 1972: 192 and Wagner, 1974:35)

Different anecdotes exist to spell out the occasion that triggered the writing of the story.

An early untitled ink manuscript version of *Hills Like White Elephants* in the Hemingway collection at the Kennedy Library in Boston (Item 472), provides an autobiographical fragment told in the first person and begins on the train as it moves through the Ebro Valley, where Hadley (the girl's name in the fragment) spots the white mountains that would provide the title of the later story. At Caseta (Spanish for "small house") Hadley and her companion stop to change trains, and while they wait they order beer, just as the couple in the short story does, but the subject of pregnancy never arises.<sup>1</sup> on the other hand, in Hemingway's biography Baker writes that:

Hemingway and Hadley (his first wife) were in Pamplona the summer before their child was born, but they did not go on to Madrid in 1923; because of Hadley's pregnancy, they returned to Paris after the fiesta.

In 1924 they went on a fishing trip on the Irati River after the fiesta. It was not until July 1925 that they travelled from Pamplona to Madrid and saw the white hills.

(Baker, 1969: 112)

Here, it is found that the day of Hemingway and Hadley seeing white hills and that of writing the manuscript offer an insufficient proof that Hemingway had asked Hadley to have an abortion; although the American in the short story is likely to be a self-portrait of papa Hemingway during the twenties. A number of stories dealing with unhappy or tensed relations between married couples or lovers are important for their artistic quality. They provide implicitly through action

and dialogue a full scene of the incongruity of the characters and the resulting feelings of boredom, aggression, dissatisfaction, and futility it entails (Voss, 1973: 222). Besides, four of Hemingway's stories written during Hadley's pregnancy present a similar fictional hero. "Hills Like White Elephants", "Cat in the Rain", "Out of Season", and "Cross-Country Snow"; each portrays a man who is unwilling to accept the responsibilities of fatherhood. In her memoirs, Gertrude Stein recalls Hemingway during those days: "...and then all of a sudden he announced that his wife was enceinte and then with bitterness, and, I, I am too young to be a father" (1933: 262). According to James Mellow, "Another oddity is that in the earliest manuscript fragment relating to the story, written in 1925, is that Hemingway who remarks to Hadley, 'look at those god-damn white mountains,' and she answers, 'They are the most mysterious things I have ever seen' "(1993: 348). This explains how Hemingway came up with idea of the white elephants. All that the manuscript provides is a background material that goes under what Hemingway calls the seven eighths of the writer's iceberg. But the use of irrelevancies in speech as a means of revelation is part of Hemingway's stock in trade. He recognized that in spoken banalities lay much of the inchoate drama of human life, and as we read his dialogue, we are always searching through it for meaning.

In Hemingway's story occurs perhaps the most famous instance of what F. O. Matthiessen (1944:169) calls one of Henry James's gifts, "the ability so to handle a conversation that he keeps in the air not merely what is said, but what isn't – the passage of thoughts without words." Hemingway firmly believed that perfect stories are conveyed far more

adequately through subtext than through the actual words written on the page. The more a writer strips away, the more powerful the iceberg, or story, becomes. From all this, it is understood how the writer's artistic method could work at its best, and how many unconscious decisions he makes before he starts writing anything. According to Short (1989: 19) "writers such as Hemingway who use mostly simple language structures can be complicated for students as a result of inconclusive plots or complex symbolism or difficult ideas."

## **2. Dual Standard Two**

This paper not generalizes on the story's symbolic qualities. It presents an analysis of different dual objects in the story, where the two entities of each duality are alike and, as it were, unified. On the other hand, these objects are intensively re-doubled in their progression as they are related to the deep complex unstated feeling of the girl in the story. Tindall (1962: 85-6) says that the recurrent images and motifs gain power through reappearance, bringing meaning from one place in the story to another and accumulating additional meaning along the way.

The story opens quietly with a long shot of "The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white."(McGraw-Hill, 1976: 359).<sup>2</sup> In this picturesque sentence, Hemingway is skillfully suggestive in expressing his own voice. A ring of irony resides in the way he strikes comparisons. The manipulation of long and white in a very short story centers on the darkest side of a human experience, the abortion, that vital issue which is never mentioned anywhere in the story. The first descriptive paragraph that establishes the exposition of the story is divided into two different

parts. One is barren, and the other is fruitful. Two Americans, a girl and her male companion, sit at a table in the shade, beside a railway station café. They face the barren side, and in the distance the country is brown and dry. On the other side of the valley, there are fields of grain and trees along the banks of the river.

