

The Interpretation of “Hills like White Elephants” in the Perspective of Transactional Reader-response Theory

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2023.70950>

Received: 15 July 2023; Revised: 24 August 2023; Accepted: 30 August 2023; Published: 01 October 2023

ABSTRACT

“Hills Like White Elephants” was first published in the short story collection *Men Without Women* in 1927. It tells the story of an American man and a girl waiting for a train from Barcelona to Madrid at the station. During the waiting, the male and female protagonists had a series of disputes about whether to do the operation of abortion or not. And this paper tries to interpret this short story from the perspective of transactional reader-response theory by analyzing and representing the process of how reader establish the meaning and produce the poem based on the original text mainly from three aspects—first, determinate meaning and indeterminate meaning; second, the blueprint and the reader’s judgements; third, the polysemy and symbolic meanings.

Keywords: “Hills Like White Elephants”; Transactional Reader-response Theory; Indeterminate Meaning; Symbolic Meaning

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

“Hills Like White Elephants” was first published in the short story collection *Men Without Women* in 1927. “Hills Like White Elephants” was written in 1927, the tenth year after the end of the First World War. Ten years ago, American young people took part in the First World War with the attitude of saving the world. However, after the war, when their situation changed unexpectedly, the young people who experienced the baptism of the war were shocked by the cruelty of the fighting. Then, when they returned home after the war, they couldn’t find their place in the society, and the young people felt pessimistic and disappointed. So many of them paralyzed themselves by drinking and indulging in pleasures to avoid their responsibilities to the real society and family. The couple in “Hills Like White Elephants” can be said to be the portrayal of this generation.

It tells the story of an American man and woman waiting for a train from Barcelona to Madrid at the station. During the waiting for the train, the male protagonist and female protagonist had a series of disputes about whether or bot to do the operation of abortion. Among more than 4,000 words in the full text, as far as the text structure is concerned, except for some brief descriptions of scenery, nearly most of the text is composed of dialogues, most of the words are no more than four letters, and most of the sentences are single sentences, and no critical words of writers are interspersed in the dialogues. However, the illusion of being simple and easy to understand conveyed by this minimalist form does not blind readers, because readers soon discovers that the context and motif of the work is difficult to grasp and understand due to the implicit description, abstract images and ambiguously open ending, and also because it is infinitely inclusive and polyphonic. It is the implicitity and polyphony that makes this short story like a miscellaneous maze of three-dimensional intersection, full of riddles and conundrums, attracting readers to participate in decoding. However, due to readers’ different life experiences, reading experiences as well as the psychological conditions and moods while reading, the interpretations of the same text of different groups of readers will have a gap in the ultimate meaning of reading.

Throughout the domestic scholars’ analysis of “Hills Like White Elephants”, the first perspective of analysis

focuses on women's identity and status. I read the essays of this perspective, and I find that there are two completely different interpretations: one type holds the idea that Hemingway has the consciousness of showing care for women in "Hills Like White Elephants", and that Hemingway is emphasizing women's viewpoints to make readers fully understand the feelings of a woman who is pregnant and thus is at an important moment of her life, and at the same time, he further critically exposes men's indifference to women's needs. From this point of view, "Hemingway can still surpass his gender identity, observe things from a female's perspective, and present women's inner feelings and their personal reactions to things, so the women in his books are still full of humanity." (Dai, 2001) In contrast, another view thinks that Jig, the female protagonist portrayed by Hemingway in "Hills Like White Elephants", is just "a meek woman", "an angel without wings" and "a woman who has no opinion and doesn't know what she wants". "Her existence is just to please her boyfriend, and she has almost become a man's accessory." By analyzing other female characters created by Hemingway, this view holds that "in Hemingway's works, the perspective of seeing the world is of the male, the narrator is male, and the values are decided by the male. He reminds readers and himself all the time in his works that he is a man and his world is a man's world (Sui, 2003)."

