

Gender Gaps in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"

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A close reading of Ernest Hemingway's *Hills Like White Elephants* yields clear evidence that communication between men and women *is* gendered. While Jig and the American converse in English, each speaks a different, gender-linked language and even their non-verbal actions betray distinctly male and female forms of expression.

Pamela Smiley, in her article "Gender-Linked Miscommunication in 'Hills Like White Elephants,'" presents critic Robin Lakoff's two descriptive models of communication. One is male:

"... Precise and to the point -- utterly straightforward -- which tells us as little as possible about the speakers state of mind and his attitude toward the addressee. We expect a low pitch, flat intonation, declarative sentence structure, no hedging or imprecision, and lexical items chosen for their pure cognitive content, not their emotional coloration."

By contrast, the other, female mode of communication, is

"... Profoundly imprecise. There is a sense that the audience does not really know what she is talking about (nor does she), but that she is very concerned with whom she is talking to, and with whether he is interested in her and whether his needs are being met... She uses interjections and hedges freely and her dialogue is sprinkled with 'I guess' and 'kinda'... (Smiley, 2)

By contemporary standards, these descriptions may seem reductionist, even silly. Yet if we keep them in mind when reading *Hills Like White Elephants*, they offer useful clues into the motives and behavior of the story's two main characters.

Hemingway's short story begins with a series of revealing, if minor, interpersonal conflicts which illustrate the "gender gap" between Jig and the American as they wait for their train. In the first of these, Jig remarks that the hills beyond the little Spanish bar where they pass

the time "look like white elephants." In describing the hills this way, Jig uses imprecise, metaphorical language that makes little rational sense; instead, she's primarily concerned with creating intimacy between herself and the American. With his indifferent reply that he's never *seen* a white elephant, the American demonstrates the strictly literal mindset of masculine discourse and uses it to dismiss Jig's comment as frivolous. When Jig attempts to be playful by saying "no, you wouldn't have" (seen a white elephant), the American responds with irritation that she can't "prove" he hasn't, and again adheres to the masculine model of communication by emphasizing the importance of factual evidence to determine what is "true."

After this rebuff, Jig immediately changes the subject in hopes of establishing rapport by asking the American -- who can read and speak Spanish -- what the words painted on a beaded curtain mean. Ascertaining that they advertise a particular Spanish drink, Jig goes on to ask more questions -- can they try that drink, and is it good with water? As Smiley notes, all of these questions accentuate "classic female deference" and dependence upon the male, and as such represent a switch in Jig's tactics. Wanting to recreate the sense of connectedness she once shared with the American, her attempts at levity to that end have been thwarted; so, utilizing a technique calculated to appeal to the American's masculine vanity, Jig asks a string of questions that "soothe (his) ego and... allow him to parade his knowledge." (Smiley, 4) Jig's motivation is obvious when we recall that her first question is about what might be painted on the beaded curtain; since she neither reads nor speaks Spanish, she must therefore depend on the American for translation, and in that way regain access to his good favor. Whether the American picks up on this stratagem is open to question, but his responses to Jig's questions are perfunctory regardless (She: "Is it good with water"? He: "It's alright;" She: "It tastes like licorice" He: "That's the way with everything"). True to the masculine model of communication described above, the American's clipped phrases tell Jig little about his actual feelings. Yet as Smiley writes, his sparse language and diffidence likely reflect his present irritation with Jig's dependence -- a dependence he may have enjoyed at one point but which now merely serves to remind him of his responsibility toward her and their unborn child.

The gender-based miscommunication between the two protagonists become more pronounced in the proceeding sections of *Hills Like White Elephants*. When the American at last raises the issue of abortion, he speaks in off-hand, understated language which suggests his desire to diminish the importance of the prospect and thus ensure that Jig will go along with his wishes. Initially, Jig does not react verbally to the American's assertion that "it's really an awfully simple operation... it's not really an operation at all." Instead, "the girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on." The American moves hastily to fill the silence that hangs in the air, assuring Jig that "it's just to let the air in," but again, "the girl did not say anything." (757) Jig's refusal to respond verbally can be thought of as another feature of feminine communication: unable or unwilling to refute the American's claims that "it's really not anything" by using the masculine props of proofs and facts, Jig instead says nothing and refuses to communicate on his terms, thereby depriving the American of the "logic"-based language structure he has previously

used to exert control over her. Although she shortly resumes speaking, her first reaction underscores Jig's possible belief that her objections to an abortion will go unheeded no matter how she chooses to verbalize them. Jig's closed-mouthed response -- which will resurface at a more crucial juncture in the story -- can also be read as silent rebuke toward the American's desire for the abortion, a way to communicate her unhappiness with him without having to use his language to do so.

