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AP English Literature and Composition

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Literary Analysis of “Hills Like White Elephants”

In the short story “Hills Like White Elephants” by Ernest Hemingway, a man and a woman are conflicted by their decision to abort their unborn baby. The abortion was never clearly stated, but it can be inferred by word choice such as “operation” and the setting, symbolizing life and death.

In the beginning, the man and the woman are on a patio by a train station. The train station lies between a valley, in which the two lands, symbolized as life and death, are bordered by railroads. One side of the valley was said to have fields of grain and trees along the banks of Ebro, in which trees and grain were used to depict fertility and life. On the other hand, the opposing side of the tracks was “brown”, “dry” and brittle. The land was barren and depicts death and despair. Should they proceed with the surgery, it will end the fetus’ life, but also, potentially the relationship between the man and the woman.

One side of the tracks lead to Madrid, toward the dry and dead, which symbolizes abortion, and the other, Barcelona, or paradise. Another possible conclusion is that the man and the woman are going separate ways, but inferring by the dialogue, the woman is going through with the procedure in attempts to please the man.

In the short story, the setting helps emphasize the conflict. Every aspect of the story resembles the boundaries between good and evil; life and death, happiness and grief, or paradise and wasteland. Each conflict represents a never ending fight between two equal forces and their struggle to find compromise.