All this material comes in the cinematic series of close-ups where Hemingway's camera anchors the characters amidst this canvas of objects and colours. The objects are rich, complex, and ironic, but above all, paradoxical in their nature. They stand for a symbolic meaning that increases the tension. The European station strengthens the rootless existence of the couple as they belong to the lost generation (Baker, 1969: 345).<sup>3</sup>

The description of the station's position between the two railway lines introduces the strand of double *two*, to be reiterated in the story. Here, *two* prepares the way for the oneness, or unity in "two minutes" which follows. The junction seems particularly important, because the story went from being set at a train junction to being a junction in the man and girl's lives. Perhaps, this is the junction that joined their lives, or separated them. All of the *twos* operate ironically, for they suggest a kind of life which is the direct opposite of the one now being experienced by the couple. These unity images are of course integrated smoothly into the literal level of the story, hence their emergence serves bimetallically, literally and symbolically, as they are unobtrusively reiterated throughout; "Dos cervezas," "two glasses of beer," "two felt pads," and "two ains del Toro".

Not one of these *two* triggered images would be fixed as a symbol if

it were seen only in terms of its literal function in an isolated context. But the piling-up of *two* images suggests that their connotative meanings are of more significance in the story than their literal functions. Symbols should not stand out like raisins in raisin bread.

It is the girl who first looks at the curtain and the hills, because she is curious about the imaginative meaning in them as they are reflected on her eyes repeatedly. The bamboo-beads curtain as an image of concealment and protection is a female principle refers to the past sexual side in the experience; and, as it were, "it keeps out flies" (359), an image of any impure lust. This is how femininity is intensively doubled by an object which is paradoxical in its symbolic nature.

It is hot, and the couple is waiting for the train from Barcelona. They start a formal conversation. The dialogue comes in nearly thirteen intermittent parts hovering around a key term that constitutes the human drama and builds up an erupting melodic tone. The girl has taken off her hat and put it on the table, ready to raise challenge and brush aside any sexual interference which might come in the inhibiting pre-consciousness of the reader. Further, a hat may be phallic according to the shape.

The second part consists of a four- line dialogue and is preceded by a segment of description. It summons up a woman who serves at the station bar. She first looks at the man and the girl who is looking at the lines of hills. Femininity is doubled as the view moves from the woman to the girl and up to the hills. The symbolic meaning in the hills is charged twice. In this instance only the woman is identified as "the woman" in the story, and

the long white hills are compared with the countryside, brown and dry, symbols of joy and sorrow.

The girl in her imaginative view finds the hills like white elephants, a rarity in nature. But in shape, elephants are comparable with the contours of the natural aspects. The girl speaks out of her instincts where there is no moral judgment. The man lacks such a quality in his sophisticated approach; he says, "I've never seen one"(359). He lifts up the tension, and leads on to the long lines of the third part in the dialogue.

This part starts with looking at the bead curtain. It is the girl who is curious about the Spanish words written on the curtain for she does not know Spanish. A gesture like this reinforces the ironic tone, for abortion is restrict prohibited by the Spanish Catholic Church. The girl lacks the moral judgment relevant to the nature of her dilemma.

The bar woman reappears here with "Four reals"(359), that is a suggestive remark. It seems that the woman is intensifying her previous role in multiplying the function of the different ironical objects she has brought in on the table; "two glasses of beer", "two felt pads". In the one hand, she is anonymous with the man and the unborn child; and on the other, she exchanges the role of femininity with the girl as she does not understand English.

Besides, she brings a new meaning. "Do you want it with water?" (359), she asks. She is a step forward in smoldering the tension as she exchanges with the girl her burden of the fancy when the girl spots the white hills as elephants. Elephants are herbivorous, purify themselves with

water and salute the rising sun with their raised trunks. In the same part, the girl hints to the licorice and absinthe; black and living green.

These are comparable with the hills and the country side, giving the same rich function of sorrow and joy. But absinthe is paradoxical here as an aphrodisiac still legal in Spain. The man keeps neutral in his replies, reflecting that side in him which is insincere, callous and emotionally rough.

The fourth part starts with the girl looking across at the hills. "They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees,"(360) she says. Here is the intended meaning in the elephants. They serve the same function the curtain serves which is to keep out any sexual implication which might be recalled by the phallic connotation in the raising trunk. But the man does not understand how a complex mixture like this could work in the imaginative aspect, "Should we have another drink?"(360). The part ends with the warm wind blowing the bead curtain, and the tension is brought down. Then, a new short part starts with the "nice", "cool" and "lovely" drink. For the first time, the man seems to be a little able to mention the "awfully simple operation...". One understands that the girl is pregnant, and he wants her to have an operation. But she wants the baby, "The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on."(360) She is demoted in femininity. The file of the story went through several revisions as Hemingway changed it from "The girl looked away". In part six, the girl says nothing but "looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two of the strings of beads"(360). She objectifies her loss, and she needs unity and moral courage as though she clutches the

beads of a rosary (Tyler, 2001:76). It is another revision Hemingway inserted. In the next part, she says: "Then I'll do it. Because I don't care about me." (361) She is blind by the force of her love-fancy, and selflessness is the truest example of that.

