

How the Lost Generation Found Their Way: Literary Modernist Themes, Conflicts, and  
Characterizations in “Hills Like White Elephants”

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The world in the early 20th century felt pain as deep as the trenches and as high as the aircraft used in the First World War. People endured suffering on a large scale never before seen, with about 19 million deaths occurring in the four short years the war spanned. Posttraumatic stress plagued the minds of those who lived through the battle, many of them using their anguish to fuel their creative fires after seeing the world set aflame. The horrors of war opened people's eyes and broke down what they believed as universal truths. Witnessing pointless deaths worldwide led the greatest thinkers to question what previous generations had taught them. Their faith in traditional values deteriorated and their disillusionment illuminated the narrative of their works. One writer in particular, Ernest Hemingway, popularized a new term to describe the hopeless youth in the epigraph of his novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, when quoting his mentor Gertrude Stein. He elaborates on the conversation that took place when she coined this term in his memoir, *A Moveable Feast*: ““All of you young people who served in the war. You are a lost generation.”” The “Lost Generation” included Hemingway and his contemporaries- most notably F. Scotts Fitzgerald, T. S. Elliot, Ezra Pound, E. E. Cummings, and James Joyce- who experienced the war and its rippling effects firsthand. They built literary modernism on the values of individualism, symbolism, and existentialism. Ernest Hemingway's “Hills Like White Elephants” epitomizes the literary modernist movement of the 20th century through various conflicts, characterizations, and themes to reflect the nontraditional beliefs of the “Lost Generation.”

Hemingway utilizes an external conflict of man versus man to exemplify the literary modernist movement and the unconventional values of the Lost Generation. In true modernist fashion, Hemingway breaks down the typical form of a story through this conflict. Hemingway

depicts the conflict through fragments, which gives the reader the illusion of a plot structure in the story, even though it does not have a real resolution. The conflict feels broken into parts as the interrupting interactions between the man and the server separate the progression of the tension between the two characters. The conflict spans from passiveness, as the girl halfheartedly agrees to the operation, to avoidance as the American man says, “I don't want you to do anything that you don't want to do—’...‘Nor that isn't good for me,’ she said. ‘I know. Could we have another beer?’...‘All right. But you've got to realize—’...‘I realize,’ the girl said. ‘Can't we maybe stop talking?’” Each part reflects the evolving emotions of the characters as they disclose their thoughts and react to each other. Likewise, Hemingway reflects modernist experimentation of form through his infamous concise writing style. He strips down the dialogue to its bare bones, even excluding the typical signifiers of “he said, she said” throughout the conflict:

“‘We can have everything.’

‘No, we can't.’

‘We can have the whole world.’

‘No, we can't.’”

This naturalistic, observation style of writing leaves the narration feeling detached and cold, while allowing the reader to hone in on the emotion behind the dialogue. Also, Hemingway’s minimalist writing method aids in conveying the beliefs of the Lost Generation through the character’s inability to directly state their emotions. Hemingway’s last lines exhibit this technique: “She was sitting at the table and smiled at him. ‘Do you feel better?’ he asked. ‘I feel fine,’ she said. ‘There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine.’” This plays as a critique of the communication style of the time period, which focused on brushing tough situations under the

rug to keep up with appearances- something the Lost Generation saw as ineffective. Ergo, Hemingway succeeds at using the external conflict of man versus man to demonstrate the principles of literary modernism and the thoughts of the Lost Generation through fragmentation, simple dialogue, and social criticism of traditional communication.

Furthermore, Hemingway uses an internal conflict of man versus self to exhibit the unconventional values of the Lost Generation within literary modernism. The third person limited narration limits any explicit internal dialogue, forcing the reader to find the implicit internal conflict of the characters through the literary modernist movement's common trait of symbolism. Hemingway utilizes metaphors of the setting within the story's narration to depict the girl's internal conflict. In the beginning, the narrator describes the hills that the story's title references: "The hills across the valley of the Ebro' were long and white... The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry. 'They look like white elephants,' she said." The description of white hills against dry, brown land makes the reader think of the land as barren, which symbolizes the idea of infertility. Further in the story, the narrator gives a contrasting description of the land to convey a change in the internal conflict of the girl as she looks to the "...fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro. Far away, beyond the river, were mountains. The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees." Hemingway now paints a picture of fertile land with growing life to symbolize fertility and pregnancy within women. The story continues as the girl says they "...could have all this... we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible" which shows the reader the girl's changing perspective of pregnancy. Also, the girl's internal conflict of what to do about the pregnancy mirrors the common topic of choice

within the works of the Lost Generation in literary modernism. Through symbolism in the girl's perspective of the setting and the idea of choice, Hemingway employs internal conflict to epitomize the literary modernist movement and the thoughts of the Lost Generation.

