

Why Does Jig Smile? Readings of “Hills Like White Elephants”*

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Hemingway’s story “Hills Like White Elephants” is often included in curricula of literature and creative writing.¹ During the first half century after its publication in 1927, its readers had no doubt how it ended—the girl, Jig, succumbed to the man’s wish that she terminate her pregnancy—and even denied the intensity of her initial resistance.² The volume of critical work on the story surged around 1980, however, with the emergence of new answers to the question “What happens at the end of the story?”³ Hemingway’s narrative technique of sharing a minimal amount of information with the reader is partly responsible for its multiple conflicting readings, but as we shall see below, it may not be the only reason for them.

These multiple readings make the story an interesting test case for questions about conflicting interpretations. Why does this story invite such a variety of readings? Which readings can appeal to large readerships? Which readings are only of interest to professionals?⁴ How are readers influenced by exposure to other readers’ readings?

This last question is of particular interest, since reading works of fiction—at least well-known and highly regarded ones—is not an individual but a collective endeavor. Readers are exposed to interpretations by the education system, by book reviews, adaptations to other media, interviews with authors, blurbs, and more. Much of a reader’s impression of a work of fiction is not his or her own.

*For debates inspired by this article, please check the *Connotations* website at <<http://www.connotations.de/debate/empirical-readings-of-hemingway-hills-like-white-elephants>>.

In this article, I will consider all the published readings of the story, and consult the views of ordinary readers through questionnaires.⁵ My interest in the readings will be restricted to their answers to a single question: "What happens at the end of the story?" To compare these readings, a general terminology of comparative traits of readings will be developed.

The story is very short, with few characters and events. A young couple, "the American" and "the girl with him," (50) are sitting outside a railway station café in the Ebro valley in Spain, waiting for a train that is due in forty minutes en route from Barcelona to Madrid. From their conversation, interspersed with drinks, the reader learns that they have been travelling together for a while, that the girl is pregnant, and that her partner is trying to convince her to terminate her pregnancy. He presents the abortion as a simple and reasonable solution to their predicament. At the same time, he 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.

The station is located between two tracks. It is usually assumed that one leads from Barcelona to Madrid—the couple's destination where one may arrange for a probably illegal abortion—and the other in the opposite direction. Thus, the two tracks are correlated with the dilemma facing the couple. The tracks pass through the Ebro valley. One side of the valley ("this side"; 50), which the couple can see from the café, is treeless and barren. It is bordered by the white hills that give the story its name.⁶ When the girl gets up and walks to the end of the station, she can see the other side of the valley, with fields and a row of trees along the river. The two landscapes are commonly interpreted as connoting fertility and life vs. barrenness and death.

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, which she could not see until now. When she returns, she expresses her feelings more emphatically. Her partner's answers frustrate her so much that she demands that he stop talking. When the arrival of the train in five

minutes is announced, the man gets up, saying he is going to move their luggage to the other side. The girl smiles at him. On the way back, he stops for a quick drink at the bar. He then returns to the girl, and the story ends with these words:

She was sitting at the table and smiled at him.

“Do you feel better?” he asked.

“I feel fine,” she said. “There’s nothing wrong with me. I feel fine.” (55)

The words “pregnancy” and “abortion” do not appear in the text, but published criticism always assumes that the girl is pregnant and the topic of conversation is abortion. It seems that other assumptions, if ever contemplated, would be unable to survive the dialog between professional readers.

Not all ordinary readers, however, arrive by themselves at the conclusion that the story is about abortion. In preparation for the surveys described below, I asked six graduate cognitive psychology students to read the story and answer a single question: “At the end of the story, what are the woman’s plans concerning her pregnancy?” Three of the respondents noted in their answers that they did not understand or were not sure that the story concerns pregnancy and abortion. The same question was posed to eighteen students in a prestigious international high school. Four admitted to not understanding that abortion is involved. Possibly, other students were embarrassed to make the same confession. One may assume that what made these students “fail” in reading the story was not lack of real-life knowledge but inexperience in reading literary fiction. They may not have recognized the way stories sometimes convey information implicitly, and that this is especially to be expected in matters related to sex or to parentage. Perhaps these students would not understand, for instance, that in Dostoyevsky’s *The Karamazov Brothers*, old Karamazov is Smerdyakov’s father.

