

A Bakhtinian Perspective for the Chronotopic Evaluation of Symbols in “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway

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Abstract: *This paper discusses the metaphoric and spatial representations in the short story “Hills Like White Elephants” from the perspective of Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope. Bakhtin explains the concept of chronotope in literary texts as the intersection of space and time configured either in abstract or concrete entities, represented by symbols and metaphors or real-time objects and spaces. In the story, an unmarried pregnant girl and the child’s father are portrayed at a train station discussing their and their unborn child’s future. The story reflects the qualities of a typical Hemingway style, the “iceberg theory” he favours in storytelling. The train station in the story is located at the intersection of railway lines in the direction of Barcelona and Madrid, and this location becomes a symbol of the decision the couple will make at that particular historical time about keeping or aborting the baby. The station is situated between a patch of dry brown land and long and white hills across the fertile valley of the Ebro river, where the characters are about to decide whether to go back to their old, barren life or keep the baby and move on to a promising and happy life. This spatial juncture, the train station, symbolizing a public space of modernity, and the contrasting hills like white elephants, symbolizing the personal dilemma of the pregnant girl, intersect in the characters’ lives and illustrate Bakhtin’s concept of chronotope. This particular chronotope reveals the conflict and tension between the hills like white elephants and the train station near the barren, dry, brown earth, as well as between the woman and man in their perceptions of their lives and future together.*

Keywords: *space; spatiality; Bakhtin; chronotope; Hemingway;*

This article explores how using spatiality enables Hemingway to depict a moment of crisis in the major characters’ lives in his modernist short story “Hills Like White Elephants” (1927). I argue that this crisis is inseparable from the difficulty of communication and the sense of alienation that characterises the specific historical moment in which the characters live. My argument is mainly based on Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope. In the story, the train station setting becomes a Bakhtinian chronotope where “time, as it were thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history” (Hemingway 84). Hence, the portrayal of space in the story brings together a personal moment of crisis, characterised by a lack of communication and a feeling of alienation, with a historical moment of crisis brought about by the

conditions of modernity. The train station in the story thus signifies a critical public modern space, located against the white hills across the valley of the Ebro River, which comes to stand for the girl's personal dilemma of her pregnancy and whether to abort the baby or not. Hence, I argue that Hemingway's portrayal of this personal dilemma against the realities of modern life and its consequences in human relations, which results in a lack of communication and compassion, can be explained within the boundaries of Bakhtin's concept of chronotope. In the story, the paths of a historical time pointing at modernity is symbolised by the public space of the train station. The white hills across the station reflect the personal dilemma of the girl within this significant time and place cross and intertwine, forming the story's backbone and hence, the chronotopic dimension.

Ernest Hemingway left his mark on literature and the public domain due to his innovative style and his characteristic narrative technique. These features influenced not only the authors of his generation but also scores of young American people who wanted to adopt a speech pattern which was called the 'Hemingway style' (Stewart, Bethurum 65).

On the surface, his style seems easy and straightforward. Still, Stewart et al. write that this style is deceptive and that his writing is probably more calculated than it appears to be. Hemingway's aim is the sensuous and emotional rendering of experience. Hemingway usually employs plain and monosyllabic language, also evident in "Hills Like White Elephants". Hemingway's style contains several repetitive words and sentences that point at something important in the story, and the characters' declarative statements are usually simple but sharp and very concise. As Edmund Wilson writes about Hemingway's style:

Hemingway's words (says Ford) strike you, each one as if they were pebbles fetched fresh from a brook. They live and shine, each in its place. So one of his pages has the effect of a brook-bottom into which you look down through the flowing water. The words form a tessellation, each in order beside the other. (qtd. in Stewart, Bethurum 66)

In his works, Hemingway portrays the American people who have suffered the devastations of the Great War and experienced its traumas in very personal and intimate ways, with their anxieties, lack of confidence, despair, and confusion, which are symbolically presented in his writings. However, there is always hope for his characters to achieve some dignity and self-assurance, as manifested in our story when the girl declares she is fine. There is nothing the matter with her, a declaration in plain language that implies that

she has made up her mind without being influenced by the American man and his proposal.

“Hills Like White Elephants” was initially published in 1927 in the literary magazine *Transition* and immediately received favourable reviews from critics and readers. Although there are different opinions on Hemingway’s style of writing, which oscillates between realistic and modernist, “Hills Like White Elephants” is considered the most modernist of his stories, which is primarily based on limited dialogue, composed of short and simple sentences that reflect one of the main themes; lack of communication between the characters are manifestly seen in the dialogues between Jig and the American. While the two converse, they never mention the real topic, which is the abortion of the baby, and the girl never openly mentions how she feels about her pregnancy. Indirect expressions and using symbols to shadow the main problem or dilemma between the two abound in the dialogues. The girl’s resembling the hills to white elephants is an instance to this avoidance. The story hosts deeper meanings than what is conversed and narrated respectively through dialogues and short descriptions by the narrator, a technique unique to Hemingway. As Müller explains: “a good piece of literature should follow the principle of the iceberg: Picture a floating iceberg and see that “there are seven-eighths of it under water for every part that shows. Anything you know can be eliminated, and it can only strengthen your iceberg” (Müller, qtd. in Diez San Jose 2). What is not said but kept under the iceberg is conveyed to the reader through symbols and metaphors and through the depiction of the atmosphere and the mood and psychological states of the characters, who are introduced from different perspectives through the interplay of time and space as the story unfolds.

