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Dilemma of Abortion through Symbolism in “Hills Like White Elephants” (1927) by Ernest Hemingway

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ABSTRAK

"Hills Like White Elephants" (1927) karya Ernest Hemingway dengan mahir menggunakan simbolisme sebagai alat untuk menggali lebih dalam tentang isu aborsi yang rumit. Makalah ini mengeksplorasi bagaimana Hemingway menggunakan simbol-simbol seperti gajah putih, alkohol, kereta api, dan tempat-tempat di sekitarnya untuk menjelaskan dampak emosional dan psikologis yang diderita oleh pasangan ketika mereka menghadapi masalah yang kompleks seperti aborsi. Penelitian ini menggunakan teori tentang jenis-jenis simbolisme yang dikemukakan oleh Alam (2013) yang menyatakan bahwa simbol-simbol konvensional yang biasa digunakan dalam sastra antara lain warna, elemen alam, dan hewan. Simbol-simbol yang ada dalam cerita tersebut secara implisit menggambarkan isu aborsi dan dampaknya bagi manusia. Cerita ini menggunakan metafora gajah putih untuk merepresentasikan aborsi, menyoroti kemurnian, kepolosan, dan kekuatan mental. Konsumsi alkohol di stasiun kereta api melambangkan perjuangan pasangan tersebut untuk menghindari dilema mereka, sementara kereta api melambangkan batas waktu yang dimiliki pasangan tersebut sebelum mengambil keputusan. Selain itu, kontras antara tempat-tempat di sekitarnya melambangkan potensi hasil yang berbeda. Dengan meneliti simbol-simbol ini dalam cerita "Hills Like White Elephants", makalah ini mengungkap tema aborsi dan dampaknya terhadap karakter yang secara implisit diceritakan dengan menggunakan simbol-simbol. Makalah ini menyoroti teknik naratif yang kuat dari cerita yang menunjukkan dilema menyakitkan yang terkait dengan aborsi, dan menyoroti kompleksitas pendapat dan hubungan individu.

Kata kunci: aborsi, dilema, simbolisme

ABSTRACT

Ernest Hemmingway's "Hills Like White Elephants" (1927) masterfully uses symbolism as a tool to delve deeper into the complex issue of abortion. This paper explores how Hemingway uses symbols such as the white elephant, alcohol, train, and surrounding places to describe the emotional and psychological impact the couples suffer when they encounter complex problems such as abortion. The current study employs the theories on types of symbolism proposed by Alam (2013) who stated that the conventional symbols that are commonly used in literature include colors, nature elements, and animals. The symbols in the story implicitly describe the issue of abortion and its impacts on human beings. The story uses a white elephant metaphor to represent abortion, highlighting purity, innocence, and mental strength. Alcohol consumption at the train station symbolizes the couple's struggle to escape their dilemma, while the train symbolizes the time limit the couple have before making a decision. Moreover, the contrast between surrounding places symbolizes different potential outcomes. By examining these symbols in the story "Hills Like White Elephants", this paper uncovers the theme of abortion and the impact on the characters that are implicitly told by using symbols. The paper sheds light on the story's powerful narrative techniques showing the painful

dilemma associated with abortion, and highlighting the complexity of individual opinions and relationships.

Keywords: abortion, dilemma, symbolism

INTRODUCTION

Abortion is the spontaneous loss of a woman's pregnancy before the 20th week, which can be both physically and emotionally painful (Hurt, 2012). Abortion is one of the most common procedures performed among women. In the U.S., in 2014, one in 5 pregnancies ended in abortion, and one in 4 women is estimated to have an abortion in their lifetime (Ajmal, 2024). The Supreme Court of the United States, through *Roe v. Wade* (1973), legalized women to have an abortion. Abortion is usually safe when treated using professional medication. Even though the practice of abortion is generally safe, several women are still facing dilemmas when making a decision to undergo the procedure of abortion. Dilemmas of abortion can be seen in Ernest Hemingway's short story "Hills Like White Elephant," where an American man and the girl with him fight over something. The use of symbolism in this story highlights the couple's emotional struggles and the heaviness of the couple's problem.

In the short story "Hills Like White Elephants" by Ernest Hemingway, he tried to describe a couple who had a struggle in their relationship. Starting from the depiction where the couple waits for the train to Madrid, which takes place in a bar near the station with a view of the hills on the Ebro that look like white elephants. As they drank a few glasses of alcohol and talked to each other, the woman named Jig noticed that the hill in front of the bar looked like a white elephant that had an internal meaning for her, but the American man didn't look at the hill the same as Jig's perception. The couple ordered other alcohol to spend the time while waiting for the train; moreover, they began to talk about the struggle that they faced. However, the couple's explanation about what they faced does not directly mention it; they symbolize their conversation with other things around them at the time. They talked with worry and dilemma in mind, leading to something they would do when they left the bar for another city. They have difficulty dealing with something that puts a burden on Jig and his partner's relationship. The American man feels that he only loves Jig and nothing else, and Jig seems blinded by her love for her partner. Furthermore, the man thinks that what they are facing now is a simple thing to do because it is natural for the people around them.

