

The Lost Generation—An Interpretation of Hills Like White Elephants

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Abstract: This paper situates Ernest Hemingway's short story *Hills Like White Elephants* within the historical context of the "Lost Generation", exploring how the post-World War I spiritual crisis among American youth—marked by shattered beliefs, lost values, and existential confusion—is reflected in the text. By analyzing the detached and futile dialogue between a couple at a train station regarding an unspoken "operation" (abortion), the study reveals how Hemingway employs minimalist narration and rich subtext to portray the psychological plight of the Lost Generation: their sense of powerlessness in the face of critical decisions, the alienation between genders, and the breakdown of communication. The story's mundane setting and the metaphorical imagery of "hills like white elephants" collectively construct a microcosm of the postwar spiritual wasteland, embodying the protagonists' hesitation, escapism, and emotional void. This paper argues that *Hills Like White Elephants* is not merely a depiction of individual fate but also a profound allegory of the Lost Generation's collective psyche, serving as Hemingway's masterpiece in capturing the era's trauma through his unique artistic form.

Keywords: Ernest Hemingway; *Hills Like White Elephants*; Lost Generation

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Hills Like White Elephants, written by Hemingway in 1927, is a short story primarily composed of a conversation between an American couple waiting at a Spanish train station, with the underlying topic being whether the young woman should undergo an abortion. Previous scholarship on this story has largely focused on its narrative techniques, narrative perspective, or feminist moral interpretations. This paper, however, approaches the text from the historical backdrop of Hemingway's era—the Lost Generation—offering an alternative critical lens.

The "Lost Generation" refers to a group of American writers in the 1920s who exiled themselves to France, including figures such as Hemingway, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and William Faulkner. Most of them had experienced World War I, witnessing the collapse of traditional culture and values, yet found no new purpose or direction. Consequently, they became disillusioned, pessimistic, and consumed by emptiness, indulging in hedonism, frequenting cafés and bars, and evading social responsibilities and moral obligations. This paper contends that in *Hills Like White Elephants*, Hemingway portrays precisely such a pair of disoriented American youths—confronted with reality yet paralyzed by indecision, trapped in a cycle of evasion.

1.A Couple

In *Hills Like White Elephants*, the image of this American couple traveling across Europe is itself a microcosm of the Lost Generation. Having undergone a collapse of values and disillusionment with life in America, they seek refuge in the ancient continent of Europe. The line "*There were labels on bags from all the hotels where they had spent nights*" reveals their rootless, nomadic existence—a hallmark of American youth at the time.

This couple is not entirely devoid of conviction; rather, they each possess their own conviction and confusion. Yet their convictions are insufficient to dispel the void and sense of loss or to chart a clear path forward. Instead, in the face of overwhelming nothingness, their conviction appear feeble and insignificant, thereby accentuating the helplessness and despair of their generation.

From the dialogue—'*And if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you'll love me?*'

I love you now. You know I love you.'

I know. But if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you'll like it?'

I'll love it. I love it now but I just can't think about it. You know how I get when I worry.'

If I do it you won't ever worry?'

I won't worry about that because it's perfectly simple.'

'Then I'll do it. Because I don't care about me.'—we can discern that the girl, younger and more vulnerable, is deeply attached to the man. She is invested in their relationship and eager to please him, even willing to sacrifice herself to remove any obstacles between them. This is her conviction: she has love and wants to preserve it. Yet, at the same time, she is filled with doubt and fear about the uncertain operation, unsure whether she should go through with it. Though she appears to make the decision, her addition—*"I don't care about me"*—reveals that it is not truly her own choice but rather a surrender of agency to the man. She lets him decide not because she really "doesn't care" but because she herself is uncertain. She does not know the consequences of the operation or whether she should undergo it. Her only conviction is the man beside her—she loves him and wants to continue their life together. Thus, she defers to his judgment, transferring the burden of choice onto him. Yet, once the decision is made, new anxieties emerge, for she has no clarity about her own desires. Regardless of whether she chooses to proceed or not, doubts will always resurface, destabilizing her resolve. By relinquishing her agency, her unease transforms into resentment toward the man, as if he had coerced her into the decision.

