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English 215

Masterpieces of American Literature

Professor Hutchisson

**Analysis of Symbolism in “Hills Like White Elephants”**

Hemingway is interesting, in terms of his use of symbolism and also in terms of the way and manner in which he sets his plot. If one reads deep into this story one will realize how the symbols used throughout the story relate to the main themes which is a sense of wanting and unwantedness. The symbols used to relate to the main theme are: the green side of the station, the arid side of the station, railroad tracks, baggage, white elephants, the Ebro River, and Anis de toro.

The plot and theme of the story are introduced first by white elephants. The main characters of the story are at a train station in Spain. The woman, Jig, begins to look at the snow-capped hills and says “they look like white elephants” (211). From this point the plot of the story begins to unfold as both the unnamed lover and Jig begin to discuss abortion. Though it is not clearly stated, Hemingway uses the term “operation” (212) and the phrase “let the air in” (213) to imply that discussion is abortion. The symbol of white elephants can mean a variety of things. Since Jig’s comment about the hills looking like white elephants leads to the discussion of the abortion, they could possibly represent her own physical engorgement. However, Hemingway describes the country surrounding the hills as “brown and dry” (211). The words “brown and dry” signify sadness or depression directed toward Jig. In relation to the sense of wanting, the white elephants represent Jig wanting approval and always wanting to make the unnamed lover happy. The thing that would make the unnamed lover happy is for Jig to get the abortion which is implied when Jig asks “if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants and you’ll like it?” (213).

The dry side of the station is what Hemingway uses next to continue to develop the plot and theme. Hemingway describes this side as being “very hot” with “no shade and no trees” (211). This is described at the beginning of the story when the couple arrives at the station and begins to wait on their train to Barcelona. While they wait they bother order beer since it is very hot. The only shade available on that side was the “warm shadow of the building” (211). The arid side of the station also represents the lack of something, as well as unhappiness. Now what is missing could be Jigs own happiness since she says “I don’t care about me” (213) in the discussion concerning abortion. She doesn’t care if she is happy she just wants to please her unnamed lover and make him happy. The dry side of the station also represents death. Death is the consequence if Jig should choose to get the abortion. In relation to the theme the dry side of the station represents Jig’s desire to be happy or lack of happiness. Jig wants to be happy but she also wants to make her lover happy as well. In order to be happy Jig must make a decision concerning the abortion which is discussed.

In the further development of the story and theme, Hemingway uses the river as the next symbol. The river represents life and its continuation. The Ebro is not really mentioned much in the story, but it still is a vital symbol in displaying the theme. When Jig walks to the end of the station she sees “fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro” and “far away, beyond the river, were mountains” (213). The fields of grain and the trees represent life that the river provides and though there were mountains shadowing the forest, Jig “saw the river through the trees” (213). In relation to the theme the river represents the fact that life keeps going on no matter what. Even though both Jig and the lover want life put on hold, life still continues and nothing can stop the continuation of life.

Hemingway uses the drink Anis del Toro as well to develop the theme and plot. The symbol is first introduced at the beginning of the story. Jig notices the bead curtain and says “they’ve painted something on it” (211). The name of the drink is painted on the bead curtain that separates one side of the bar from the other. The drink represents Jig’s excitement. Jig is excited to try the drink. Jig states that “I was being amused” (212). In relation to the theme the drink represents the want of trying new things. Jig states “I wanted to try this new drink” (212) and also states that all they ever do is “look at things and try new drinks” (212). This can mean that Jig is tired of doing the same old thing and wants to try something different. In relation to the theme the drink Anis del Toro represents Jigs want for something more than just trying new drinks. It can be deduced that Jig wants to have the baby that she is carrying and not go through with the abortion.

Hemingway uses the green side of the train station to continue the development of the plot and theme further. The green side of the station represents happiness, and being plentiful. It also represents the results of not having the abortion. After the discussion about the abortion, Jig says “we could have everything” but as soon as the lover says that they can Jig replies “no, we can’t. It isn’t ours anymore” (213). The “it” that is being described is Jig’s unborn child. The green side of the station represents the life the two could have had if Jig had decided not to get the abortion. In relation to the theme the green side of the station is what Jig really wants but she gives it up in order to make the unnamed lover happy. Jig states that “it’s the only thing that’s made us unhappy” (212). By this statement Jig is implying that the pregnancy is making her and the lover unhappy and that she wants to get the abortion in order to make the lover happy.

Hemingway continues to develop the plot and theme with the symbol of the railroad tracks. Considering that the couple is constantly discussing abortion, the railroad tracks represent the decision that they have to make. One set of tracks symbolizes one direction for pro-abortion where as the other symbolizes the direction for anti-abortion. Both Jig and the unnamed lover know that they cannot turn back after making their decision. Jig tells the unnamed lover “once they take it away, you never get it back” (213) to show him that the decision isn’t simple at all. The train station is set in the middle of the two sets of tracks. This symbolic positioning represents that until the train arrived at the station, they would be stuck in the middle of the decision making. In relation to the theme the railroad tracks represent an unwanted decision that has to be made as a result of their past decisions. If the couple chose a different direction in the past, they would not have to make this important decision.

The final symbol that Hemingway uses to develop the theme is the baggage that the unnamed lover has to carry to the other side of the station. Hemingway describes the bags as heavy (214). The baggage has several meanings. In the first instance, when the lover is staring at the labels of the hotels they had stayed in, the baggage represents the past (214). The past that is mentioned are the decisions, actions, and consequences that the couple had made. The Second instance with the baggage is seen at the end when the lover “picked up the two heavy bags and carried them around the station to the other tracks” (214). In this final scene the baggage represents the burden of the decision that has to be made because of their past exploits. If the couple had chosen to lead a different life then they would not have to carry this burden. In relation to the theme of “unwantedness”, the baggage can be seen as unwanted because it is a burden that does not have to be carried.

**Work Cited**

Hemingway, Ernest. “Hills Like White Elephants.” *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*. NY: Scribner, 1998. Pages 211-214.