The second descriptive paragraph introduces another feature quality of the landscape:

fields of grain and trees along the bank of the Ebro.  
Faraway, beyond the river, were mountains. The shadow  
of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw  
the river through the trees. (361)

Another new revision is made to the manuscript. The girl could see the life-giving water through the trees, but the scene of the cloud moving across foreshadows the death of her unborn child. She has reached the point of disillusion which occurred after she left the "table" and walked to the end of the station. One wonders if Hemingway intends the table to suggest the surgical bench. According to the classics, clouds were ready and convenient vehicles of the divine will. The cloud is a two-fold object which is either fertile or barren, and here it is barren. Moreover, Philip Kolin (1978:154) refers to the function of clouds and says: "their protean shapes and solar opposition made them images of mutability and death".

In the present story, the gelatinous shape of the cloud recalls a stimulating image of a fully pregnant woman, nude, probably lying on her back with her destined belly virtually bursting with life and her breasts engorged by the approaching birth. The union of the three forms makes a

trinity group with white hills. It becomes apparent that the river is a metaphor by which the girl identifies herself; it is an image of solace and concealment.

The girl, in part eight, laments her fortune, and the man does not listen. "What did you say?"(361), he asked. She is parodying herself in a long series of "love me, love me not", till "the man looked at her and at the table". He says "you've got to realize"(361). The table is a mirror that reflects the depth of the man as he looks at it. The girl bursts out in the musical tones of the seven "pleases", she is able to realize her loss, but the man is not. He says nothing but looks at the labels on their baggages; those are the legal-bonds in the identity of the unborn child. They are like the Spanish setting at the station, revealing the girl's essential helplessness and dependency.

The barwoman reappears with the two glasses of beer, announcing the coming of the train. "The girl smiled brightly at the woman, to thank her."(362) Using the infinitive in this instance is syntactically useful in comparison with "to keep out flies" which comes earlier. The girl's defeat has been assured, and she is aware of it. She looks for companionship in the woman who provides her with intimacy and the experience of life.

She feels fine with hope. The story ends as it has begun, i.e. nothing happens. The girl is left at the beginning of a new world, not wholly defeated. Hemingway in this story knows the way where to conceal the first part of his writing, and the result is intensive and total. He "does not tell us what to feel, but our imaginations work on these details to evoke the sense... the omitted part would strengthen the story." (Leech and Short,

2007: 147) One makes no harm in following the advice of his writer in omitting the omitted and making readers feel more than understand.

Another point is left for the title. Besides the symbolic meanings, there is a significant implication in the actual visual representation that comes calligraphically. The way in which the title appeared provides a derivative meaning in parodying the theme. Each of the consonants signals a double representation. It is comparable with the two lines of the rails in the story. Each group of consonants is divided by a short vowel, as the life of the couple is divided by the life of the unborn child which stands in balance.

### **3. Conclusion:**

It is noticed that most of the sentences in *Hills Like White Elephants* are of a three-cushion shot, and the story is an iceberg by itself. The reader goes through dual objects that are redoubled in progress, giving depth to the concealed feeling of the feminine character in the story. Each time the images and motifs reappear, they acquire additional power. The real mastery of Hemingway's story lies in a delicacy of touch, a subtlety of minute shadings. Although Hemingway uses symbols, he is not Symbolist nor is he a Romantic; his work shows the care, restraint, and control more often associated with Classical literary tradition.

Hemingway is a master of rhythm and of structure, and the essence of what he is saying often lies in what is suggested or left unsaid. He moves from finely wrought definite center to suggest dimensions operating in all directions to the outside. He believes in the justice of feelings in response to experience. He is after "the real thing", that

sequence of motion and fact that made the emotion and which, if it were rendered by the craftsman purely enough, would be valid always (Benson, 1975: 272)

**Notes:**

1. See the discussion of these anecdotes in Robert E. Fleming (1983: 7).
2. All further references to this story are to this edition and will henceforth be cited parenthetically in the text.
3. It was Gertrude Stein who first applied the phrase to the American writers. "You are all a lost generation," she said to Ernest Hemingway, and he used the remark as an inscription for his first novel (Cowley, 1994: 3).

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