

A BARTHESIAN ANALYSIS OF *HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS* BY EARNEST HEMINGWAY

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ABSTRACT

The present study applies Roland Barthes' five codes to Hills Like White Elephants (1927, later published in 1955 by Penguin Books), a short story by Ernest Hemingway, a popular minimalist writer of the 19th century. The study has examined the story in a qualitative manner by keeping in view Barthes's five codes: proairetic, hermeneutic, semantic, symbolic and cultural ones. The present study first takes the critical overview of the story Hills Like White Elephants and then further analyzes it on a structural level by applying five codes as given by Barthes. The story opens with a long description of setting and the tense situation between the characters. The story is full of tension where several elements stand for connotative meanings. Patriarchal and authoritative nature of men is the prevailing theme in the story. Most importantly, binary oppositions (symbolic code) play a vital role in the structure of the story. The study concludes that the author has created a fine contrast between the personalities and feelings of The American (male) and the girl (Jig). Their conflicting nature, viewpoints, desires, feelings and emotions and their conflicting perception of the issue provide the content and construction of the plot of the story. The findings of the study reveal that all the Barthes' five codes run through the narrative structure of the short story and help the reader to get new insight and meanings.

Keywords: Structuralism, Barthes' five Codes, Hills Like White Elephant, Earnest Hemingway.

1 INTRODUCTION

Structuralism, as a 20th century approach and intellectual movement, is an attempt to interpret and analyze the interrelated chunks of any text with its multifaceted systems in social sciences. The concept of structuralism is based on the construction of human activities, mind perceptions and its products that seem normal and natural in the human world. It deals with the conception that everything in this world has some meaning and this is because of the study of particular systems along with its sub-systems that contribute to its total meanings. According to Blackburn (2008), this approach constitutes the operation of interrelations among human beings and the world as there are constant laws of abstract structures that formulate and operate behind these interrelations and their manifestations. Hence, Structuralism is a human science that tries to understand in a systematic way the various fundamental structures that underlie all human experience and therefore, all human behavior and production (Tyson, 2006, pp. 209-210). In Literature, Structuralism tries to study the underlying patterns, structures and codes that shape a particular text.

Roland Barthes, being a structuralist and philosopher, identified five structural codes while analyzing Balzac's *Sarrasine* and these five codes are: Hermeneutic, Proairetic, Semantic, Symbolic, and Cultural ones. These five codes deal with the five kinds of semiotic features which can be found in all types of literary texts. Barthes has devised these codes to understand the basic underlying

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patterns/structures of any literary text. Barry (2002) contends that these five codes are the basic underlying structures of all narratives.

The present study has used Barthes' five codes to analyze the short story *Hills Like White Elephants* by Earnest Hemingway. This short story is full of tensions in which various sections of the text have different connotations. The story presents an amazing opposition between two different genders. The American (male) and Jig (female) are the two main characters of the story having entirely opposing and conflicting features. The text of this short story has been analyzed to know the impact of the theory and its appropriateness in interpreting the meanings in different socio-cultural contexts.

2 REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There are a number of studies relevant to the application of Barthesian codes on literary texts. The purpose of these studies is to demystify the cultural meanings by making the readers a part of the creative process. Zaib & Mashori (2014) apply structuralist approach on Shahraz's short story *A Pair of Jeans*. The story reveals Mariam's Western clothing and her immodest and rebellious attitude towards traditional culture and values, leading to the break of her engagement. Malik, Zaib and Bughio (2014) analyze a short story *The Optimist* by Bina Shah by applying Roland Barthes' five codes. Application of Barthesian codes unfolds the story to the readers in different ways. The story is structured on the binary opposition in characterization: patriarchal Adnan and feminized Raheela. The story truly depicts the cultural conflicts between Pakistani-British girl Raheela and Pakistani Adnan.

There are a number of studies on *Hills Like White Elephants*. Majeed & Mohammad (2014) have examined the two characters, The American and Jig as the Double Rhythmic Movement to analyze duality objects in the story. The study highlights the use of the author's Iceberg Theory that leaves the readers with unanswered questions, so they can create answers by themselves. The findings of the study reveal that readers identify themselves with the conflicts and their solutions that exist between the two characters of the story. Alashjaai (2014) has examined this short story from the perspective of interpersonal relationship between Jig and the American. The study focuses on dialogues to highlight the point of views of the two characters. Throughout the story, both the characters communicate with each other but are not in each other's favor. Both of them have different point of views regarding the concept of abortion. The study analyzes the story keeping in view the dramatic dialogues of the characters by employing New Critical Approach. Jiahong (2017) investigates this short story by employing Speech Act Theory. The study discusses the conversations and behaviors mentioned between the American and Jig to explore the portraying images of two characters. By applying Speech Act Theory, the characters' relationship is easily understood. Moreover, the author's purpose can also be revealed. These Speech Acts help the readers understand the story, as the story confuses the readers about its ending.