In my experience, readers who did not understand that the story concerns pregnancy and abortion quickly accepted the usual interpretation. In that sense, their readings were not sustainable—they could

not persist in the inter-personal domain but only in the mind of a Robinson Crusoe.

As mentioned, for the first fifty years after the story's publication, a single reading was accepted. I will call this reading "Girl Surrenders." According to it, the story presents one episode in a static relationship, in which the man is dominant. The girl's verbal attempts to challenge his authority lead nowhere. She wants to please him and keep him, even at the cost of an abortion. Possibly this would not be enough. Her last words and her smile indicate that she submits to his will. They contain an apology for her outburst a few minutes ago, presented almost as a child's temper tantrum.

The new readings offer a different reconstruction of the plot, most importantly of the man and the girl's plans. These readings also offer a different understanding of the characters but not of the author's sympathy, which everyone agrees lies with the girl. The questions critics disagree about are: What is the state of affairs at the end of the story? Did any change take place during the short time of waiting for the train? Did the girl decide to keep her baby? If so, is the man aware of that decision? Is he resigned to it? Does the girl want to stay with him? Does he want to stay with her?

"Girl Surrenders" assumes that the girl would abort and stay with the man if he is still interested in her, while the man's plans are considered unknown. It seems he intends to stay with her in the near future, at least until the abortion, probably for a while after. It is less clear whether he would stay for a long time, as his words imply. On the contrary, it may be that the abortion would push him to end his relationship with the girl soon. If all he wants from her is to have a partner for travel, drinking and sex, their conversation makes it clear that she is no longer a pleasant one. Her talk, which perhaps he once found amusing, is becoming annoying. After he bluntly rejects the white elephant imagery by saying, "I've never seen one," their conversation becomes an open confrontation:

"Yes," said the girl. "Everything tastes of liquorice. Especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe."

"Oh, cut it out."

"You started it," the girl said. "I was being amused. I was having fine time."

"Well, let's try and have a fine time."

"All right. I was trying. I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn't that bright?"

"That was bright."

"I wanted to try this new drink. That's all we do, isn't it—look at things and try new drinks?"

"I guess so." (51)

If that is what their conversation is like now, it should be clear to the man that in the future, with the memory of the abortion hanging as a shadow over their relationship, the girl would no longer serve as a means for "having a fine time." Thus, it is hard to believe the man when he says, "We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before" (52). The last drink he takes by himself at the bar marks his preparation for life without the girl. Perhaps her last smile marks her resignation with the ending of this relationship. Accordingly, a modified variant of "Girl Surrenders" is that the man will definitely not stay with the girl after the abortion. I call this reading "Man Leaves after Abortion."

A more substantial opposition to the old reading attaches much importance to the word "other," which appears twice towards the end:

"I'd better take the bags over to the *other* side of the station," the man said. She smiled at him.

"All right. Then come back and we'll finish the beer."

He picked up the two heavy bags and carried them around the station to the *other* tracks. (54-55; italics mine)

Earlier, when the girl got up from the table and went to the end of the station, she saw the *other* side of the valley for the first time. If the two sides of the valley stand for fertility and life vs. barrenness and death, and the two tracks lead in opposite directions accordingly, it is significant that at the end of the story we are told about the *other* side of the station and the *other* track. It turns out, some readers contend, that the man agrees to cancel the plan of travelling to where an abortion is available (see Fletcher; Gilligan). In that case, it is possible that the girl

really feels fine, as she says, and her smile is sincere. I will call this reading "Man Surrenders."

