

**Breaking Social Norms with Irony and Bold Characters in “Soldier’s Home” and
“Hills Like White Elephants”**

By Katie Howland

“His town had heard too many atrocity stories to be thrilled by actualities. Krebs found that to be listened to at all he had to lie and after he had done this twice he, too, had a reaction against the war and against talking about it” (“Soldier’s” 343). With his almost contradictory simple yet complex way of telling stories, Ernest Hemingway is considered one of America’s greatest 20th century writers. He is famed for his adventurous lifestyle and his unique style of writing. One of the most important stylistic techniques that dominate Hemingway’s work is his use of irony. While irony is prevalent in all of his writing, I will be focusing in this essay on Hemingway’s use of ironic situations and settings in two of his short stories. I believe it is through this stylistic technique that Hemingway is able to connect and relate two very different characters and stories, Harold Krebs from “Soldier’s Home” and Jig from “Hills Like White Elephants,” to create two alternative anti-heroes, who comment on social choices and expectations presented by society.

To begin, it is important to recognize the structure of the settings in both “Soldier’s Home” and “Hills Like White Elephants.” Hemmingway uses a singular event in the story line to create a divide between what the setting meant to the characters before the event and what it means to them after the event. For Krebs, in “Soldier’s Home,” this event is the war. In “Irony of Situation in Ernest Hemingway’s ‘Soldier’s Home,’” Anthony J. Petrarca recognizes the markers of irony and their significance in “Soldier’s Home.” He indicates that right from the first few lines of the story, “war is immediately presented as the backdrop against which all Krebs’ experiences, past and present, shall be measured” (Petrarca 664). What this ultimately means is that the war is, “the peg of reality on which the irony of situation hinges, and it provides the foundation for Hemingway to create a significant tension by contrasting this reality with illusions of the ‘Soldier’s Home,’ thereby setting up the external complications, and inner conflict of the story” (Petrarca 664-665). In other word, the setting of home is in every physical way the same before the event of war as after, however, it now elicits a different reaction from Krebs. What was once a safe and comforting place has now become a setting of alienation and complication. However, there is a desire from society and the Krebs’ family for him to return to the lifestyle and attitude he had before the war. But for Krebs the home they want him to return to is just a socially constructed illusion. His reality is one that society is unwilling to see or understand. Therefore the Hemmingway is able to change the meaning of the Krebs’ mundane setting into a critic on how society deals with war and veterans returning home.

In this same line of stylistic inquiry, in the settings of “Hills Like White Elephants” the significant indicator that changes the setting is the pregnancy. While it is never explicitly indicated in the story, the majority of critics have agreed that the unnamed conflict, or significant event, in the

story is the question of aborting an unplanned pregnancy. Similarly to Krebs and his wholesome all American Oklahoma setting, Jig and the American are in the process of living a certain kind of lifestyle before the event (or realization) occurs. Furthermore, just as Krebs is changed by the war, Jig is changed by the revelation of her pregnancy. The first indication of Jigs revelation is when she states, “That’s all we do, isn’t it – look at things and try new drinks” (“Hills” 416). Her acceptance of the couple’s carefree transient lifestyle comes into question with her pregnancy, and once she is put in the place to think about it, she questions the validity and sustainability of said lifestyle. In his article “Moving to the Girls Side of ‘Hills Like White Elephants,’” Stanley Renner identifies that “in choosing whether to abort or have the child, the couple are choosing between two ways of life” (28). However, the American is either unwilling or unable to recognize the pregnancy and Jig’s doubts about the abortion, stating, “We’ll be fine afterwards, just like we were before” (“Hills” 416). By desiring things to return to how they were before the event and ignoring the change that has happened within Jig, the American is pushing his own expectations onto Jig much like Krebs and the society around him. Whether she decides to keep the baby or not, Jig’s reality has been altered and she realizes that any attempt to return to an unchanged relationship and carefree lifestyle is simply an illusion. For both characters this denial of a significant event that has forever altered who they are is impossible.