The Story and the Author

Earnest Hemingway (1899-1961) was an American novelist, sportsman, short-story writer and journalist. *A Farewell to Arms*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *The Sun also Rises*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* are included in his eminent and well-known fictional works. Earnest Hemingway's short story *Hills Like White Elephants* was first published in August 1927 and later on, it appeared in the collection of the short stories *Men Without Women* (1928)

Earnest Hemingway in his short story *Hills Like White Elephants* presents a discussion between two characters that are waiting for a train at a station. They are discussing aborting the baby. The male character of the story is named The American and the name of the girl is Jig. Both are waiting for the train to go to their destination, Madrid. The author of the story has highlighted different happenings around the station as Jig points out that hills look like the white elephants in the valley. The situation highlighted here is that both the male and female characters of the story order drinks while discussing their matters at the station. While having their drinks, the American talks to Jig that she should have undergone an operation and Jig seems inquisitive of the operation as she would be undergoing this soon. The American moderates the situation and seriousness of the abortion as in his views it is not an operation at all while Jig feels scare about it. Curiously, she later asks The American what will happen to her after the operation. To this, The American responds confidently that their life may become easy and happy afterwards. He wants to control her thoughts by stating that he has seen many people who

did this before so as to keep their life free and happy. Jig finally decides to undergo the operation for the sake of The American's happiness as she does not want to hurt him. She thinks of her happy life that would be possible only after the operation. A conflict occurs later between them while discussing the matter when The American repeatedly assures her that he does not want her to have an abortion if she does not want it. It seems, however, that the girl would rather keep her baby and raise it together with her partner. At some point in the conversation, the girl gets up, walks to the end of the station, and looks at the other side of the valley. When she returns, she expresses her feelings more emphatically. Her partner's unexpected responses frustrate her so much that she implores him to stop talking please. When the arrival of the train is announced, the man gets up, saying he is going to move their luggage to the other side. He then returns to the girl and asks her do you feel better? She answers that she feels fine and there's nothing wrong with her.

3 DISCUSSION

3.1 Hermeneutic Code

Scholes (1985) interprets the term hermeneutic code as a code of puzzles that deals with the questions which are raised for the extraction of meaning from the text. This code may also be termed as enigmatic code that refers to the unexplained, puzzling and mysterious elements in the story. Following are the enigmatic elements in the story:

3.1.1 The Title

The title of this short story is *Hills Like White Elephants*. This title forces the readers to think: what would the story be like? Why has the author selected this title for this short story? The answers to these questions lie within the text. After careful reading of the text, readers come to know that the phrase white elephant refers to an unnamed existing tension between Jig (the girl) and the American (male). Metaphorically, the use of white elephants can be compared to a problem and confusion that symbolizes the unusual and burdensome of something. It may be related to anything such as the pregnancy, the child itself, the act of aborting infant, the unwillingness of Jig to get the abortion and it may be the persistence by the Americans that Jig should abort her baby.

3.1.2 The Unnamed Tension

The story begins with an intense environment that surrounds the rest of Hemingway's short story. The beginning of the story takes place in the late 19th century in Spain. The mentioned lines below describe the setting of the story as:

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...it was very hot and the express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes. It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went to Madrid. (Hemingway, 1955, p. 50)

Right from the beginning of the text till the end, the tension between the two characters along with atmosphere has been highlighted through setting of the story, dialogues and behaviors of the two characters and their conflicting natures and views regarding the issue between them. The end of the story is highly enigmatic and problematic as the line shows "Do you feel better?" he asked. "I feel fine," she said. "There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine" (p. 55). The ending of the story leaves multiple confusions whether the American surrenders or the girl surrenders in the end.

3.1.3 The Operation

The word operation runs through the fabric of the story multiple times. The words pregnancy and abortion do not appear in the text, but the criticism mostly assumes that the girl is pregnant and the topic of conversation is about abortion. "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. "It's not really an operation at all" (p. 52). The procedure goes unnamed throughout the story, but as the story progresses, we come to know that it is clearly a euphemism for an abortion and the unnamed tension is also because of their conflicting views about that operation. At that time, abortions were illegal and often very dangerous, adding to the implicit nature of their discussion.