The American repeatedly stresses that "I don't want you to do anything you don't want to do," using conciliatory language to pacify Jig and hence advance his agenda. In a strange way he employs reassuring words to "guilt Jig into" compliance with the unstated demand to abort their child. Directly after the American uses the "I don't want you to do anything you don't want to do" phrase for the first time, Jig asks, "And you really want to (abort the baby)?" To which the American replies: "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." (757) The contradiction between what he says and what he actually wants, and even between the words he speaks from one moment to the next, are clearly evident and indicate either willful, conscious manipulation of language to achieve the desired abortion or, possibly, genuine confusion about what course to take. It's my belief that although the American is not a "cruel oppressor" (as Smiley terms the conventional feminist critique of the character) motivated purely by self-interest, neither is he impartial. He can love Jig -- as I believe he does -- and still try to manipulate her into having the abortion, however placating his language.

Jig's response to the American's desire is another example of "classic female deference": "Then I'll do it. Because I don't care about me." (758) Although she continues to voice reservations about the abortion, this statement represents her initial capitulation on the matter. In short, Jig chooses to preserve her relationship with the American by sacrificing the possibility of motherhood. The statement itself is, to contemporary ears, almost unbelievably self-deprecating, yet it nevertheless represents a method of "traditional, female" communication with the opposite gender -- a way to achieve consensus and maintain relationship, as Smiley might say. The only problem, of course, is that to retain something she wants (i.e. their relationship), Jig must not only give up something else that she wants (the baby) but also communicate a lack of self-worth as well. It is probably true that to whatever degree Jig actually holds such an opinion of herself; yet it is perhaps truer still that she uses the phrase "I don't care about me" because she's been taught by the culture around her that when communicating with men, self-deprecating language is expected and even beneficial. Unfortunately, the "benefit" Jig receives here is a trade-off that exacts a heavy price indeed: she gets to keep the American's affection, but loses the prospect of motherhood.

Yet another prime example of gender miscommunication occurs between Jig and the American when, as Smiley relates, "... consistent with her gender-linked language, Jig speaks of the baby *metaphorically*... in terms of the obviously symbolic (and) fertile landscape" she sees around her. (Smiley, 8, italics mine) Smiley states that for Jig, this portion of the landscape

represents life and the possibilities of change and growth, concepts that are in direct opposition to what critic Doris Lanier, in her article "The Bittersweet Taste of Absinthe in Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants' " terms "the brown, dry, infertile land" that Jig also sees from the bar table where she sits. This part of the land "represents the rootless, empty and sterile life" that the American's insistence upon an abortion will likely lead to (Lanier, 280)

Jig turns from viewing the "fields of grain and trees along the Ebro" and comments, "And we could have all this... we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible." (758) In

the female model of communication, Jig is referring to the full and rewarding life she and the American could share while raising a newborn child, owning a home, and settling down. Yet what she *says* is indirect, abstract, vague -- an encoded, gender-linked message that hints broadly at the negative impact an abortion will have on their capacity to grow and live rich, meaningful lives. Because of the nebulous nature of her statement -- and because *he* communicates in the gender-linked idiom of *masculine* language -- the American is at first baffled as to what she's talking about.

When he does catch on, the American claims that having the abortion will not impede the possibility of happiness, and equates their ability to travel with fulfillment, asserting, "we can go everywhere... we can have the whole world." But Jig views matters quite differently, and replies, "No we can't. It isn't ours anymore... once they take it away, you never get it back." (758) Jig sees the good life through the traditionally female lens of creativity and nurturance, while the American emphasizes the freedom of mobility (and from responsibility?) prized by the traditional male. It is significant, too, that Jig uses the pronoun "they" here; once again, she employs a vague word choice. "They" could actually be code for "you," (that is, the American), or perhaps she's referring to the doctors at the abortion clinic. Or, abiding by Smiley's model of female communication, Jig's "they" could be some amorphous, implacable enemy that she can't name and doesn't really understand. Whatever the case, as readers we are compelled to interpret Jig's exact meaning, and her word choice in this instance is an excellent example of gender-linked miscommunication.

Similarly, Smiley points out that women tend to use the plural pronouns "we" and "us" to effect consensus and indicate partnership. When Jig says, "We could get along" if she gave birth to their child, the American replies, "I don't want anybody but you. I don't want any one else. And I know that it's perfectly simple." (758) The American's language conforms to the male communication model: it bespeaks division rather than unanimity, erects boundaries instead of seeking concord. Given the way she communicates, Jig likely interprets the American's use of singular pronouns as a none-too-subtle signal that if circumstances dictate (read: if she refuses to have the abortion) the "we" of their relationship may cease to exist, leaving "you" and "I," two distinct individuals no longer obligated to one another. If Jig does indeed perceive the

American's language this way, she would deduce an implied threat behind his words, which conceivably creates yet more pressure to acquiesce to the abortion.

A further illustration of the gender-linked miscommunication in *Hills Like White Elephants* appears near the story's end, when, tired and upset over his incessant, maddeningly indirect badgering, Jig says to the American:

"Would you please do something for me now?"

"I'll do anything for you."