In fact, the physical and social settings of both stories can be even further explored to indicate the significant change seen in the main characters once asked to take part in the social illusion surrounding them. In “Soldier’s Home,” Hemingway describes the physical setting less than the social setting, “Nothing was changed in the town except that the young girls had grown up” (“Soldier’s” 345). But the once simplistic environment of the small mid-western town has become too complicated after Krebs’ experiences in the war. Krebs description of Oklahoma as a complicated place breaks all expectations of the stereotypical ‘simplistic American Midwest.’ But after his complicated and most likely traumatic experiences in war, what appears simplistic in the social illusion is presented in Krebs’ truthful reality as people who, “lived in such a complicated world of already defined alliances and shifting feuds that Krebs did not feel the energy or the courage to break into it” (“Soldier’s” 345). His view of his surroundings is beautifully represented in one sentence that describes his breakfast as he talks to his mother, “Krebs looked at the bacon fat hardening on his plate” (“Soldier’s” 349). This simple image is so significant in indicating the change that has happened within Krebs, and the unaltered state of his home, family and life. He no longer sees the world in the same way as his mother, and he no longer believes in her faith. And yet his life continues

with his breakfast slowly getting cold in front of him. Though Krebs is not unaffected by this disconnect, “Krebs felt embarrassed at resentful as always” (“Soldier’s” 349). This has become his new state of being in his old home, which leaves him lonely and detached from his surroundings.

In “Hills Like White Elephants” the reader has less of an insight into Jig’s thoughts, therefore we must turn to the physical setting described by Hemingway. Like the ironic and symbolic location of Krebs’ home in Oklahoma, Jig and the American find themselves at both a metaphoric as well as physical crossroads. Though, the setting of a train station in the countryside between Barcelona and Madrid extends beyond the time sensitivity of their decision and the transitory nature of the lifestyle. It is also the location of the station, by the Ebro River, with its two distinct ecological systems that indicates the polarity of the situation. Renner identifies that, “the choice of abortion is associated with the arid sterility of the hills on the barren side of the valley and by extension with the aimless, hedonistic life they have been leading. The choice of having the child is associated with the living, growing things on the other side of the valley, the ‘fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro’” (Renner 28). In this way the physical setting magnifies and identifies the decision that Jig is struggling so profoundly with. She realizes that at one end of the station she keeps the child and at the other she does not. But what she will have if she decides to go through with the procedure, as the American suggests, is a barren setting that no longer holds the appeal it once did.

What is achieved through these situational ironies and ironic settings is a tension between the characters and the people around them. Because of this tension Krebs and Jig are forced to make some very difficult decisions that concern appeasing expectations and simultaneously finding peace with themselves. For Krebs his tension seems to be initiated from his late return home. “By the time Krebs returned to his home town in Oklahoma the greetings of hero’s was over. He came back much too late” (“Soldier’s” 343). Because of this late return he had no one to talk to about his experiences and thus withdraws into himself. However, the apex of the tension in the story is between Krebs and his mother. She ultimately pushes him to the point where, “she stirs Krebs to dramatically demonstrate his total and profound separation from the conventional American way of life” (Petrarca 667). This is first represented when his mother is pushing him to start work and she says, “God has some work for everyone to do...there can be no idle hands in His Kingdom” (“Soldier’s” 349). Krebs’ departure from his mother’s faith indicates and initial distancing which is followed by her comparing him to another man his age, who is settling down with a girl and doing exactly what society expects of him. This comparison further alienated Krebs from his family and society by highlighting his altered state after the war. What this tension culminates to is the outburst in which

this mother declares, “Don’t you love your mother,” to which Krebs responds, “No...I don’t love anyone.” (“Soldier’s” 350). While tragic on a familial level, this moment indicates a moment of declaration in which Krebs recognizes in himself and exposes to society his disinclination for convention. He can no longer play into the social illusion that nothing is wrong, he is in this moment not only admitting that he is damaged, but also calling for recognition and help from society.

