

hills like white elephants symbolism

hills like white elephants symbolism is a central theme in Ernest Hemingway's short story "Hills Like White Elephants," which has been extensively analyzed for its rich use of symbolic elements. This story, set in a railway station in Spain, uses symbolism to explore complex themes such as communication, choice, and the tension between freedom and responsibility. The symbolism in the story is subtle yet powerful, offering readers a deeper understanding of the characters' emotional states and the underlying conflict. This article will delve into the various symbols Hemingway employs, including the hills themselves, the white elephants, and the contrasting landscapes. Additionally, it will examine how these symbols relate to the story's broader themes and the characters' psychological struggles. By unpacking these symbols, readers can appreciate the layers of meaning that contribute to the story's enduring impact. The discussion will also include an analysis of the symbolic significance of the setting, the dialogue, and the narrative's minimalist style. The following sections will guide the reader through a comprehensive exploration of hills like white elephants symbolism.

- The Symbolism of the Hills
- White Elephants as a Metaphor
- Contrasting Landscapes and Their Meanings
- Symbolism in Character Dialogue
- Setting and Its Symbolic Role
- The Story's Minimalist Style and Symbolism

The Symbolism of the Hills

The hills in Hemingway's story serve as a complex symbol central to the narrative's interpretation. They are described by one of the characters as resembling white elephants, which introduces the primary metaphor that drives much of the story's symbolic meaning. The hills represent a looming choice or obstacle, one that cannot be ignored. They visually dominate the landscape, suggesting the weight of the decision facing the couple. The shape and presence of the hills symbolize the emotional and psychological barriers between the characters, as well as the potential for new life or change.

Physical versus Symbolic Interpretation

While the hills are a physical feature of the setting, their symbolic importance transcends their literal appearance. They represent fertility and the potential for growth, contrasting with the couple's tension and uncertainty about pregnancy. The hills also symbolize the divide between the two characters' perspectives, highlighting the emotional distance and conflict that underpin their interaction.

Emotional Landscape

The hills mirror the internal emotional landscape of the characters, standing as a metaphor for the difficult decision they face. Just as the hills rise sharply from the flatness of the plains, the story's tension escalates from the characters' subdued conversation to the unspoken conflict beneath the surface.

White Elephants as a Metaphor

The phrase "white elephants" is a key symbolic element in the story, rich with connotations that inform the narrative's meaning. Traditionally, a white elephant refers to something unwanted or burdensome, often costly to maintain and difficult to dispose of. Hemingway uses this metaphor to encapsulate the pregnancy that the couple is discussing, which is seen as both a potential blessing and a burden.

Unwanted Burden

The symbolism of the white elephant reflects the dilemma faced by the characters regarding the pregnancy. It suggests that the pregnancy is perceived as an encumbrance that complicates their lives, evoking feelings of ambivalence and hesitation in the couple's dialogue.

Value and Rarity

Conversely, white elephants are rare and valuable, which adds a layer of complexity to the metaphor. This duality reflects the conflicting emotions surrounding the pregnancy — it is simultaneously precious and problematic, desired and feared.

Contrasting Landscapes and Their Meanings

The story's setting features two distinct landscapes: the fertile river valley and the barren, dry hills. These contrasting scenes carry significant symbolic weight, illustrating themes of choice, life, and barrenness.

Fertile Valley

The lush, green river valley symbolizes life, growth, and potential. It represents the possibility of nurturing and sustaining new life, aligning with the theme of fertility and the future that the pregnancy could bring.

Barren Hills

In contrast, the dry, sunbaked hills symbolize desolation and sterility. This landscape mirrors the emotional barrenness and tension between the characters, as well as the potential loss of freedom that the pregnancy might entail.

Symbolic Dichotomy

The juxtaposition of these landscapes reinforces the central conflict in the story — the choice between continuing the pregnancy or opting for an abortion. The fertile valley and barren hills act as visual metaphors for the paths available to the couple.

Symbolism in Character Dialogue

The dialogue between the two main characters is laden with symbolic meaning, often conveyed through subtle and indirect language. Their conversation reveals the underlying conflict without explicitly naming it, reflecting Hemingway's iceberg theory of writing.