In contrast to his boyfriend, Jig feels a dilemma to make a decision; moreover, in Jig's desire there is still a feeling of hesitation to do something that has been planned before. After a long conversation, Jig's emotions began to become uncontrollable, so they ended their conversation at the bar while looking at the hill that appeared there a few minutes before the train was predicted to arrive. Eventually, they were still waiting by the railroad tracks at the station waiting for the train to arrive, but it had not yet arrived. The explanation of Hemingway perfectly represents the story of a couple who wants to have an abortion but does not use the word abortion explicitly in the story. However, with the symbolism in this story, we as readers can understand that the problem faced by this couple is about the abortion that they have to do.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the abortion issue through symbolism in Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," particularly on how a decision of such importance as an abortion might impact a person's psychological and emotional state, in this case, the characters in the novel. By analyzing the symbolism in this story that implicitly brings up the issue of abortion, such as the use of symbols of the hills, the alcohol consumed by the characters, and the train and surrounding places where the characters have conversations throughout the story, this paper seeks to uncover the underlying themes and the impact of the couple's dilemma on their big decisions and individual perspectives.

METHOD

The analysis of "Hills Like White Elephants" by Ernest Hemingway uses qualitative methods for literary criticism. It mainly focuses on the representation of symbols in the story that highlight the theme of abortion. The story was selected for the richness of symbolism and the relevance to the theme. This analysis began with close reading to find the symbols that represent the theme, such as the white elephants, alcohol, the train, and surrounding places. The historical and cultural view toward abortion around the 1920s was also identified to provide context for these symbols. The symbols are then interpreted within narrative context, supported by other research that has correlation with the theme. The process involved detailed textual analysis,

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contextual research, and synthesis of findings to draw conclusions about how Hemingway uses symbolism to convey the emotional struggles of his characters.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Through the short story "Hills Like White Elephants," Hemingway uses rich symbolism to convey the emotion and all they thought in their relationship. The symbolism seen in this story includes a situation that exists around them, such as the white elephant, the consumption of alcohol when they are talking, as well as the train and surrounding places.

White Elephant

The girl mentions that the hills "look like white elephants" (Hemingway, 1927). Elephants in real life are the biggest land-living animals that have distinctive features including a long proboscis called a trunk, tusks, large ear flaps, pillar-like legs, and tough but sensitive grey skin. However, there is one popular idiom in English "Elephant in the Room" which has a meaning that there is some big problem happening. Moreover, in Buddhism, the elephant is a symbol of mental strength (Choskyi, 1988). There are some colors that are used in this story. Colors can symbolize different things, and people around the world have different meanings of colors based on tradition, culture, and religion (Hammiel, 2010). In the story, the color "white" is mentioned several times, and the color white can represent purity and life, but it can also signify "innocence, youth, godliness, cleanliness, and health professionals" (Rohrer, 2010).

From the paragraph above, we can conclude that the color white often symbolizes purity, while the animal elephant can possibly symbolize the problem and the actual form of mental strength. The assumption widens to the merging of both words which is "white elephant" in the story that represents a huge problem and how it's relevant to purity, innocence, and also mental strength. It leads to our belief that the main problem that the couple has to encounter in this story is pregnancy and their contemplation of abortion. Chandra (2017) stated that there have been innumerable instances in which children are portrayed and depicted as innocent in art, literature, and media. The story also mentions that there should be "an awfully simple operation" (Hemingway, 1927), which means that the big problem they are facing includes child and surgery, and we can conclude that the problem is about abortion which needs to be done by professionals. Abortion in the era when the story is written is still illegal, and not until 1973 when

the Supreme Court of the United States released *Roe v. Wade* about the legalization of abortion. In 1925, the Sheffield branch of the BMA claimed that of 25 recent puerperal fever deaths, 11 were associated with abortion: "Puerperal fever is much more frequent in connection with abortion than it is with normal labor" (McIntosh, 200), based on the social stigma and big consequence of the abortion practice makes Jig facing a big dilemma whether she is going to have an abortion or not.

Overall the "white elephant" in the story is a symbol of an important and complex problem of abortion, emphasizing the purity and innocence important problem. The historical context and social stigma underlying the reason for the dilemma that the couple was facing.