To counter "Man Surrenders," one may ask: How do we know the other track leads in the opposite direction? Only one train has been mentioned, and the man moves the luggage a few minutes before its arrival. The value of such arguments in reading a work of fiction is questionable. Even more questionable is the value of the external information that in the real Ebro valley, the fertile fields and barren hills are both on the same side, northeast of the tracks (see Hannum). The rich metaphor of two tracks on two sides of the valley is more important than the real geography, which the author does not bother to describe fully and consistently (see Renner). The author need not shape his landscape according to the real map, and can simply err.⁷

Perhaps more importantly, one could wonder about the psychological plausibility of a sudden and unexplained change in the man's position. Presumably, the couple have been discussing the abortion for many days, and no new insight on the man's part is evident in the text (see Hashmi). There are good arguments against the old reading as well, however. The conversation between the partners does not necessarily portray the girl as weak and dependent, nor does it foreshadow her defeat. The man thinks he can control her. He speaks the local language, has money, and claims to have experience in the matter of abortion. Yet his attempts to convince the girl fail. He is no match to her in verbal struggle. He admits his weakness when he says, "I just can't think about it. You know how I get when I worry" (see Hannum).

The girl uses figurative language and the man cannot be sure when to take what she says at face value, especially when it comes to the crucial words, which most readers interpret as sarcastic and accusatory:

"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." (53)

Thus, the old reading of the girl as caving in at the end is problematic, lending some support to "Man Surrenders." To support "Man Surrenders" further, it may be helpful to divide the story into four sections, in which the girl experiences change (see Renner). In the first, she does not yet know clearly what she wants but is dissatisfied with her partner, a feeling she only hints at. This section ends with the words "Then I'll do it. Because I don't care about me" (53), and with the man's unsatisfactory answer. At this point, both realize the intensity of the conflict.

In the second section, the girl gets up, distances herself from the man's influence and looks for the first time at "the other side." She now attains a level of self-awareness that enables her to deal with the man as equal.

In the third, the girl comes back, does not sit at the table and confronts the man:

"And we could have all this," she said. "And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible."

"What did you say?" (53)

He does not truly respond to her wish for his commitment. He tries to bring her back under his influence, but fails. "'Come on back in the shade,' he said. 'You mustn't feel that way'" (53). Their frustrating conversation leads to the girl's request that he stop talking and her threat of screaming if he went on.

Finally, in the fourth section, after the man has said no less than six times in the course of the story that the final decision is the girl's, he comes to acknowledge the strength of her will to keep the baby and surrenders. This he expresses by saying he will move the suitcases to "the other side" (54). On the way back, the man stops at the bar and has a drink by himself while watching the people sitting there. "They were all waiting reasonably for the train" (55). This sentence has

attracted the attention of many readers. According to "Girl Surrenders," the man thinks everyone behaves like a reasonable person while he alone has to carry the burden of an unreasonable partner (see Trilling). The same sentence may be used, however, to make a small but important revision in "Man Surrenders": he understands now that his worries about the continued pregnancy and birth are unreasonable and resigns himself to the birth and parenting (see Renner).⁸ This reading provides a definite answer to the question of the man's plans: he intends to stay with the girl. I call this reading "Birth and Stay."

Support and more depth to this reading may be provided by a textual detail ignored by readers for many years. Our understanding of the physical movements in the station used to be as follows: the girl gets up, goes to the end of the station, sees the other side, comes back, stands near the table and talks while her partner barely listens, a fact that made readers accuse him of indifference and obtuseness:

"And we could have all this," she said. "And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible."

"What did you say?"

"I said we could have everything." (53)

The dialog that ensues shows that nothing has changed in the man's attitude. "Come on back in the shade, you mustn't feel that way". The girl stands outside the shade, and he invites her to sit in the shade with him, which she does only at the end of the frustrating conversation.