Briefly and on the surface, the story is about an American man and a girl sitting at a train station cafe, waiting for the train from Barcelona to Madrid, and conversing briefly. The girl’s nationality is never mentioned, even her name is revealed much later in the course of the story. The reason might be that Hemingway wants his readers to see her as a symbol of all the girls under the manipulative treatment of masculine power. Another reason may be Hemingway’s desire to underline the tension and conflict between the two rather than focusing on identities. What they discuss – something that is not mentioned – seems to be a significant issue which will shape their immediate and coming future. The setting is Spain, but there is very little information about why this couple is there and who they are. The story’s beginning gives sparse details on the actual location: “The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white”. Starting with the first sentence, what is not told is given in the description of the hills as long and white. The female character later copies this narrative device and uses the image of the mountain looking like a White elephant. What the couple discusses covertly is the tip of the iceberg,

left to the reader to understand through the symbols and metaphors that the topic is the girl's, called Jig by the unnamed American, pregnancy and the ensuing discussion about a possible abortion. This is the story the narrator tells, but which hides so much underneath the untold part. The iceberg principle invites the readers to construct by way of the symbols, images, and metaphors of temporal and spatial nature such as the train station and the white hills, that point to a critical moment in the baby's and characters' lives now and forever.

I will read "Hills Like White Elephants" using the Bakhtinian concept of chronotope because, in my opinion, the concept is pertinent to and applicable in the story. Before that, I would like to explain this concept briefly. The term chronotope is made up of two words, "chrono" (time) and "topos" (place), which emphasise the intersection and inseparability of time and space in literary narratives. Bakhtin describes this concept in the following way:

In the literary, artistic chronotope, spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, and becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot, and history. This intersection of axes and fusion of indicators characterises the artistic chronotope. (Bakhtin 84)

The purpose of developing this concept for Bakhtin is to draw attention and to highlight a sense of the unity and interdependence of time and space in literary works, portrayed by concepts, objects, places, events, and many other symbolical, metaphorical, and actual events, incidents, or objects. Thus, this concept enables the narrator to develop and materialise their material in a coherent frame and, on the part of the reader, to understand the work's literary structure and message in concrete and well-defined terms. Hence, chronotope is a dynamic structure that influences the story's unfolding and the reader's response.

The earliest spatial symbol in Hemingway's story is where the characters are placed: in a railway station at the juncture of the dry Brown land back to the White hills and the fertile Elbo River. In the story, the narrator refers to the white hills and mountains each time the girl and the American covertly try to discuss the abortion. It may be said that the white hills symbolise a pregnant woman's body and remind the girl of white elephants with their curves and roundness. The couple sits in the shade, although the girl gets up to move in the sun while looking at the white hills. The darkness of the shade in a vast space and the limitedness of the lighted area symbolically reflect the inner struggle of the American who pushes the girl for abortion and Jig's choice of keeping the baby, a promise of life and hope. Stewart et al. evaluate these symbols in the following passage:

If the darkness stands for disorder and chaos of a hostile world or universe, and the spot of light for the small amount of order and discipline and civilisation and security that the individual has been able to wrest out of the surrounding chaos and old night, Hemingway seems to say that the small lighted area is enough, or at any rate, must be made to do. (Stewart et al.70)

As the dialogue moves on sparsely and the reader becomes aware of the rest of the iceberg, the reference to the hills resembling white elephants in the story's title and between the conversations of the American and Jig makes sense. According to the symbolic description of the white elephant in dictionaries, it is valuable but undesirable since it is challenging to keep and look after. When we get to the story's core, it is seen that the couple is talking about an abortive operation to get rid of the baby, which is the white elephant, metaphorically. The dialogue around this unnamed operation gradually reveals the characters' perspectives on this issue. The white elephant, named by the girl, Jig, is an entity she cannot give up, while the man thinks she should. Their point of departure can be seen in this dialogue:

The girl looked 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.
“I’ve never seen one,” the man drank his beer.
“No, you wouldn’t have”. (1)

Elsewhere further in the story, the girl wants a drink since drinking seems to be the only thing they agree on, and the conversation moves as follows:

“It tastes like liquorice,” the girl said, putting the glass down.
“That’s the way with everything”.
“Yes”, said the girl.” Everything tastes of liquorice. Especially all the things you’ve waited so long for, like absinthe”.
“Oh, cut it out”.
“You started it,” the girl said.” I was being amused. I was having a fine time.”
“Well, let's try and have a fine time.”
“Alright. I was trying. I said the mountains looked like White elephants. Wasn’t that bright?”
“That was bright.”

