

Questions and Proposals about Ernest Hemingway's story, "Hills Like White Elephants" and Ann Beattie's story, "Snow"

For future users of this website:

Below are some questions and proposals about two short stories, Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" and Ann Beattie's "Snow." Page numbers indicated below refer to the anthology out of which we (the All Souls Book Group in Asheville, NC) read these stories: *The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction*, Shorter Seventh Edition, ed. Richard Bausch and R.V. Cassill, 2006.

I. A few observations/ questions about Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants."

1. **Where are the man and the woman?** It seems clear that these two characters are in a place they don't know well, if at all. The "American" man has some Spanish (maybe he has more than is revealed in this story), and she appears to have none, or at least less than he. (And that disparity is critical to the character of their relationship, isn't it?) The hills "across the valley of Ebro" are one of only a few details of place, and though a greatly evocative detail, are also oddly...featureless?... blank? (what is the right word here?) The hills are white, the country is "brown and dry." Also note that there aren't many other people in the story, or rather, at least not people of consequence to the man and the woman. Also, and somehow terribly, there's only one kind of light, and it's a very harsh light (there is no shade on the side of the station where the girl and the man are.) The man and the woman seem starkly alone. The scarcity, here—of shadow, people, setting—seems paradoxically a kind of density or heaviness bearing down on the woman and the man. This setting--brown, white, dry, hot, oddly tree-less and shade-less--is hugely important to the story. How is it important?

2. A feature to keep in mind: Story Told Almost Exclusively in Dialogue:

"Hills Like White Elephants" begins quite differently than do the other two stories we've talked about together, Anton Chekhov's "Lady with the Dog" and Raymond Carver's "Cathedral." Those first stories began with exposition, or, in fiction writing parlance, "back story." In "Hills Like White Elephants," we are supplied with no such "back story." What we get instead is a short paragraph describing the landscape, the train station; we then get some information about train schedules; *and then we're right into dialogue. From that point on, the story will be told almost exclusively in dialogue.* This story structure is an important one to keep in mind.

3. Another feature of "Hills Like White Elephants" to keep in mind: Story Told from "Third Person Objective" Point of View:

The narrators of the two stories we've talked about thus far, Raymond Carver's "Cathedral" and Anton Chekhov's "The Lady with the Dog," are what one might call "biased" narrators, in that their narratives are biased according to character desire,

character will, really character personality/ psychology. In "Cathedral" you've got a first person narrator, which means that everything told you comes directly from the character himself: "I, I, I". And in "Lady with the Dog" you've got a "third person subjective narrator," a narrator who although outside the body of the central character—in this case, Gurov—tells the story in a way that seems driven by Gurov's sensibility.

Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" is told by a third-person OBJECTIVE narrator. By "objective" we mean that the narrator is outside of, AND uninfluenced by, character sensibility. An objective narrator is sort of like a movie camera, a machine designed simply to record speech and action. (A dud analogy, this one, as it only partially represents what's going on in this story. All analogies designed to generalize about works of art are dud analogies, in the end; more than dud, in that they imperil uniqueness, and so imperil imaginative opportunity; but for the sake of getting discussion going, let's just leave this analogy for now, then explore the many subtleties of the story when we meet.)

Question: Imagine this story told exclusively from the point of view of the woman, or from the point of view of the man. Why is the point of view ultimately settled on by Ernest Hemingway—an objective, "outside" narrator—the right one?

4. **Proposal:** I think it's fair to say that "Hills..." exemplifies a truth we've watched play out in our own lives, whether we've been in this particular situation or not, and that truth is this: **Just by talking, we create possibility, we create our "realities"; and we destroy possibility, we destroy our "realities."** The woman especially will both create and destroy her reality (and theirs) by what she says, and when she says it. In my experience, "Hills..." opens up greatly when you study it as two characters effecting their future simply through talking, and talking often in oblique/ indirect ways.

5. **Be careful about making the hills, or the white elephants, be symbols.** The hills/ white elephants definitely hold a complex meaning for the girl, for the man, for the story, for their relationship; though we might want to be careful about making them be symbols for something. Try and think about what they mean within the "time" of the story, within the movement of it; and also within the back-and-forth of the man and woman's exchange. If the meaning (s) of the hills, and/ or the "white elephants" they evoke, change; or if the hills, or the white elephants, open to multiple evocations, then we must respect this. If they elude easy symbolization, we must respect this.

6. **Hemingway's compression:** The man says "the" air when he's describing the procedure by which the woman's fetus will be aborted (this is on the top of p. 337). This little "the" tells us much about the man's character, and about his and his girlfriend's/wife's relationship. What does it say? It is such a small detail, yet it speaks volumes. The story runs on this sort of economy. In Hemingway's fiction generally, the compression of language yields an expansion of meaning. This is another feature of the story to keep in mind as you review it.

7. **What's happening when the girl stands up and walks to the end of the station and**

looks at the fields and the banks of the river? This moment falls, in the anthology we're working with, at the bottom of p. 337. What's happening here?

8. The story accelerates when the girl says "Because I don't care about me." What's happening here? What is she doing? (She does this, in the Norton Anthology, bottom p. 337.)

9. Hemingway's remarks about the "principle of the iceberg" and how they might help us think about "Hills Like White Elephants." In the interview with Hemingway included in our anthology (pp. 856 to 859), Hemingway likens the ratio of what an author has observed about his story to the amount he actually reveals *in* the story...to the ratio of concealed and revealed ice in the body of an iceberg. "There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn't show." Does viewing "Hills Like White Elephants" with the help of this "iceberg" analogy sharpen your understanding of the story? How? Stay close to the text as you answer this question.

10. And it's a short exchange between them. In "real" time, the man and the woman's ("girl"'s) exchange probably lasts for...twenty minutes? Less than that? In a way, the train determines their exchange, and therefore its outcome: they only have so long to talk before the train arrives. I'm not sure that this is a question so much as a description of the kind of time the man and the woman are inside of. How would you describe the "time" of the story?

II. Questions and Proposals about Ann Beattie's "Snow"

1. Studying the story as a prose poem.

Please go ahead and read this story...four times. Five times. Right away in sentence four Beattie uses the word "poem," permitting our treating the story as a poem. Take out a pencil (why not?) and note patterns in the story. Track the progress of the images from the beginning of the story to the end. You'll learn much about the story by studying it this way. (You'll note that the word "pattern" appears very early on as well, in the sixth sentence.)

2. The first thing that happens in the story--a chipmunk jumping off a pile of wood being brought into the house and then running through the house--is not prepared for. It's a natural occurrence, and it's beyond the characters' control. Many of the images and events in this story are thus. Do you sense a "pattern" here (ha ha ha)?

3. An *ars poetica*

This is an *ars poetica*—a story about storytelling. Do you feel that it's about more than that? Maybe the story is only consequential/ affecting, maybe it's only "about" anything, for as long as you are reading it, for as long as you are inside it.

4. **Where is the "heart" of this story? Is there a "heart" to this story?
Could this be a story that liberates us (for a time, anyway) from the desire
to find a "heart" in every story?**