

THE CONCEPTION OF  
IRREVERSIBILITY:  
HANNAH ARENDT AND  
HEMINGWAY'S  
"HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS"

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THERE HAS BEEN A PLETHORA OF CRITICISM examining one of Ernest Hemingway's most powerful short stories, "Hills Like White Elephants." However, one approach that may merit more attention is an exploration of Hemingway's notions of "action" and of the irreversibility of action within the text. Hannah Arendt, an intellectual whose germinal work has transcended more than one discipline, may be useful in providing some measure of insight into Hemingway's problematic narrative.

I would like to begin by examining certain rhetorical elements of "Hills," which suggest traces of Arendt's perspectives on the "nature of action." More specifically, Arendt's influential study, *The Human Condition*, suggests that the dissonance found in the relationship between Jig and the American primarily arises from their differing viewpoints regarding the Arendtian notion of irreversibility.<sup>2</sup> That is to say, the issue is far more important than considerations of the potential abortion, which is the explicit topic of their combative dialogue, as critics have noted (Gillette 50–69; O'Brien 19–25; Rankin 234; Urgo 35). We might consider that Jig, in her overtly rhetorical exchanges with the American, illustrates (and promotes) the concept of irreversibility, as she suggests that the conception of life (an action, in essence, as it is a beginning) within her cannot be undone, while the American argues

against irreversibility, as he believes that the conception can be “undone” by the act of abortion. As Stanley Renner proffers in his “Moving to the Girl’s Side of ‘Hills Like White Elephants,’” “[I]n choosing whether to abort or to have the child, the couple are [sic] choosing between two ways of life” (28). This forty-minute exchange determining the end decision—abortion or life—reveals that the couple is also choosing between two ways of *living*—either living in such a way so that actions can be “undone,” so to say, or living in such a way where actions bring consequences that are absolute.

Throughout the story the American attempts to articulate and advance his belief in reversibility. However, his own actions and statements undermine his attempts to do so. One can first see this situation in the exchange begun by Jig’s comment about the hills in the distance, as this moment initiates the heated philosophical discussion. As David Wyche perceptively states, “This bit of dialogue establishes the characters’ opposing positions in what is, essentially, an emotionally charged negotiation” (61). Seated outside the bar, the couple enters into dialogue—the dilemma at hand being whether or not the couple should (or can) have an abortion and thus reverse the conception. While staring off into the distance, Jig remarks that the hills “look like white elephants,” to which the American responds, “I’ve never seen one” (211). Jig views the hills as white elephants, as entities so large and powerful that they require attention and disallow negotiation, much like the baby within her womb—a connection that Stanley Kozikowski makes: “Hills are like white elephants for Jig because they carry ambivalent evocations of the child within her—like a white elephant, an unwanted gift, a seemingly remote but immense problem” (107). The American, on the other hand, claims to have never seen a white elephant, a statement that suggests he does not believe in entities or actions that cannot be undone. However, his rhetorical position is weakened by his unwillingness to look up and assess the hills for himself. He responds to his beer,<sup>3</sup> rather than to Jig, as following his statement, the narrator says, “[T]he man drank his beer,” rather than something like, “The man said,” or, “The man responded” (Hemingway 211; 55-56). When Jig snaps back, “You wouldn’t have,” the American replies, “Just because you say I wouldn’t have doesn’t prove anything” (211). In his response, the American, perhaps unwittingly, takes power away from speech, through which the two ways in which actions can be reversed—the making of promises and forgiveness—occur. As such, within this exchange about the hills, Jig constructs the fetus within her womb as irreversible and non-negotiable,

much like a white elephant, while the American attempts to forward his belief in reversibility—in the abortion of actions. Yet the American fails to construct the plurality necessary for such actions to be reversed, as he talks into his beer and limits the power of his own statements.

Another such exchange occurs when Jig and the American try Anis del Toro. Upon imbibing the drink, Jig comments that “[i]t tastes like licorice,” to which the American responds, “That’s the way with everything” (212). The American’s response plays into Jig’s beliefs about irreversibility, for she seizes upon the chance to rephrase the statement and direct it back toward the American: “Yes,” she says. “Everything tastes of licorice. Especially all the things you’ve waited so long for, like absinthe” (Hemingway 212). Perhaps the American only meant to dismiss Jig’s childish statement about licorice; however, in doing so, he opened the door for her to make a philosophical statement about consequence. In saying that everything amounts to one thing—one “taste”—Jig suggests that actions have an absolute consequence, one that leaves a bitter taste that cannot be undone. After a succession of comments about each rhetorician’s motivation, Jig concludes, “That’s all we do, isn’t it—look at things and try new drinks?” (Hemingway 212). Jig’s statement indirectly reproves the American for not allowing action within the relationship. The only action she has seen, in her opinion, was the conception, and the American will not even allow that to progress to full term. Detecting Jig’s intimation, David Wyche writes that “[Jig] manages to articulate, again figuratively, what has no doubt been an increasing awareness of the emptiness of the couple’s lifestyle to date” (62). Similarly, Paul Rankin surmises that, despite the American’s desire to “act” on the conception, his character is “essentially passive in nature”: “the man has nothing to offer, nothing to contribute to the story, just as he has nothing more to contribute to Jig’s pregnancy” (235). As such, despite the American’s desire to reverse the action—the life—he created through the abortion, his passivity inhibits his rhetorical position.