Alcohol

At the beginning of this story, they ordered some beer before they started the conversation at the bar near the train station. The American man stated that "It's pretty hot," then Jig, the girl that came with him, suggested that they should "drink beer." (Hemingway, 1927). It clearly depicts through the narrative that the American man and Jig consumed beer, which has a low grade; some specialty brews had characteristically higher or lower mean concentrations: ice beers 6.07% v/v, malt liquor 7.23% v/v, light beer 4.13% v/v, and seasonal ales 6.30% v/v (J. Forensic Sci, 1999). This low grade of beer represents the start of their light conversation. After that, Jig mentions other alcohol in the curtain, then the man explains, "Anis del Toro. It's a drink." So, they ask the women at the bar, "We want two Anis del Toro." (Hemingway, 1927). Their conversation after drinking Anis del Toro went deeper; as we know, the grade of Anis del Toro is higher than beer. This was evident when Jig described the taste of this Anis and compared it with licorice: "Everything tastes of licorice. Especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe." (Hemingway, 1927). As mentioned in that passage, the taste of Anis del Toro, which has a bittersweet taste, possibly implements the bittersweet dilemma that they faced for abortion.

The dilemma they experienced was due to the uncertainty they would face as a result of Jig's pregnancy. This is depicted clearly when Jig asks the Man about how they were doing after the abortion, "Then what will we do afterwards?" (Hemingway, 1927). In Jig's mind and heart, there were still doubts about having an abortion. On the other hand, the man was convinced to have the abortion, as evidenced by the passage "We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were

before." (Hemingway, 1927). That belief is possible in the mind of the American man because Paul Cameron, in his study, states that "There is nothing worse than an unwanted child" is a common motto of the pro-liberalized abortion campaign. Presumably, the motto is not to be taken literally (some things must be worse) but is to be construed as "unwanted children are destined to have a much less satisfying life than children who are wanted." So, the statement reinforces the reason why American men believe that they will feel better and live happily as before if they have an abortion. As the conversation turns to abortion, the American man tries to change the topic by having a conversation while drinking alcohol; alcohol here is represented as an escape from the problems they face, which means abortion. It was evident when the man said, "Should we have another drink?" (Hemingway, 1927). With this explanation, the man wanted to end their conversation about abortion so that he would not feel any dilemma in making that decision. As explained above, the use of alcohol in the story "Hills Like White Elephants" by Ernest Hemingway symbolizes how the dilemma felt by the couple in deciding the abortion they will be having. Besides that, alcohol also interprets as an escape that is being done by the two couples against the dilemma they face.

The Train and Surrounding Places

The story takes place when they are waiting for a train. It is narrated that the train "from Barcelona would come in forty minutes" and would stop at the station when the couple stayed "for two minutes and went to Madrid." (Hemingway, 1927). In general, trains are a form of transportation that travels relatively quickly. Within the context of this narrative, the train might stand in for an important moment where the characters have to make an essential decision. The train station is visualized as the juxtaposition of "fields of grain and trees" on the other side of the station with the "brown and dry" country that is portrayed in the story (Hemingway, 1927). Based on that juxtaposition, we assume that there is a clear comparison that portrays the condition of the female character.

The words "fields of grain and trees" give a symbol of how she'll have the potential of fertility and sterility if she keeps the pregnancy to bring a new life into the world. On the other hand, if she chooses to have the abortion, she might feel empty and desolate about the couple's current way of life as a consequence. The statement "brown and dry" also highlights the relationship between the woman and the man, where both of them would somehow feel dry and strained that

the man might possibly think of the idea of keeping the pregnancy. At the same time, the imagery of green and full of life can be seen in the part "fields of grain and trees," which is relevant to the metaphor of hope and positive emotions for the woman's potential desire for something more meaningful in life, which is becoming a mother. Overall, the train serves as a significant metaphor for the important decision they must make as soon as possible. Considering that they are depicted as literally and symbolically standing at a crossroads, it emphasizes the significance and urgency of the choice they are making. We draw the conclusion that the contrast shows how their choices have the power to either fill them with growth and vitality or leave them feeling empty and hopeless for the rest of their days.

Overall, the symbolism in this story highlights the issues of abortion portrayed through the symbol of hills that look like white elephants, the alcohol they take during their conversation, and the train and surrounding scenery. The white elephant represents abortion, the problem that they are faced with. The alcohol represents the dilemma and the platform for them to forget their problem. The train station and scenery represent the different outcomes of their decision.

CONCLUSION

"Hills Like White Elephants" by Ernest Hemingway brilliantly employs symbols to draw attention to an issue that is not easily understood in a brief overview. Hemingway employs the white elephant, alcohol, the train, and the surrounding locations as metaphors to illustrate the characters' dilemma and the underlying problem of abortion. The white elephant represents the abortion theme, which emphasizes mental toughness, innocence, and purity. The alcohol represents the means by which they can momentarily escape their predicament and the depth of their emotions. The train represents the length of time they had left before making a choice, and the surrounding locations represent the two possible resolutions to their predicament. The paper's analysis of the narrative revealed the abortion's underlying themes as well as the conflict in the couple's relationship and point of view.

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