In addition, the second perspective of interpreting "Hills Like White Elephants" focuses on the analysis of the power of discourse. Such scholars believe that in the face of men's aggressive power of discourse, Jig gradually realized that all this was just her own ideal illusion which wouldn't come into reality. Therefore, she tried to approach her marginal discourse to the center of the power of discourse, and achieve the balance of power through the interaction of discourse, so that the productivity of power can be fully reflected. This kind of power of female's micro-discourse highlighted with women's self-awareness is also a subversion of macro-patriarchy (Qian, 2001).

The third research perspective of interpreting "Hills Like White Elephants" focuses on the analysis of the narrative mode and language style. This kind of scholars think that this short story highlights the theme by using concise language, and reveals the deep spiritual world of the characters in the form of dialogue. The clever use of metaphor in the text fully shows the emotions of the characters, the language features of dramatic contradictions in the text and the unique dramatic tension. Objectively speaking, the cruelty of war has indeed brought Hemingway great pain to the point where it is difficult to express it in words. The only thing Hemingway can do is to accurately convey everything he has experienced to readers, so that readers can imagine as they can according to their own experience. "The author objectively shows the events to readers from the perspective of external focus, uses a lot of hints such as dialogue, symbols, etc., and partly uses narrative methods to vividly describe the story in his own unique language style" (Meng & Chang, 2010), without adding any comments, thus creating a sense of mystery, allowing readers to perceive and fill in the parts omitted by the author, and giving the story a unique explanation. It is exactly a practice of Hemingway's iceberg theory.

We can see that different scholars have different attitudes towards the interpretation of "Hills Like White Elephants", and sometimes the understanding of the author's attitude is quite the opposite when it comes to the view of women, which is mainly due to the reading obstacles set by the writers in the original text. This kind of reading obstacle not only exists in the form, but also is hidden in its content, which constitutes the uncertainty and complexity of the meaning of the text and the complexity of the reader's understanding, and then new "poem" is produced by readers after decoding the meaning personally. So I think this short story can be a perfect case for an interpretation in the perspective of transactional reader-response theory.

"As its name implies, reader-response criticism focuses on readers' responses to literary texts" (Tyson, 2001). "Attention to the reading process emerged during the 1930s as a reaction against the growing tendency to reject the reader's role in creating meaning" (Tyson, 2001). And "the creation of the poem, the literary work, is a product of the transaction between text and reader, both of which are equally important to the process" (Tyson, 2001). And this paper tries to analyze and represent the process of how reader establish

the meaning and produce the poem based on the original text.

Determinate Meaning and Indeterminate Meaning

In transactional reader-response theory, it is the determinate meaning that define the facts and set the limit for reader's over-interpretation and it is the indeterminate meaning that make the text have more possibility to conclude more motifs and connotations.

"Hills Like White Elephants" creates ambiguity and dilemma for readers, which makes readers feel confused in the writer's maze of writing, and at the same time, they are suspicious of their own ability of judgement. Readers' first impression of "Hills Like White Elephants" is that the information provided is insufficient and abstract, uncertain and incomplete. The whole text runs through with dialogue, with no introduction of characters and no story, just like an unprocessed recording of roadside conversation. The male protagonist and female protagonist argue about whether to "abortion" or not. However, neither of the two people in the conversation nor the narrator outside the story mentioned the word "abortion" directly. The unadorned dialogue gives readers a real and natural feeling. This feeling not only narrows the distance between the works and the characters in the works and the readers, but also increases the credibility and affinity of the works.

At the same time, it virtually creates a trap for readers who are eager to find answers, setting a "blank" in the text. This is a rarely seen zone between texts, a zone that stimulates readers' imagination, and the value and function of readers in creating the meaning of the text is also reflected here. But the author himself is hidden behind the text, so that readers can't even feel his existence, given the situation that Hemingway never jumps out to make comments in the text. He deliberately disappeared behind readers and texts, and even reserved a place for readers to participate in around the conversation between male protagonist and female protagonist. Even if the readers are familiar with the whole conversation, they still can't accurately grasp the theme and attitude that the text wants to express. The writer plays the role of a voyeur, watching the readers lost in the abnormal dialogue mode in the uncertain area of the text.