Moreover, Hemingway employs an external conflict of man versus society to reflect the foundations of literary modernism and the alternative beliefs of the Lost Generation. The reader sees the external conflict of man versus society through the frequent references to alcohol:

“‘Let's drink beer.’...The woman brought two glasses of beer... ‘Anis del Toro. It's a drink... ‘We want two Anis del Toro.’” Hemingway published the story in the United States in 1927, during the time of prohibition. The story goes beyond mentioning alcohol as the characters use it as a buffer in their conflicts. The two main characters, an American man and a girl, argue over whether she should have an unspecified operation. Since the story takes place in the early 20th century, and they beat around the bush when talking about the operation, the reader can assume they're debating the taboo subject of abortion, an illegal operation. When the American man first brings up the elephant in the room, he minimizes the depth of the situation: “It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig,’ ... ‘It's not really an operation at all’ ... ‘it's all perfectly natural.’” To go as far as describing an abortion as “natural”, the man's stance on abortion contrasts strongly with the societal standards of the time. In addition, the narrative implies that the pregnancy occurred from premarital sex as the man says he feels “‘perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything.’” Society at this time looked down upon premarital sex and consequential pregnancy, with the common solution being shotgun weddings, since many countries outlawed abortion. Hemingway's detached style through the man's casualness fits the characteristics of literary

modernism and his head-on approach to controversial subjects reflects the philosophies of the Lost Generation.

Through the characterization of the female protagonist in “Hills like White Elephants”, Hemingway utilizes characters to convey a modernist story that exhibits the thoughts of the Lost Generation. Hemingway never describes the female character biographically or physically: “The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building.” While Hemingway’s writing technique does not typically include much use of adjectives or flowery description, like much of literary modernism, this extensive lack of details about the character feels intentional. It allows the reader to imagine themselves within the narrative, adding a personal and empathic depth to the story. When the man brings up the operation and tells the girl she should have it, she focuses on how it would affect the man and their relationship and puts him before herself: “‘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.’”

Hemingway lets meaning slip in between the lines, implicitly stating that the girl feels that in order to go through with the abortion she would have to lose herself and her desires, but would consider doing so if it meant bringing her and the man together. However, as she turns to look at the landscape, she realizes that regardless of the choice they make things could never be the same: “‘We can go everywhere.’

‘No, we can't. It isn't ours anymore.’

‘It's ours.’

‘No, it isn't. And once they take it away, you never get it back.’

‘But they haven't taken it away.’

‘We'll wait and see.’”

Whatever path they choose at this crossroad will ultimately change them as people. If she has the abortion, she could lose her sense of self and fall out of love with the man for pressuring her. If she keeps the baby, they could get married, despite his hesitations, and end up unhappy. Using the characterizations of the female protagonist, Hemingway demonstrates the Lost Generation's way of analyzing the depths of controversial subjects like abortion to epitomize the literary modernist movement.

Again, through the characterization of the male antagonist in “Hills like White Elephants” Hemingway uses characters to communicate the ideals of the Lost Generation and the literary modernist movement. Hemingway utilizes the classic modernist method of implicit characterization through dialogue to show the man's manipulation as he says he thinks “‘...it's the best thing to do. But I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to.’” In troubling times, the man has the ability to feign indifference and support of the girl's choice, while simultaneously

pressuring her to feel the same way he does. In a few words, Hemingway can capture the true nature of his character's thoughts: "Of course it does. But I don't want anybody but you. I don't want anyone else. And I know it's perfectly simple." When the man says he doesn't want anybody but the girl, he makes an indirect statement that he wants to keep the relationship the same and not have a family. When the girl asks the man to stop talking, his actions show the reader his true desires as 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."

Through the depiction of his gaze turning to the hotel labels from their travels, Hemingway reflects the notion that the man values freedom the most. Hemingway's characterization of the male antagonist demonstrates writing techniques that emulate the literary modernist movement in order to further develop common themes of the Lost Generation.

Hemingway's "Hills like White Elephants" develops themes that help the story epitomize the literary modernist movement and the ideology of those in the Lost Generation. People's inability to effectively communicate plays a major role in the story. When the girl asks if the abortion would make them happy, the man says, "that's the only thing that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy" despite the arguing and passive aggression they had towards each other prior. The idea that he truly believes that the abortion would fix all their problems and her inability to voice her concerns shows the flawed communication between them. The story also focuses on individualism and a person's ability to make their own choices. At the end of the story, the girl says "I feel fine"... "There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine" when the man asks her if she feels any better. This line expresses ambiguity and leaves the reader wondering if the girl just wants to appease him and has the abortion or if it indicates her choice to keep the



baby. People feeling disillusioned when situations do not end as they wanted describes another theme within the story as the girl and the man realize they want different things: “‘I don't feel any way,’ the girl said. ‘I just know things.’” This line reflects the pessimism she feels as she faces her disillusionment. After gazing at their luggage, the man says “‘But I don't want you to,’ he said, ‘I don't care anything about it’” showing his own disillusionment. Hemingway utilizes modernist techniques to develop and exhibit the Lost Generation’s themes of communication, individualism, and disillusionment in “Hills like White Elephants”.

In “Hills like White Elephants”, Ernest Hemingway uses external and internal conflicts depicted through intentionally underdeveloped characters that portray thematic messages conveying the unconventional ideals of the Lost Generation to epitomize literary modernism. Hemingway, like many of his contemporaries, questioned the universal truths society held at the time after watching the previous generation’s mentality lead to a world war. Their work led others to hold skepticism to tradition and utilize their disillusionment to change the way the world thinks. They taught people to use the pain and suffering that came from war to create a better way of life. “Hills like White Elephants” works to bring to light darker ideas and force the reader to think beyond societal standards. While the argument between the characters may cause them pain, communicating their desires and being true to themselves would set them free. As Hemingway says in *The Sun Also Rises*, “...the world breaks everyone and afterward many are strong at the broken places.”

## References

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