In contrast, the man is far more resolute. Throughout the conversation, he repeatedly encourages the girl to undergo the operation. On this matter, he is not confused—he knows what he wants. For him, the issue is straightforward: he loves the girl and wants to maintain their relationship. In his view, she only needs to undergo a low-risk procedure, after which they can return to their former happiness. However, since he is not the one undergoing the operation, he cannot ignore her feelings—and this is the source of his hesitation. Some interpretations suggest that the man is coercing the girl into compliance, but in my reading, he is far gentler. While he holds more power in the relationship—partly due to his certainty and detachment (he is not the one facing the operation), and partly due to the girl's indecision and transfer of responsibility—he is, in a way, thrust into the role of decision-maker by the girl himself. He undoubtedly wants her to proceed, yet he does not wish to override her will. When the two conflict, he explicitly defers to her choice (*"I think it's the best thing to do. But I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to."*). Thus, he primarily expresses his own preference without ever imposing it. When the girl offers to undergo the operation for him, he immediately rejects the condition (*"I don't want you to do it if you feel that way."*), recognizing it as an unhealthy dynamic—he does not want her to act under duress. His anguish stems from the gulf between genders and the paralysis of communication.

2.The Floating Shadow

The majority of the dialogue consists of mundane, everyday exchanges—discussions about beer, the hills, the train, and the detailed depiction of the bead curtain. The waitress moves in and out; the curtain sways in the breeze. These descriptions create an atmosphere of tranquility and normalcy, as if nothing of significance is happening—just a couple waiting for a train, sitting at a bar, drinking, gazing at the scenery, and casually commenting on drinks and the shape of mountains.

Yet what matters is not what they discuss, but what they avoid discussing. The word "abortion" never surfaces, as if it were taboo. In the story, the bar provides shade where the couple shelters from the scorching sun outside. But beneath their banal small talk, a real shadow looms—one born from the unspoken conflict over the operation, the underlying power struggle between genders, and, above all, their shared fear of confrontation.

As previously noted, this couple loves each other and values their relationship. This very love makes them terrified of arguments. Perhaps they have already quarreled over this topic many times before, and now, to preserve their bond, neither dares to broach it directly. When the man first raises the subject, the girl first *"looked at the ground the table legs rested on,"* then *"did not say anything,"* followed by *"looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two of the strings of beads,"* or *"stood up and walked to the end of the station."* Later, she *"looked across at the hills on the dry side of the valley."* At one point, she outright deflects with *"Could we have another beer?"* or pleads, *"Can't we maybe stop talking?"* and finally, *"Would you please please please please please please stop talking?"*—all to evade the issue.

In contrast, the man is far more convinced. He wants the girl to make a decision and clings to the topic with greater tenacity. In the entire story, only his initial "Oh, cut it out" and "Well, let's try and have a fine time" could be interpreted as attempts to avoid the subject. Later, even as the girl demands an end to the conversation, he repeatedly circles back, demonstrating his desperate need to address the issue or assert his stance. His dilemma lies in his dual desire: to resolve the matter and express his position, while simultaneously fearing the girl's anger. This prevents him from ever fully engaging with the heart of the problem.

The man wants to settle the issue while defining his stance in their relationship—all without provoking conflict. The woman, meanwhile, does everything possible to evade both the decision and the potential for confrontation. This shared fear of discord casts a shadow over their conversation. Her inability to commit, their mutual dread of another argument—these forces keep them perpetually skirting the edges of the real issue.

3. Hills Like White Elephants

Many scholars interpret the "white elephant" as a metaphor for the burdensome fetus, but in my view, the white elephant, the distant hills—even the beer and the bead curtain—are merely refuges in the woman's eyes. Unwilling to confront her decision, she fiddles with the bead curtain, studies its inscriptions, stands to gaze at the natural scenery, and contemplates the shape of the mountains. During a lull in their argument, the girl rises to observe the landscape across the railroad tracks. Here, Hemingway devotes considerable detail to describing the distant "fields of grain," "trees," "river," and "mountains." When she returns, she says, "And we could have all this," followed by, "And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible." The hills like white elephants, much like the scenery across the tracks, serve as her refuge. She longs to be there—where her current anxieties would dissolve, where her love would no longer be marred by arguments, where she and the man could live happily, traveling freely, "have the whole world." How fervent the hope, yet how stagnant the reality. She dreams of "having the whole world," of living a life full of possibilities, yet she remains shackled by the abortion dilemma. She loves the man beside her but cannot avoid conflict with him.

At the story's close, after the man suggests moving their bags, "She smiled at him," and later declares, "I feel fine." The issue appears resolved—but this is merely another failed argument ending in evasion. They return to square one, unchanged. The girl, still lost, forces a smile as if their quarrel never happened, as if no rift had ever formed between them. "They were all waiting reasonably for the train." Yet in truth, "they could not see the train." They remain indecisive, paralyzed, retreating day after day until retreat is no longer possible. And those hills like white elephants loom eternally in the unreachable distance—these mountains "don't really look like white elephants, just the colouring of their skin through the trees."

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