Right at the very beginning of the dialogue between the male protagonist and the female protagonist, readers can feel this uncertainty and confusion: "What should we drink?" the girl asked. "It's pretty hot," the man said. "Let's drink beer." "Dos cervezas," the man said into the curtain. "Big ones?" a woman asked from the doorway. "Yes. Two big ones." (Hemingway, 1969)

The readers are confused about the time, the place, the contextual information of the conversation and the relationship between the two, with the dialogue comes into sight all of a sudden at the very beginning.

The female protagonist first asks the other person's opinion: What to drink? We noticed that she doesn't use the euphemism "What would you like?" Instead, she uses the first person plural form "we". A word "we" shows the relationship between them, which is not a casual acquaintance. The female protagonist is obviously sincere and intimate, but next the man's rambling answer inevitably makes readers feel a little abrupt, because the man's answer violates the quantitative criterion and relevance criterion in the cooperative principle, resulting in disharmony in the dialogue.

And then comes a new round of dialogue again: "They look like white elephants," she said. "I've never seen one." The man drank his beer. "No, you wouldn't have." "I might have," the man said. "Just because you say I wouldn't have doesn't prove anything." (Hemingway, 1969)

The female protagonist is pondering about the mountains bathed in the sun in the distance. To the reader's surprise, the man once again violated the approval criterion of politeness principle and made a far-reaching and innocuous negative answer. So the female protagonist relentlessly retaliated by saying "you wouldn't

have". In order to refute women's irony, the man does not hesitate to overturn their previous arguments. At this point, readers realize that the relationship between male protagonist and female protagonist is far from being as friendly and tacit as expected before. The topics they talked about were erratic, changing from beer to weather, mountains, white elephants, wine, licorice and so on. The reader's eyes suddenly turn east and west with the pen of the author.

Just when the reader is confused and trapped in a maze, the author timely provides a glimmer of light for readers eager to figure out what happens exactly. This light comes from the following round of dialogue: "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. "It's not really an operation at all." The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on. "I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in." The girl did not say anything. (Hemingway, 1969)

It's the man's impatient test, but the girl makes a silent response, from which the reader noticed that the contradiction between the two sides was gradually becoming clear, and "operation" must be the crux that troubled them. But what kind of surgery is this? According to the man's suggestion, it's such a simple operation that can't even be regarded as a real operation. What kind of operation does not need to be removed, sutured, and only need air to suck? Further, what kind of surgery has been tormenting the man's mind, requiring him to persist or even push hard? What kind of surgery touched a woman's feelings and made her have to scream hysterically to vent her dissatisfaction? ——"Would you please please please please please please stop talking?" "I'll scream," the girl said. (Hemingway, 1969) What kind of surgery has become a stumbling block for a man to live happily in the future? What kind of surgery is the promise of maintaining the relationship between two people in the eyes of women? Readers have a series of questions to be answered.

All of these information which is not clearly explained in the text leaves readers with unlimited space to imagine and associate. Most people associate it with the old-fashioned "abortion", and return to the beginning of the story with this guess to re-verify: the American man wants his lover to abort the fetus in her bellies, pestering her to do the abortion operation, and making persistent and rational persuasion. The girl, on the other hand, doesn't want to abort their children, and feels sad her boyfriend's irresponsible attitude. In the face of this selfish and coward man who ignore her personal feelings, Jig vented her inner helplessness and resentment with silence and screaming. That's what reader can imply from the determinate information and guess from the indeterminate information.

The Blueprint and the Reader's Judgement

On the surface, Jig is just a weak woman who is dominated by her boyfriend and can't control her own destiny. When her opinion conflicts with her boyfriend's, she tries every strategy to achieve her aim, such as pleasing, being straightforward, being sarcastic, or even fawning on him. But when all strategies still fail to work in front of indifferent man, she has to give in and has the thought of maintaining her relationship with her boyfriend at the expense of her unborn child.

If the reader judges that what the author wants to show here is to look down upon women, thinking of them as "a compensatory thing, a man's ideal and deification", then the author will successfully let the reader's rational judgement get lost in the feelings of misunderstanding. Obviously, it is the surface blueprint of text narration that is influencing readers.