In the case of Jig, her tension stems from communication with the American, because he is the only person Jig can talk to. However, on a larger level he represents the voice of society and its expectations of women and the expectations of a young, free spirited, transient couple. In “Hills Like White Elephants” there is a steady ebb and flow in which Jig voices her concern and the American uses the same counter argument to try and silence her. To establish this tension Hemingway uses repetition of phrases such as “I feel fine” from Jig, and “I know it’s perfectly simple” from the American, both of which we know to be highly ironic and simply untrue given the situation. For Jig the desire to be listened to always culminates when she can no longer stand listening to the American’s unfounded assertions. Jig eventually reveals her disbelief in the American’s apparent confidence and knowledge about the “procedure” when he states that, “That’s the only thing that bothers us. It’s the only thing that’s made us unhappy” (“Hills” 416). He then continues, “You don’t have to be afraid. I’ve known lots of people that have done it” to which she responds sarcastically, “So have I... And afterwards they were all so happy” (“Hills” 416). This sarcasm is a recognition of the American’s ego and ignorance. Not only is this a life altering decision, but it would also be nearly impossible in Spain in the 1920s. Ultimately her desire for him to stop talking, and stop trying to control her ends with her desperate, and climactic plea, “Would you please please please please please please stop talking” (“Hills” 418). The over enthusiastic use of the word please highlights her final shift from what some might identify as the dependent female companion, to a girl in frustration disregarding and actively denying the expectations of her companion and society they acquainted themselves with. This is the moment the reader truly feels Jig has stepped outside convention for her desires to be heard. Like Krebs’ outburst it is a moment of declaration, she is obviously not convinced, and no longer wants to hear him talk about an illusion she knows is unattainable.

So what exactly differentiates these two characters for some of Hemingway’s others? According to B.S. Tillinghast Jr. “In this day of contemporary writing with the non-hero and the anti-hero, the Hemingway hero who believes in "grace under pressure" can offer a positive antidote of having meaning in what he does” (38). While this may be true of Hemingway’s work in general, I

believe that it does not accurately describe the position of the protagonists of two stories. I think Krebs and Jig fall somewhere in between Hemingway's hero and a classic anti-hero in their characteristics. While they don't necessarily identify as noble, courageous, moral and steadfast they do show these characteristics in some ways. In addition, they both make the heroic effort of voicing their denial of social expectations in an attempt to find reality in a world of illusions and expectations. But over all Krebs is a damaged war veteran who is lost and isolated. He has forsaken his faith and his desire to truly live his life. Though the most tragic of his anti-heroic sentiments comes when he appears to ultimately choose to continue the illusion to appease his family. In a similar fashion, Jig is tragically portrayed not only in a foreign country where she doesn't speak the language, with a man who does not appear to wholly respect or even deeply care for her. But also in a situation where her opinion counts for little. Though Jig does not want to lose the American and desperately seeks his affection, she is not the victim of this story as some of Hemingway's female characters are. While conflicted, she is still makes the heroic effort to not fall subject to the American's desires and struggles with the decision. However, the conflict is not solved in the story and it is unclear whether she will decide to play along with the illusion and follow the American's advice just to stay in a relationship with him. By construction these characters as something other than the classic heroic figure, Hemingway brings into question not only what we expect of a hero but also how society handles those who do not possess the expected qualities. In addition, Hemmingway decides to leave his audience uncertain of whether these characters are truly heroes or anti-heroes.

Ultimately both Krebs and Jig decide to push down their true desires in their new realities as a kind of compromise with the illusion presented by social expectations. This decision stems from a desire for silence, for a break from others telling them what to do. For Krebs his mother's constant urging for him to participate "Don't you think it's about time," and for Jig who is continually being told by the American, "I know its perfectly simple." This shared desire for peace indicates two characters that are fed up with the pressures of external expectations and influences. So their act of conformity is simply a stopgap to social pressure. It may be that what Hemmingway communicates with these two characters, is that to gain true peace and silence in a world of illusions, one must be willing to make their voices heard. While this may seem like a contradictory statement, I believe that by speaking their truths Krebs and Jig are able to, if only slightly, crack the glass ceiling of social expectations of the time and their surroundings. While these characters may not take the strong courageous stance of a typical hero, they fight against social expectations in their own quiet way. Though of course in true Hemingway fashion, the reader is not privy to a long detailed story, or given a conclusion. We can

only speculate whether Krebs settles down with a nice girl or finds solitude away from his hometown, and whether Jig decides to keep or abort the pregnancy. But what can be recognized are two main characters that represent a resistance to social norms and expectations, and act accordingly in their own heroic way.

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