This understanding is challenged, however, by a single word: "*They* sat down at the table and the girl looked across at the hills on the dry side of the valley and the man looked at her and at the table" (italics mine). If two sit down then just before that, two were standing. So perhaps this is the correct description: the girl gets up and walks to the end of the station, sees the other side and makes this monologue:

"And we could have all this," she said. "And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible." (53)

Her partner gets up and follows her. He asks her what she said not because he is not listening, but because he was out of hearing range. They are both standing in the sun, and he asks her to go back to the shade with him. After some more exchanges, they go back and sit at the table together.

This new description of the couple's movements in the small station space gives more support to "Birth and Stay." The girl's crucial words, "Then I'll do it. Because I don't care about me" (53), and her leaving the table, make the man listen to her, understand her plight and finally agree to her wish to keep the baby. The rest of the dialog shows that he would still like her to have an abortion, but that it is important for him that she know that "I don't want anybody but you" (54; see Justice).

So far, we assumed that the girl wants to stay with the man. A very different reading assumes that during the story's short timespan the girl completes a probably long process of realizing the superficiality and egotism of her partner, and decides to leave him. When she returns from her short walk, she offers him one last chance to change. His disappointing response drives her to say the crucial words:

"Would you do something for me now?"

"I'd do anything for you."

"Would you please please please please please please stop talking?" (54)

She has made up her mind to leave the man and the smiles she gives him are no different from the polite smile to the waitress.⁹

This reading had two variants. According to one,—*"Abortion and Breakup"*—the girl will travel with her partner, benefit from his practical and financial help in arranging an abortion and leave him (see Hannum). According to another,—*"Breakup and Birth"*—she will leave and have the baby by herself (see Kozikowski). Her last words, "There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine" (55), may justify this last reading. The old reading saw them as an expression of submission, but we can read them as the expression of a clear and determined

position: My pregnancy is not a problem; I'm going to have this baby (see Kobler), or maybe even: The only problem is our relationship; I'd rather keep this baby than keep you. As far as I am concerned, *you* are a white elephant (see Gilmour). This reading has met with scoffing:

Some starry-eyed readers believe Jig will leave him and live, with a child of course, happily ever after. Hemingway does nothing to encourage such a consolatory reading. Indeed, her final smile does not suggest rebellion but submission. (Portch 45)

Proponents of "Abortion and Breakup" or of "Breakup and Birth" see no need to justify their claim that the girl intends to abort or give birth. They see it as an obvious conclusion from her decision to part with the man. According to "Abortion and Breakup," once the girl has decided to leave her partner, she no longer wants to keep the baby, which used to be part of the future she planned to have with him and which will not materialize. Conversely, according to "Breakup and Birth," once the girl has decided to leave her partner, she no longer needs to have an abortion. At this junction, both readings rely on different implicit psychological or social reasoning that the readers have not taken the trouble to spell out and corroborate with textual evidence.

* * *

The large number of readings motivates systematic classification. Three questions about the end of the story are subjects to debate. Firstly, does the girl plan birth or abortion?¹⁰ One may answer that she has not decided or that the text does not tell us, but critics did not find these possibilities interesting, and we will not consider them. Secondly, what are the girl's plans for the relationship? Here too, critics found only the two definite answers interesting: stay or leave. If the girl has decided to leave, most readers, adopting her point of view, are no longer interested in the man's plans. If she has decided to

stay, however, a third question arises: What does the man intend to do? Here three answers have been proposed: stay, leave, or “the text does not tell us.”

Girl Plans to Leave	Girl Plans to Stay			
	Man Plans to Leave	Man's Plans Unknown	Man Plans to Stay	
Abortion and Breakup	Man Leaves after Abortion	Girl Surrenders	Abortion and Stay	Abortion
Breakup and Birth		Man Surrenders	Birth and Stay	Birth

Table 1

Table 1 presents the readings according to this analysis. The missing cell corresponds to a reading not encountered in published criticism.¹¹ The bold borders divide the readings into three groups or types. In the top right area of the table are “Weak Girl” readings: “Man Leaves after Abortion,” “Girl Surrenders,” and “Abortion and Stay.” In the left column are “Strong Woman” readings: “Abortion and Breakup” and “Breakup and Birth.” In the bottom right are “Reformed Man” readings: “Man Surrenders” and “Birth and Stay.”