Indirect Communication

The characters rarely speak directly about the pregnancy or their feelings, symbolizing the emotional distance and difficulty in communication. This indirectness highlights the tension and unresolved issues between them.

Language as Symbol

Words such as “white elephant” and references to the hills serve as coded language that symbolize their deeper concerns. The dialogue's ambiguity allows multiple interpretations, enhancing the symbolic richness of the story.

Setting and Its Symbolic Role

The story's setting at a railway station between two countries symbolizes transition and decision-making. It is a liminal space where the characters are metaphorically and literally at a crossroads.

Transitional Space

The railway station represents a point of change or passage, emphasizing the theme of choice and the uncertainty about the future. It underscores the impermanence and instability of the characters' situation.

Isolation and Public Exposure

The open setting contrasts with the private nature of the couple's dilemma, symbolizing the tension between personal decisions and societal expectations. The setting amplifies the sense of exposure and vulnerability inherent in their conversation.

The Story's Minimalist Style and Symbolism

Hemingway's minimalist writing style contributes significantly to the story's symbolic power. The sparse prose and restrained dialogue compel readers to infer meaning from what is unsaid.

Iceberg Theory

The iceberg theory, or theory of omission, is evident in the story's symbolic approach. The surface conversation conceals deeper emotional currents, requiring readers to read between the lines to grasp the full significance of the symbols.

Symbolism Through Simplicity

The simplicity of the narrative style enhances the effectiveness of the symbols, making each element — from the hills to the dialogue — resonate more profoundly. This economical use of language intensifies the emotional and thematic impact of the hills like white elephants symbolism.

- Hills as emotional and psychological barriers
- White elephants representing ambivalence about pregnancy

- Contrasting landscapes symbolizing choice and consequence
- Dialogue reflecting communication challenges
- Setting as a metaphor for transition and uncertainty
- Minimalist style emphasizing subtext and symbolism

Frequently Asked Questions

What do the hills symbolize in "Hills Like White Elephants"?

The hills symbolize the woman's pregnancy and the choices she faces, representing the looming decision about whether to have an abortion.

How does the symbolism of the white elephants relate to the story's themes?

White elephants symbolize something unwanted or burdensome; in the story, they represent the pregnancy and the emotional weight of the couple's situation.

Why are the hills described as "like white elephants"?

The description suggests something large and looming, possibly unwanted or mysterious, paralleling the pregnancy and the tension between the characters.

What does the contrast between the two sides of the valley symbolize?

The two sides symbolize the couple's conflicting perspectives and choices — one side is fertile and full of life, the other barren, reflecting the decision about the pregnancy.

How does the symbolism in the story enhance its exploration of communication?

The symbolism of the hills and white elephants underscores the characters' indirect communication and the unspoken tension surrounding their decision.

Is the symbolism of the white elephants universally negative in the story?

Not necessarily; while white elephants often symbolize burdens, in the story they also evoke complexity and ambiguity about the pregnancy and the relationship.

How does Hemingway's use of symbolism contribute to the story's ambiguity?

By using subtle symbols like the hills and white elephants, Hemingway leaves the story open to interpretation, allowing readers to explore themes of choice, consequence, and communication.

Additional Resources

1. *The Great Gatsby*

F. Scott Fitzgerald's classic novel uses the green light and the Valley of Ashes as powerful symbols reflecting the elusive American Dream and moral decay. Much like "Hills Like White Elephants," the symbolism enriches the narrative, offering deeper insight into characters' desires and societal commentary. The story explores themes of wealth, love, and disillusionment in 1920s America.

2. *Heart of Darkness*

Joseph Conrad's novella uses the Congo River and surrounding jungle as symbols of the unknown, darkness, and moral ambiguity. The journey into the wilderness serves as a metaphor for the protagonist's psychological descent and the complexities of imperialism. The symbolic landscape challenges readers to consider the nature of civilization and savagery.