“I wanted to try this new drink. That’s all we do, isn’t it – look at things and try new drinks?”

“I guess so.” (2)

The minimalist dialogue encapsulates the disconnectedness and lack of communication between the two and the unnamed dilemma that pushes them further apart.

The train station is where this conversation reveals their discontent, disconnection, and inertia, which serves as a significant spatial chronotope. It points out a definite setting and is substantial in the story's development and implications. It is described as located in a dry, barren land on one side and fertile and green on the other side, which is just under the white hills near the river, described as such in the story:

The girl stood up and walked to the end of the station. Across, on the other side, were fields of grain and trees along the banks of Ebro. Far away, beyond the river, were mountains. The shadow of a cloud moved across the grain field, and she saw the river through the trees. (4)

At this spatial point, that is, the train station, and at this condensed spot of time when Jig makes up her mind for herself and her unborn baby, she turns her face toward fertility, greenness, and productivity, as opposed to barren and dry land. This chronotopic element signifies a critical point in the life of the characters.

Additionally, train stations have served a pivotal role in literature as a metaphor and symbol for advancement and modernization, as well as a nostalgic element that connects characters to the bygone days and carries them over to the future. In “The Presentation of Modernity by Trains in Twentieth-Century American Literature”, Sun writes the following:

The train frees the modern subject from one kind of temporal and spatial bondage, but places the subject in another kind of enclosed space. This enclosed space symbolizes the place of contemporary human industrial civilisation; although it is only a transitional space during travel, it is also premise of the train station, one area of public facilities where modern people stay the longest... The train reminds us that it is easy to stay and leave and gives us a chance to temporarily escape from the present and imagine the future. At the train station, we are simultaneously in the superposition of “nowhere to go” and “anywhere to go”. (Sun 1435)

In this sense, Jig's attitude toward her and her baby's future at that particular train station in that specific limited space and condensed time in her life constitutes a very conspicuous Bakhtinian chronotope in the story's narrative structure, which encompasses her two alternatives.

The train station's function in the story is significant when evaluated from the Bakhtinian concept of chronotope. As the opening lines write: "The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and White. On this side, there was no shade and no trees, and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun" (1). The train station comprises two lines of rails and two sides, one side in the shade and the other under the sun, as well as two destinations. The narrative description is loaded with metaphors and symbols that can be read from the light of the Bakhtinian chronotope. Firstly, as mentioned above by Sun, the train station occupies a public but confined and limited space, whereas trains and the characters waiting to embark on a journey are in opposition between mobility and staying put. Similarly, this symbolic space of the station describes the situation of the American and the girl. The main line of their conflict, whether to abort the baby and live like they always have or go on with the pregnancy and move on to a new destination in their lives, is related to the opposition between the public space of the train station and the private space of the girl's body and the dilemma of both the man and the girl in terms of how to manage the pregnancy and their lives. In the story, their dilemma is revealed covertly through the reference to "do it", as mentioned in the story:

"They are lovely hills," she said. "They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the coloring of their skin through the trees. Should we have another drink?"...

"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig." The man said. "It's not really an operation at all."...

"I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in."...

The girl looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two strings of beads.

"And you think we'll be all right and be happy."

"I know we will. You don't have to be afraid. I've known lots of people who have done it."

"So have I", said the girl. "And afterwards, they were all so happy."

"Well," the man said, "if you don't want to, you don't have to. I wouldn't have you do it if you didn't want to. But I know it's perfectly simple."

"And you really want to?"

"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." (3)

Hence, the limited space of the station at that condensed time is the Bakhtinian chronotopic element, which is precisely material and cannot be divorced from the time since it reflects a particular experience in a specific time in a certain space. The station, then, illuminates the significance of the moment of decision-making, of being of two minds, on such a majestic and personal issue.

As mentioned earlier, a Bakhtinian reading of the story enables the reader to fully understand the tip and the unseen body of the iceberg technique of Hemingway in the story and the overall meaning and message. The spatial element of the train station, and the temporal element as the condensed time at that particular place, are told in the story as: “the Express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes. It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went on to Madrid” (1). This intersection of both the spatial and topographic symbols create the chronotopic element in the narration. Thanks to the chronotopic evaluation of that narrative structure, that space intersects with the moment of acknowledging one’s future, as the readers understand.

Consequently, a Bakhtinian reading of the story “Hills like White Elephants” reveals not only the tip of the iceberg but the whole body of it. The latter becomes apparent through the use of symbols that come together in a chronotopic construct as explained in this article and emphasises the couple’s lack of a joint agreement on such a critical issue, and the girl’s opting for a sunny and fertile future. This future which awaits her comprises her choice to keep the baby and to move on with her life away from the man, despite the limited time and space and the American’s pressures. The girl manages to overcome her inability to decide in that public space and condensed time. At the end of the story, in the last line, she celebrates the symbol of “The Hills like White Elephants”, meaning her fertile and productive female body: “I feel fine”, she said.” There’s nothing wrong with me. I feel fine” (6).

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