In trying to explain the variety of conflicting readings, we should give proper weight to the fact that the story enjoys a positive artistic appreciation, a large readership and extensive attention by professional readers who teach the story in literature and creative writing classes. Moreover, since the text is very short, much importance is attached to every small detail. Some of the readings rely on the precise meaning of single words in the text, a strategy that would make little sense in a longer text. Finally, and most importantly, the story is characterized by contradictions or tensions and by lack of information (ambiguities or gaps) which invite conflicting readings.¹²

One source of tension stems from the conflicting evidence the story provides concerning the balance of power between the man and the girl. She seems to be the weaker party; indeed, the first time she is

mentioned she is called "the girl with him." She is pregnant, unmarried,¹³ with a partner who is not necessarily reliable, in a foreign country whose language she does not understand, where no legal abortions are available. He speaks the local language, knows exactly what he wants and has a clear plan, while she finds it difficult to express a position of her own. Her feelings toward him are not exactly clear but it seems she considers him a suitable long-term partner and wants to raise her child with him ("we could get along"; 53). His interest in her, it seems, is mainly as a companion for travelling in Spain, a temporary situation. Even when he makes an effort to present his best side, there is no hint of long-term commitment on his part.

Conversely, the girl does not have much esteem for her partner. She is smarter, and she knows it. Her sophisticated use of language challenges and threatens him, as we see right in the beginning of the story:

- (1) "They look like white elephants," she said.
- (2) "I've never seen one," the man drank his beer.
- (3) "No, you wouldn't have."
- (4) "I might have," the man said. "Just because you say I wouldn't have doesn't prove anything." (50-51; numbering mine)

The girl's first utterance (1) is both an invitation to intimacy and a challenging puzzle. The man, who wants to direct the conversation to the discussion of an abortion, rejects the invitation and deflects the challenge (2). The girl's answer (3) seems to take the man's answer at face value, thus signaling a retreat from (1). The reader understands, however, that (3) encodes a message of scorn, such as "unlike me, you are narrow minded and lacking in imagination." Whatever way the man understands (3), he clearly perceives the disrespectful undertone. His attempt to change the balance of power in his favor (4) is clumsy if not childish and reveals his lack of confidence. The girl comes out on top in this miniature verbal combat, and it is not the only one.¹⁴ In the second part of the story (after she gets up), she speaks more explicitly, ending with her request that he shut up.

Another tension stems from the apparent contradiction between most of the story and its surprising ending. After we have made up our mind that this relationship has a grim future, we see the girl smiling at the man when he takes the suitcases and saying to him with unexpected warmth: "All right. Then come back and we'll finish the beer" (54). He receives another smile when he returns. Have we completely misunderstood the state of affairs between the partners?

* * *

If contradictions are a surplus of information, then under-specification, vagueness and gaps result in lack of information. Hemingway's style is generally characterized by action and dialogue without delving into the minds of his characters; direct speech without description of tone and without speech verbs, or with neutral non-informative verbs¹⁵; partial scene descriptions leaving much room for the reader's imagination; a small vocabulary; and minimal use of adjectives and adverbs (see Levin).

The reader is left without information, not only about feelings and intentions, but also regarding some basic facts: How old are the man and the girl? When and how did they meet? Where do they come from and what awaits them when they return? This lack of information invites readers to invest much interpretive energy in the physical details of the train station and its environment. By their nature, such details may support more than one reading.

The lack of details is motivated by an implicitly stated aesthetic principle: Hemingway favored omitting as many details as possible and leaving the reader with "the tip of the iceberg," as a way of making a story more effective.¹⁶

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer

had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. (Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* 132)

Another source of divergent interpretations, particularly important because of its privileged position in the narrative and the surprise it causes, is the girl's last words: "I feel fine [...]. There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine" (55). These words, usually understood as related to the girl's emotional rather than physical state, may be interpreted in opposite directions, depending on the degree of openness and cooperation one attributes to the girl at this point in the story.