Actually, readers should look at Jig's situation against the social background. Then readers will find that she is really at the crossroads and has no choice. The Comstock Act promulgated in 1873 still has the legal effect until 1927. Illegal abortion is explicitly prohibited in the Act, and offenders will be fined \$5,000 and sentenced to five years' hard labor. Jig understands that once she agrees to her boyfriend's request, it will

not only hurt her body, but also rebel against society. But intuition has told her that her relationship with her boyfriend will be fundamentally changed. But if she refuses to have surgery, her boyfriend will abandon her without hesitation. Between her boyfriend and the baby, she can only choose one.

In the first half of the story, we can see from the dialogue mode between her and her boyfriend that the girl is at a weak position, and she seems to choose to give in to her boyfriend between them. With the helplessness, she is in a difficult and inferior position in the patriarchal society, and in the binary opposition between the sexes, she is also in a subordinate and secondary position. The gender role she plays is determined by social and cultural conditions. To be sure, Hemingway observes and has acknowledge of all this, so he could stand by the side of the women who are excluded and hurt by the indifferent and self-righteous male protagonist, and vividly show their wishes, pains, frustrations, anger, disillusionment and their resistance to the readers. The readers' possible contempt for Jig or likely criticism of Hemingway's machismo are only the function of the surface blueprint of the text for readers, because Hemingway gives readers the confusion emitted by this surface blueprint. Instead of giving readers the right direction, he also uses this uncertainty to mislead readers and let them easily walk into the trap he sets.

The Polysemy and Symbolic Meanings

In addition, figures of speech such as metaphor and symbols in the text constitute another complication of meaning construction in the process of reading. When the reader associates and analogizes the images in the text with different things, different meanings will be endowed to the text.

White Elephant: the Unborn Baby

First of all, the title of the text, "Hills Like White Elephants", is taken from a remark by the female protagonist Jig in the face of the rolling mountains under the scorching sun. The reader is puzzled, why does Jig compare the mountains to white elephants instead of humps, and why does Hemingway use this sentence as the title instead of others? All these can't help but make readers who are eager to dig out the theme of the text feel confused about the figurative meaning of "white elephant".

According to the dictionary, we conclude that the "white elephant" contains two kinds of meanings: "rare" and "troublesome". But obviously these two meanings are contradictory and ambiguous. Rare things are precious, but such rare white elephants are troublesome and disturbing things in people's minds. Does Jig make this metaphor because of the strangeness of this situation, or is she worried about the burden of life, or is she struggling between the two? Again readers try hard to find answer in the text, but they find nothing at last.

For the symbolic meaning of the "white elephant", the most obvious and possible interpretation is that it symbolizes Jig's baby. The baby is the hope in the heart of the mother Jig, which is rare and precious, but it is the burden that the father tries to get rid of and persuades Jig to remove.

Readers are once again confused in the following description of the scenery. At the beginning of the story, Hemingway sketched a lonely picture for readers without any pretence or embellishment:

"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. Close against the side of the station there was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies." (Hemingway, 1969)

With a few strokes, readers can feel the extremely hot weather and witness the desolate scene, which arouses a lot of melancholy and depression. On the other hand, in the dialogue, the female protagonist once

“stood up and walked to the end of the station” ?Hemingway, 1969?. With her eyes, the readers see another scene: “Across, on the other side, were 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, 1969) Whether it is farmland, trees, mountains or rivers, these lovely scenes endowed symbolize life, vitality and hope. This is in sharp contrast to what readers has seen before: one side is full of vitality, while the other side is barren; on the one side, it brings hope, but on the other side, it only leads to frustration. Such a contrasting natural landscape is also rare in daily life, so readers can guess that these scenes must have some symbolic meanings. In addition to the strong visual effect, the author here must have a deeper meaning. We believe that the huge contrast reflects the two different futures that Jigs imagined in her heart. If she is agrees to the man’s request, Jig’s future will continue to be a life without goals, responsibilities, desolate and barren; but if she refuses the abortion, instead to choose to have keep the baby, build a family and establish a career, the prospect will be as full of vitality and hope as the nearby scenery. But where Jig is going is still an unsolved mystery, because the ending part is open and unclear. All these factors bring countless uncertainties to the text, and the readers’ complex background can not only resolve this uncertainty, but also make it more uncertain, which makes the connotations of the text more profound and changeable.