3.2 Proairetic Code

Hawkes (2003) views Proairetic code as code of action. This action code deals with building tension in the story. It indicates any action which may show that something troublesome is going to happen. This code heralds suspense in the story and maintains actions chronologically: what happens next.

3.2.1 The Unnamed Operation

This story holds a good amount of suspense right from the start of text till the end of the plot. Throughout the story, readers remain curious to know about the unnamed tension between the two characters. We only know that they are talking about some operation, but no one knows what kind of operation it is. This is the word that weaves the web of tension in the story from beginning to the end. "It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig, the man said. It's not really an operation at all". (p. 52). As the action of the story proceeds, the tension intensifies when the American says "Well," the man said, "if you don't want to you don't have to. I wouldn't have you do it if you didn't want to. But I know it's perfectly simple" (p. 53). After this when she agrees to do it to be happy in future life she says "Then I'll do it. Because I don't care about me" "What do you mean?" "I don't care about me." "Well, I care about you." "Oh, yes. But I don't care about me. And I'll do it and then everything will be fine." "I don't want you to do it if you feel that way" (p. 54). So tension goes on till the girl implores "Would you please please please please please please stop talking?" (p. 56).

3.3 The Semantic Code

There are many elements and words in this short story which have connotative/symbolic meanings. This code refers to some additional meanings found mostly in characters and themes of the story.

3.3.1 White Elephants

The term *white elephant* in the title symbolizes some unwanted thing. It seems like a burden or a thing that Jig does not want in her life. The girl does not want to take the responsibility of newborn baby at all. Undoubtedly, the newborn baby has been symbolized by the white elephant. A white elephant is considered as a precious item that costs high but has no use. The white elephant has been represented differently from Jig's perspective; it is unwanted but still a blessing and the American considers it as a burden in his life. As the text shows "they look like white elephants. She said, I've never seen one. "The man drank his beer" (p. 50). The exchange of words shows that the American is not willing to have a child and he considers it an extra responsibility and an unwanted burden. But for the girl it is a blessing, and she is ready to start a new life and enjoy the new experiences of life in the shape of her unborn baby.

3.3.2 Names of Characters

The names of the characters also have connotative meanings. In this short story, the girl is named *Jig* and the male character is named *The American*. Naming the male character as American shows the superiority and authority of the man. The authority of man in the society shows his interactions. He just pays false devotion to make the girl happy. He shows that he has only one concern for Jig's happiness, but this is not true. He lives to fulfill his own desires. He wants to implement his decisions on the girl and forces her to seek an abortion so that he may enjoy his freedom. It is only the girl who should sacrifice her life and social values and the man has all the rights to live life. Jig must do the things that the man wants for her. He imposes his rules and regulations on the girl. Jig's actions and intentions are controlled by him as he treats her like a child and she cannot do her work by herself. This indicates the damaging behavior from the man and poses a negative impression on the society. Jig states in the story: "I wanted to try this new drink. That's all we do, isn't it-look at things and try new drinks?" (p. 52). This statement shows that she is willing to give birth to her child. She wants to experience this new happening in life. The name of the girl in the story is Jig which symbolizes a form of drink or measurement of alcohol.

3.3.3 The Curtain

Another object in the story is the Bamboo curtain that symbolizes some life issues that the couple faced due to the coming of a new one in their lives. It happens because both the man and the girl have different perceptions regarding the birth of the baby. The man does not want this baby and considers it as a burden in his life while Jig wants the infant and this pregnancy is based as a curtain between the man and the girl. The curtain is described in the story as “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” (p. 50). The curtain is a clear indication of a problem that has arisen between the couple.

3.3.4 Numeric Digit 2

The digit two has also symbolic importance in the story. A few examples have been taken into consideration from the mentioned story. These instances are related to the number two, as in two minutes, the couple received two glasses of beer, two felt pads; the man carried two heavy bags and so on. The number two gives two different notions in relation to the plot, as the man cannot accept the third person in between the relationship of Jig and himself. Secondly, it is related to Jig and her child that they may become two to understand each other in future to bear the harsh realities of the world.

3.4 The Cultural Code

Hawkes (2003) regards the cultural code as dealing with the concept -- *everyone knows*. It is about the author who writes the story while knowing about the established and cultural facts about the society. This short story represents the picture of both Western and Eastern patriarchal cultures and societies. Portrayal of authoritative nature of the man and typical girl add to the cross-cultural values. Gender-based discrimination, hedonism and stereotypical approaches lend peculiar meaning to the story.

