

hills like white elephants literary analysis

Introduction to "Hills Like White Elephants"

Hills Like White Elephants is a short story written by Ernest Hemingway in 1927. This work is a prime example of Hemingway's iceberg theory, where the underlying themes and emotions are submerged beneath a surface of simplicity and dialogue. The story's setting, characters, and symbolism work cohesively to explore profound themes such as communication, choice, and the complexities of relationships. In this literary analysis, we will delve into the various elements that contribute to the richness of this story.

Setting and Context

The story is set at a train station in the Ebro River valley of Spain, which plays a crucial role in establishing the mood and themes. The backdrop of the hills, which the female protagonist, Jig, compares to white elephants, symbolizes the conflict and emotional weight of the couple's conversation.

Geographical Symbolism

The geographical elements in the story are significant:

- **The Hills:** The hills represent the life and future that Jig envisions, filled with beauty and potential. This contrasts sharply with the flat, barren landscape that symbolizes the emptiness of their current situation.
- **The Train Station:** The train station signifies transition and choices. It is a point of departure, hinting at the couple's need to make a decision about their future.

Character Analysis

The two main characters in "Hills Like White Elephants" are Jig and the American man. Their interactions reveal their contrasting perspectives and emotional states.

Jig

Jig is a complex character grappling with the implications of an unplanned pregnancy. Her name, which is reminiscent of a dance, suggests a certain lightness, yet her character is weighed down by the gravity of her situation. Throughout the dialogue, she displays a longing for connection and understanding, which is largely thwarted by the American man's dismissive attitude.

The American Man

The American man represents a more pragmatic and detached perspective. He is insistent that the procedure (implied to be an abortion) is simply a solution to a problem. His character embodies a sense of control, but this control is ultimately superficial, as it masks his deeper insecurities and fears about commitment and responsibility.

Thematic Exploration

Several recurring themes permeate the narrative, weaving a complex tapestry of meaning that resonates with readers.

Communication and Miscommunication

One of the most significant themes in "Hills Like White Elephants" is communication, or the lack thereof. The dialogue between Jig and the American man is fraught with tension and misunderstanding.

- **Surface Conversations:** The couple engages in seemingly casual conversations about the landscape and drinks, which serve as a distraction from the pressing issue at hand.
- **Emotional Disconnect:** Jig's attempts to express her feelings and desires are continually undermined by the American's insistence on viewing the situation in terms of practicality.

Choice and Consequence

The story centers on the theme of choice, particularly the choices related to pregnancy and relationships. The couple stands at a crossroads, and the decision they make will have lasting consequences on their lives.

- **The Decision:** The American tries to persuade Jig that the procedure is simple, reflecting his desire to minimize the emotional weight of the decision.
- **Jig's Struggle:** Jig's hesitation indicates her inner turmoil and the weight of the choice she

faces, emphasizing that the consequences of their decision extend beyond the immediate moment.

Gender Roles and Power Dynamics

The gender dynamics between Jig and the American man are emblematic of the power struggles within their relationship.

- **Masculine Authority:** The American man's push for Jig to undergo the procedure reflects traditional gender roles, where male authority often dictates female choices.
- **Female Agency:** Jig's eventual resistance to the American's perspective highlights her struggle for autonomy and her desire to assert her own voice in the relationship.

Symbolism and Imagery

Hemingway's use of symbolism is crucial in conveying the story's deeper meanings. The imagery he employs creates a stark contrast between the characters' emotional states and the physical setting.

The White Elephants

The term "white elephant" traditionally refers to something that is costly to maintain and burdensome, much like the unplanned pregnancy that Jig faces.

- **Beauty and Burden:** While the hills symbolize beauty, they also represent the heavy burden of an unwanted responsibility.
- **Illusions and Reality:** Jig's comparison of the hills to white elephants suggests her awareness of the situation's complexities, yet her longing for a simpler, more beautiful life remains unfulfilled.

Drinks and Alcohol

Throughout the story, the act of drinking becomes a coping mechanism for both characters.

- **Escapism:** The characters drink to escape the gravity of their situation and to create a facade of normalcy.
- **False Comfort:** Their reliance on alcohol highlights their inability to confront their issues directly, serving as a temporary distraction from the harsh realities of their lives.

Conclusion

In "Hills Like White Elephants," Ernest Hemingway masterfully explores the complexities of communication, choice, and gender dynamics through a seemingly simple dialogue between two characters. The setting, symbolism, and nuanced character interactions all contribute to a deeper understanding of the emotional weight carried by the couple. Ultimately, the story serves as a poignant commentary on the challenges of human relationships and the profound impact of choices made in moments of crisis. Hemingway's ability to convey such intricate themes in a concise narrative leaves a lasting impression, encouraging readers to reflect on the unspoken elements of their own lives and relationships.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the central theme of 'Hills Like White Elephants'?

The central theme of 'Hills Like White Elephants' is the conflict between personal choice and societal expectations, particularly regarding the issue of abortion and the complexities of communication in relationships.

How does Hemingway utilize symbolism in 'Hills Like White Elephants'?

Hemingway uses symbolism extensively, with the hills representing the potential for life and the future, while the white elephant symbolizes the burdensome nature of the decision the couple faces.

What role does dialogue play in 'Hills Like White Elephants'?

Dialogue is crucial in the story as it reveals the characters' emotions and underlying tensions. The sparse conversations reflect their inability to communicate openly about their feelings and the gravity of their situation.

How does the setting influence the narrative of 'Hills Like White Elephants'?

The setting, a train station in Spain, serves as a liminal space that underscores the characters' emotional crossroads and their indecision about the future, mirroring the tension in their relationship.

What does the character of the American man represent in the story?

The American man represents a pragmatic and self-centered attitude towards relationships, often attempting to persuade Jig to conform to his desires while avoiding deeper emotional engagement.

What is the significance of the title 'Hills Like White Elephants'?

The title suggests the idea of something that is large and burdensome (the 'white elephant') and hints at the complex emotions surrounding the couple's discussion about an unplanned pregnancy.

How does Hemingway's writing style contribute to the story's impact?

Hemingway's minimalist writing style, characterized by short sentences and sparse descriptions, creates an atmosphere of tension and ambiguity, allowing readers to infer deeper meanings and emotions beneath the surface.

What does Jig's character represent in the story?

Jig represents the struggle between personal desire and external pressures, symbolizing the emotional turmoil faced by women in making reproductive choices, as well as the desire for connection and understanding.

How does the ending of 'Hills Like White Elephants' allow for multiple interpretations?

The open-ended conclusion, where the characters' future remains uncertain, invites multiple interpretations regarding their decision and relationship, reflecting the complexities of choice and the ambiguity of human emotions.

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