Bags: Literature Traditions

If readers compare pregnancy with literary creation, the meanings of various information and texts can be constructed as follows.

Jig’s pregnancy is compared to a young writer’s creative attempt. The boyfriend that Jig has always relied on is the predecessors of literary creation, and the bag of her boyfriend is the literary tradition.

Therefore, whether Jig can successfully give birth to a newborn means whether the young writer’s innovation can be carried out smoothly. If Jig succumbs to her boyfriend and chooses abortion, it is a symbol that the young writer chooses to give in to the majesty and authority of the literary predecessors and gives up his or her innovation in literature. However, if Jig chooses to keep his children no matter what happens, even if she will be separated from his boyfriend and be willing to live independently with her children, then it symbolizes that the young writer dares to break out of the shelter and bondage of literary precessors and build up a brave self-consciousness for innovation.

Therefore, in this case, the symbolic meaning of this text has been expanded. It is well known that “fiction is indispensable to novel creation, and symbol makes the novel have profound artistic charm. If fiction is to extract triviality, collect gold from sand and show the essence of life through the representation of life, then symbol can make the narrative of novel highly concise and endow ordinary life materials with profound ideological connotation. Symbol deepens the artistic conception of novel, which can be said to be the highest realm of novel art.”(Dong, 134) After the reader’s processing and association, the symbolic meaning of the text has new perspectives and more possibilities. This is exactly the poem produced by both the text and the readers.

Hotels: Homeless Spirits after the First War

The male protagonist in “Hills Like White Elephants”, who is from America, is a vivid representative of the “lost generation”. Although the girl has a name as Jig, Hemingway doesn’t give the American man a name, which indicates that the America man in the story may be a symbol of all the characteristics of Americans at that time. From the travel bag “with the labels of all the hotels where they have spent the night”(Hemingway, 1969), we can see that the male protagonist and female protagonist live a wandering and homeless life, and they often move from one city to another, from one hotel to another. These labels are the testimony that they are not satisfied with their life. They are trying to find a habitat to settle down, but it

doesn't seem easy.

Despite the political stability and economic development of the United States after World War I, the shadow of World War I has a lingering influence on young people. Especially after the war, the change of the world was completely different from the imagination of young people, they found that false prosperity concealed all social problems. They can't accept such a life. Not only is there a crisis in natural ecology and social ecology, but more importantly, there is an unprecedented crisis in people's spiritual ecology. As individuals, people have a sense of powerlessness and hold no hope for the future.

Therefore, when the protagonists in the story are faced with confusion and helplessness, their views on life are pessimistic. They can't find a sense of belonging of home and love, so they completely lose themselves without faith, morality or life itself. Therefore, they regard love as a game that has nothing to do with deep feelings. Hemingway, who is used to portraying tough-guy characters in his works, describes for us the image of a cowardly man in "Hills Like White Elephants" — yielding to the pressure of the environment, having no confidence in life, having no courage to face the reality and the future, being indifferent and irresponsible, because this is a man who is the representative of the "lost generation", his spiritual world will not easily change and reverse. The trauma brought by the war to this generation is that their souls have nowhere to put, and their hearts have no trustworthy home and home.

CONCLUSION

Hemingway is unconventional in the artistic expression of the text. In fact, he is also deliberate in the construction of the theme of the text. "Hills Like White Elephants" embodies Hemingway's originality, a well-designed text using the iceberg theory, both in form and content. Hemingway plays the role of an invisible man behind the text. He allows readers to participate in the re-creation of the text's indeterminate meaning, so that readers are disappointed, happy or suddenly enlightened in constantly overthrowing, confirming or rebuilding their expectations and judgements. The result of re-creation is "poem", which is an aesthetic object which is endowed with meanings by readers and the original text, as a final interpretation of the text after readers finish reading activities.

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