The variety of readings also reflects differences of values, sensibilities and ideologies having to do with gender status and relationships. All readers sympathize with the girl, but this sympathy can be expressed in different ways. For proponents of "Girl Surrenders," the girl is helpless. Not only is she unable to be firm and obtain consideration for her needs and feelings; she also finds it hard to reach a clear understanding of these needs and feelings in the first place. At the end of the story, she not only reconciles herself to the man's plan, but she makes an effort to say and feel that everything is fine. One critic who agrees with this reading finds a universal message in the story having to do with the position of women in a male-dominated world:

The smiling look she gives the waitress and the two times she smiles at the man in the very last stages of the story imply the male world closing around her, not the strengthening sense she has of her own independence and the man's stupidity. She looks only at him, not past him and toward the hills. In this way, the story functions not only as a powerful critique of the man's sexual politics, but also as a complex portrayal of woman's, not just Jig's, *final* compliance. (O'Brien 24, italics in original)

The critic's language bears traces of feminist discourse ("sexual politics"), but he supports the "Weak Girl" type of reading and explicitly rejects the "Strong Woman" readings ("not the strengthening sense she has of her own independence").

Another proponent of "Girl Surrenders" almost blames the girl for her fate:

Her smiles give him one message, readers another. His insensitivity leads him to believe she smiles out of contentment. We suspect she first smiles to hide her discontentment. And from this suspicion we conclude there can be no hope for either positive verbal or non-verbal communication. People who hide behind false selves can rarely reach out to one another. (Portch 45)

In the new readings, one may perceive a tendency to “help” the girl and empower her. This is more extreme in “Strong Woman” readings than in “Reformed Man” readings. One critic who supports “Birth and Stay” claims that this reading is logically necessary: since the implied author sympathizes with the girl and is critical of the man, the story must end in a way that agrees with “current sympathies,” ignoring the fact that stories often end in ways that would contradict their authors’ wishes in real-life situations.

So firmly does the story’s sympathy side with the girl and her values, so strong is her repugnance toward the idea of abortion, and so critical is the story of the male’s self-serving reluctance to shoulder the responsibility of the child he has begotten that the reading I have proposed [i.e. “Birth and Stay”] seems the most logical resolution to its conflict. [...] [T]he story turns out to be even more rightminded, in terms of current sympathies, than has been generally perceived. Not only does it side with its female character’s values, it also understands and sensitively dramatizes her struggle to take charge of her own arena, to have a say about the direction of her own life. (Renner 38)

The desire to empower the girl finds even bolder expression in readings claiming that the girl has decided to leave the man. She understands that he is not worthy of her and that she does not need him, so the question whether she can make him change his mind is no longer relevant. One critic supporting “Abortion and Breakup” calls for changing the image of the female protagonist from that of a helpless girl to that of a woman capable of evaluating her partner and drawing practical conclusions.

Comment on the story to date has underestimated Jig’s character considerably. She is not the “neurotic” slave Austin Wright saw or the “little girl” Virginia Woolf saw in her [...] [T]his is not so much a question of her having the

courage to leave him, after the abortion, as a clear case of her being unable to tolerate him—of her having left him in her wake. (Hannum 53)

The critic's language relates to the protagonist almost as if she were a real person—as do many other critics of the story—and blames the old reading for reproducing stereotypes of weak femininity.

* * *

In order to study the effect of exposure to others' readings on ordinary readers, I have conducted two surveys with two distinct respondent groups. In other words, no person has participated in both surveys. All participants have been asked to read the story and confirm that they are reading it for the first time.¹⁷

In the first survey, participants answered three questions: At the end of the story, what are the woman's plans concerning her pregnancy? What are the woman's plans concerning her relationship with the man? What are the man's plans concerning his relationship with the woman? The phrasing of the first question was designed to make sure that readers understood that pregnancy was at stake.¹⁸ The first survey let participants express their views freely and did not expose them to readings different from their own. For quantitative analysis of the questionnaires, I assigned the answers to one of the readings discussed above.¹⁹

In a second survey, participants were presented with six readings, each phrased as concisely and as convincingly as possible. Participants were told that each reading was supported by some "Hemingway scholars" and were asked to select the "best" reading.