The rhetorical struggle culminates in a battle between the *cans* and the *cannots*—a battle that Jig incites when she looks upon the field and the mountains and says, “And we could have all this . . . . And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible” (213). She clearly makes this statement to spite her lover, who agrees with her that, once Jig had the abortion, they could do and have anything they wanted. Every time the American suggests something (clearly impossible) they could have or do

post-abortion, Jig responds, “No, we can’t” (213). After the American’s concluding remark (“We can go everywhere”), Jig replies, “No, we can’t. It isn’t ours any more,” and later comments that “once they take it away, you never get it back” (213). At this point Jig cements her belief in irreversibility in the face of the American, who now is at a rhetorical disadvantage and can only make impossible remarks. In these lines, Jig insists that “undoing” something—reversing something—such as the conception of life is an impossibility, for though something can be removed or killed, in the case of the fetus, *that* something was once present—was once a reality—and, as such, can never be truly reversed. True reversal would require Jig and the American to “forgive and forget,” so to say—something that Jig, once having had life within her, cannot do. It is clear that if Jig went through with the abortion, she would never be able to view the world in the same way—nothing could ever be hers again, for she would have lost something that was truly important to her. After this exchange during which Jig seemingly wins the rhetorical battle over the potential of irreversibility, she refuses to discuss the matter anymore. Whether or not she has the abortion is open to debate, although the issue of irreversibility, once on the table, has been removed from the discussion.

The story concludes with Jig smiling—yet not because she has discerned the fate of her unborn child, but rather because she has asserted her beliefs regarding the notion of irreversibility and has won the rhetorical battle against her lover, the American. She “feel[s] fine,” perhaps, as a result of this knowledge of rhetorical victory, rather than as a result of her thinking—at least temporarily—she will not go through with the abortion, as Hilary K. Justice and Stanley Renner say, or as a result of her being inebriated, as Phillip Sipiora suggests (25–26; 40; 50). Without knowing the fate of Jig’s unborn child, the reader can surmise that Jig has successfully promoted her claims of the irreversibility of actions (particularly conceptions), while the American, although attempting to forward the reversibility of actions, has failed in such attempts. By not acting and fostering plurality through his dialogue, he is not able to utilize the two Arendtian modes of reversal that would be open to him—namely, forgiveness and the making of promises. His promises are not grounded in reality, for what he has to offer includes the whole world—a non-reality, which Jig jumps to point out. Moreover, he cannot talk Jig into forgiving him for impregnating her, nor can he “forgive” her for conceiving a child by enabling her to carry it to term. While neither

partner agrees with the other,<sup>4</sup> there is a clear rhetorical victor. As no concordance is reached, the reader is merely left with the conclusion that, based upon the rhetorical aspects of the text, Jig has emerged rhetorically victorious, while the American has lost control of the situation and must resort to interacting with others inside the bar and acting as Jig's porter, moving the luggage to the other side of the tracks.

#### NOTES

1. Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, distinguishes action from performative activity based upon the ability of action, in contradistinction to performative activity, "to set something into motion," to begin something anew (177). Action, in the Arendtian sense of the word, is intrinsically tied to speech, for it is "[i]n acting and speaking [that] men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities and thus make their appearance in the human world" (179). As illustrated by the previous quote, action necessitates plurality, for the "revelatory quality of speech and action comes to the fore where people are with others and neither for nor against them—that is, in sheer human togetherness" (180). According to Arendt, man's ability to act—to set things into motion—can have severe consequences if actions are left unchecked.
2. In order to combat irreversibility, according to Arendt, man must either make promises or bestow forgiveness on others, two actions that, by their nature, also require plurality, "for no one can forgive himself and no one can feel bound by a promise made only to himself" (237).
3. Meg Gillette, in her piece "Making Modern Parents in Ernest Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants,'" provides a detailed analysis that focuses upon how the characters in the story frequently shift between offering retorts and drinking.
4. As David Wyche points out, "We see that if either or both of the characters experience 'growth' throughout the course of the story, neither necessarily moves toward the other's side" (61).

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