3.4.1 Patriarchal and authoritative nature of the Man

The story portrays the character of a female who is overwhelmed in the beginning of the 20th century. The story depicts the female character, Jig, who seems to be suppressed by The American, who is her lover. She feels the pressure of subjugation. We can associate the characters with the stereotypical gender roles. The American who exercises his power seems dominant. On the other side, Jig seems passive and more obedient in the story. The story begins with a discussion between the couple. First, it seems as a normal conversation but they are actually talking about an abortion. Later on, we come to know that The American is supporting it and the girl is against it. The girl in her own way plans a future in which she and her lover may spend a good life with their child, but this will not happen as the man is reluctant even to entertain those lovely moments. Later on, he mentions his intentions of so-called love by claiming that “I love you now. You know I love you.” And I don’t care about me.” “Well, I care about you” (p. 53). The girl seems to surrender her personal freedom against the man’s will. In the end of the story, when the American asks Jig about her feelings, Jig replies in a rigid way that reveals her true feelings as “I feel fine. There’s nothing wrong with me. I feel fine” (p. 56). This self-suppressed statement indicates that their relationship will remain stuck in the present state, and this seems really unhealthy for her to live in this condition.

3.4.2 Hedonism

Hedonism is a doctrine which considers pleasure to be the ultimate goal of life, or we can say that pleasure lessens the pain otherwise. Human nature is always in need of search, a search for pleasure and happiness. The author of the story explores the behavioral patterns of such cultural norms. The story represents disappointment in life through the character’s dialogues and discussions. The emptiness in the conversation is generated by pleasure seeking actions. Moreover, it also represents such behavior through the male character’s selfish motives embodied in his attempt to preserve his own freedom through manipulation and trickery.

“I’ll go with you and I’ll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it’s all perfectly natural.

'Then what will we do afterwards?'

'We'll be fine afterwards. Just like we were before.'

'What makes you think so?'

'That's the only thing that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy.' (p. 53)

The selected text reveals how the American is manipulating the girl with his tricky dialogues and he is not willing to sacrifice his own freedom for the sake of the girl and their unborn child.

3.5 The Symbolic Code

The symbolic code deals with the organization of the meanings based on semantic approach by dealing with it at a wider and deeper level of meanings, i.e., plurality of meanings. This is same as the semantic code but there are certain binary oppositions on which the story and text can be structurally analyzed and placed. The man never discloses his name throughout the story and even the girl never mentions him with his real name. Throughout the story, the main concern and focus of man is to convince the girl to abort her baby. Both the characters seem poles apart in their approaches and perceptions. The Binaries develop gradually and run through the whole story till the end.

Table No. 1 Binary opposition between The American and the Girl

<i>The American</i>	<i>The Girl</i>
a. Can speak English and Spanish	a. Can speak English only, does not know Spanish
b. Determined to convince the girl to have an abortion	b. Not willing to have an abortion
c. Calls her by her name (Jig)	c. Never calls his name
d. Takes abortion as a casual operation	d. Worried about the effects of the abortion
e. Claims he is willing to marry Jig but does not want to marry her	e. Wants to marry the man and willing to live a happy life
f. Claims to be worried about the situation, but actually he is not worried	f. Actually, worried about the situation and their relationship
g. Uncompromising	g. Compromising
h. Authoritative and dominant	h. Dependent and submissive
i. Realistic and practical	i. Idealistic/typical girl
j. Has clarity of mind	j. Confused

4 CONCLUSION

The present study has applied Barthes' narrative codes to unfold the deep understanding of narrative structures and themes of the short story *Hills Like White Elephants*. The application of Hermeneutic code reveals that the text is full of suspense and keeps the reader curious about what may happen next. Furthermore, the reader remains doubtful regarding the problematic and enigmatic ending of the story.

Proairetic code implies the continuity of tension and suspense through the string of conversation and dialogues in the story. The canvas of the story is broadened by the application of Semantic code that enhances the insight of the reader by giving certain symbols, images and icons. Cultural code enhances the vision of the reader regarding American culture and it reveals that men are dominant. Male dominance and authoritative nature of man is the prevailing theme of the story. Last but not least; the Symbolic code portrays the binary oppositions of the two major characters. Their conflicting viewpoints, desires, feelings and emotions are reflective of their opposing natures. To sum up, the study reveals that application of Barthesian codes helps in interpreting literary texts and enhancing new insight of the readers by decoding the underlying narrative patterns.

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