3. *Of Mice and Men*

John Steinbeck's novella employs the natural world, including the riverbank and the dream of a small farm, as symbols of hope and freedom. The contrasting settings emphasize the harsh realities faced by itinerant workers during the Great Depression. Symbolism in the story highlights themes of friendship, dreams, and loss.

4. *The Road*

Cormac McCarthy's post-apocalyptic novel features the barren road and desolate landscape as symbols of survival, despair, and the enduring bond between father and son. The harsh setting mirrors the bleakness of the characters' journey and the fragility of hope. Symbolism here deepens the emotional impact of the story.

5. *Wuthering Heights*

Emily Brontë's novel uses the moors and the natural environment as symbols of wildness, passion, and isolation. The bleak, untamed landscape reflects the tumultuous emotions and complex relationships

between characters. The symbolism enhances the gothic atmosphere and explores themes of love and revenge.

6. *Lord of the Flies*

William Golding's novel uses the island setting and the "Lord of the Flies" pig's head as potent symbols of civilization versus savagery and the innate darkness within humanity. The isolation on the island strips away societal norms, exposing the primal instincts of the boys. Symbolism drives the exploration of human nature and morality.

7. *To Kill a Mockingbird*

Harper Lee's novel incorporates the Radley Place and the mockingbird as symbols of innocence, fear, and moral conscience. The symbolism underscores the themes of racial injustice, empathy, and the loss of innocence in the American South. It invites readers to reflect on societal prejudices and personal integrity.

8. *Fahrenheit 451*

Ray Bradbury's dystopian novel uses fire and the phoenix as symbols of destruction and rebirth. The constant burning of books represents censorship and loss of knowledge, while the mythological phoenix symbolizes hope and renewal. Symbolism in the novel critiques conformity and champions intellectual freedom.

9. *The Catcher in the Rye*

J.D. Salinger's novel uses the museum, the carousel, and the "catcher in the rye" metaphor as symbols of innocence, childhood, and the struggle against growing up. The protagonist's journey reflects his desire to protect purity in a confusing and often hypocritical world. Symbolism provides insight into themes of alienation and identity.

Hills Like White Elephants Symbolism

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the tone of the short story. "Hills Like White Elephants" is a paramount example of Hemingway's so-called iceberg theory. Similarly, Hemingway's short story "Hills Like White Elephants," which is mostly told in dialogue, is like the tip of an iceberg—the succinct length and the seemingly simple language are deceptive. Analogously to Hemingway's iceberg theory, there are concealed depths to the surface story. The fact that there are only a few sections in which the setting is described emphasizes that a close reading of the setting is necessary because the lack of description indicates that there is hidden meaning behind the overall setting. This paper argues that Hemingway uses the setting to demonstrate the struggle of the main characters, the American and the girl Jig, about whether to have an abortion—even though words such as 'abortion' or 'pregnancy' are not mentioned in the text. The paper argues that Hemingway integrates symbolism into the landscape and furthermore uses spatial concepts to convey meaning that goes beyond spatial information. The contrast between abortion or birth correlates with the dichotomy of the setting and is hence almost entirely expressed in spatial terms. Moreover, the descriptions of the setting reflect the couple's contrasting points of view regarding the pregnancy. The paper aims to discover the implied and hinted meaning within the deceptive simplicity of the text by relying on narrative theory.

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Penn Hills, Pennsylvania (PA 15235) profile: population, maps, real Penn Hills, Pennsylvania detailed profile Mean prices in 2023: all housing units: \$292,456; detached houses: \$289,428; townhouses or other attached units: \$307,075; in 2-unit

Vernon Hills, Illinois (IL 60061) profile: population, maps, real Vernon Hills, Illinois detailed profile Mean prices in 2023: all housing units: \$443,782; detached houses: \$558,532; townhouses or other attached units: \$334,025; in 3-to-4-unit structures:

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Beverly Hills, Florida (FL 34465) profile: population, maps, real Beverly Hills, Florida detailed profile Mean prices in 2023: all housing units: \$301,887; detached houses: \$351,336; townhouses or

other attached units: \$226,884; in 2-unit structures:

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