"Would you please please please please please please
stop talking?" (758-759)

The American says nothing for a moment, unsure. Then: "But I don't want you to... I don't care anything about it." Desperate to make him shut up, Jig utilizes the one weapon her female communication model places at her disposal -- the threat of throwing a fit. In doing so, she demonstrates that while she may not know how to communicate effectively with the American, she is keenly aware of what will silence him: the thought of being embarrassed and humiliated in front of others by a woman he cannot control. Jig understands the powerful masculine taboo against such a possibility, and uses the tactic successfully; only the interruption of the barmaid with news that the train that will carry them to the abortion clinic is due in five minutes dispels the tension of the moment.

The American takes advantage of this interruption to reassert his dominant role within their relationship, and simultaneously attempts to render the abortion debate between Jig and he moot by saying, "I'd better take the bags over to the other side of the station." This is the most crucial moment in the entire story, for Jig still possesses the power of refusal, despite her earlier ascent. Yet once again she chooses to preserve her relationship with the American, and hence accept his way of life (and all the sterility that way of life implies), rather than have the baby and risk losing him. Her affirmative response to the American's statement is a bland, joyless smile devoid of authentic emotion. Much earlier in the story, Jig dealt with the American's first attempts to talk her into the abortion with silence. Here, she finally accedes to his wishes by using a nonverbal method of communication that can certainly be described as "classic female deference." Since the American's desire to proceed with the abortion remains unchanged, Jig makes the critical, irrevocable decision to sacrifice her needs for his to maintain their relationship. So she smiles and says nothing, thereby signaling her acquiescence. Her weak, facsimile smile also conceals the hurt and turmoil she doubtless feels, and hence provides a perfect symbolic representation of the yawning gap between male and female communication models. Jig has tried to employ various aspects of feminine language patterns in service of her

point of view, but they have all failed; rather than indicating genuine acceptance, her smile is instead an ironic gesture of surrender.

The American, for his part, may scarcely see Jig's ultimate compliance as the unmixed blessing he was hoping for. The radically different, gender-based languages that exist between the two of them, and the resultant miscommunication these languages engender, suggest a cloudy future for their relationship:

He picked up the two bags and carried them around the station to the other tracks.

He looked up the tracks but could not see the train. Coming back, he walked through the barroom, where people waiting for the train were drinking. He drank an Anis at the bar and looked at the people. They were all waiting reasonably for the train. (759)

This passage contains several signs that bode ill for the American's hope of resuming his relationship with Jig as though nothing life altering or negative has occurred. To begin with, the two bags he carries to the tracks may symbolize the "emotional baggage" each will continue to bring to the relationship. The fact that the American "looked up the tracks but could not see the train" can be viewed as a clue that despite his hopes, no means will be found to deliver Jig and he from the fractured state of affairs they now find themselves in -- there is, in other words, "no end in sight." The abortion will merely solidify the growing sense of alienation they feel from one another. The American's decision to have a drink by himself at the bar before returning to Jig is as apt a metaphor as any for their estrangement; he is "existentially alone," as is she, even though both cling to the remnants of what they once shared. Finally, Hemingway's choice of the word "reasonably" in the sentence "they were all waiting reasonably for the train" indicates that, as critic Doris Lanier notes, "the American perceives himself as a 'reasonable' man who is having trouble reasoning with an unreasonable women." (Lanier, 281) There is no indication that the American sees any way out of a situation that has grown depressingly complex and burdensome.

The last exchange between Jig and the American recapitulates the gender-based miscommunication that has plagued them throughout the story, to devastating effect:

"Do you feel better?" he asked.

"I feel fine," she said. "There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine."

As both Lanier and Smiley point out in their respective articles, the American perceives Jig's previous objections to the abortion through the rubric of his own gender-linked language. By that standard, her behavior is irrational, even hysterical. Because he is a member of the dominant gender group, the American is used to viewing any deviation from its linguistic tenants as evidence of unbalanced, or at least illogical, thinking. Consequently he enjoys the luxury of treating Jig's reservations as abnormal, and is able to ask her if she "feels better" while remaining

insensate to the irony of his question. In the power struggle between Jig and the American, it is he who benefits from the language model that society deems legitimate. Jig, on the other hand, is forced to suppress and deny her true feelings, smile sweetly, and let the American have his way. True, she has always been free to leave the American, or insist that the child be born. As noted, however, Jig wants the American as well as the child, but as long as *he* objects to the baby, the constraints of the phallogentric culture Jig lives in obstruct her ability to negotiate both motherhood and her romantic attachment to the American. She is placed in an either-or bind that severely limits her options and precludes a workable middle ground.

Hills Like White Elephants can, of course, be read in other ways, but in the end it seems to me that Jig is ultimately defeated and entrapped by a feminine communication model that the society of her day designates as "inferior" relative to its masculine counterpart. Conversely, the American is not necessarily an ogre; he's simply taking advantage (wittingly or no) of the superior status society confers upon *his* language. However readers feel about these characters, and whatever speculations might be entertained regarding their eventual fate, one conclusion can be safely drawn: like all of us, Jig and the American adhere to gender-linked language patterns, and like all of us, they suffer from the gaps in communication these patterns inevitably produce.

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