Reading	First Survey (open-ended)	Second Survey (multiple choice)
Breakup and Birth	1.5	5
Abortion and Breakup	0	3
Man Leaves after Abortion	3	1
Girl Surrenders	17	8
Birth and Stay	1.5	0
Man Surrenders	0	1
Total	23	18

Table 2

The results of both surveys are presented in Table 2. A clearer picture is obtained when we present the results according to the three reading types in Table 3.

Reading	First Survey (open-ended)	Second Survey (multiple choice)
Strong Woman	1.5	8
Weak Girl	20	9
Reformed Man	1.5	1
Total	23	18

Table 3

The vast majority of readers who interpreted the story by themselves (first survey) supported the “Weak Girl” type of reading.²⁰ By contrast, half of the readers who were exposed to different readings

(second survey) chose "Strong Woman." The difference is statistically significant.²¹ For both surveys, the "Reformed Man" readings received very little support from the readers.

In order to discuss readers' choices, I will offer some criteria for comparing and rating readings. The criteria are subjective. In other words, different readers may grade readings differently using the same criterion. The first criterion is *simplicity*. It concerns the relationship between the text and the fictional world created by the reader. This criterion evaluates the complexity and arbitrariness of the processes used in order to construct that fictional world, and of the assumptions needed to fill in gaps in the story. Applying this criterion involves judgement on the part of the individual reader, but some agreement may be expected.²²

A very simple reading of our story is probably impossible, since it has a surprising and enigmatic ending. Any reading must assume some invisible personal or interpersonal processes operating in the background, whose results the reader may only fully observe at the end, and uncertainly at that. All readings have difficulty finding textual evidence for those processes.

"Strong Woman" readings assume that the woman has decided unilaterally on a new plan in which the man has no place. "Reformed Man" readings assume a new understanding between the partners: no more talk of abortion. "Weak Girl" readings assume that the girl has decided to give up on both the baby and self-expression in favor of relationship harmony. When and how were these decisions and understandings reached? Why did we see no sign of them until the end of the story?

That being said, the level of simplicity of the different readings is not quite the same. The story starts with a conflict, which reaches a crisis, and ends with peace and quiet. Any reading must locate, within the short duration of the story, an internal change for either of the protagonists or both. The readings we saw offer three options for such a change: (1) The man decides that the girl is more important to him than a life of freedom without responsibility and commitment; (2) the

girl decides that the man is not a suitable partner and that she would be better off without him; and (3) the girl decides that the relationship is more important to her than the baby.

Selecting Option 1 is not easy, because the author has made every effort to make the man unlikeable. His presentation of abortion as easy, simple and inconsequential, and his repeated promises that he did not want the girl to do anything against her will seem insincere and manipulative. The readers' lack of sympathy for the man makes the assumption that he goes through a change of heart appear arbitrary. In other words, this would not be a simple reading to most readers.

Option 2 (the girl decides to leave) has no direct textual basis. It is, however, somewhat simpler than the first, because the girl's outbreak in the middle of the story shows how frustrated she is by the man and what little respect she has for him.

Option 3 may be the simplest. The relationship between the partners is a continuous compromise on the part of the girl. Her expressions of irony and intellectual superiority are easily interpreted as part of such a compromise: "You decide, I'll scoff and express dissatisfaction, then obey." This pattern prepares the reader for a final compromise on her part at the end of the story. The results of the first survey may indicate that this is indeed the simplest reading for many readers.

Another criterion may help explain the considerable support for "Strong Woman" in the second survey: *morality*, or the extent to which the reading makes the story one that is compatible with the reader's values. This is a problematic criterion in that it may lead readers with the same values in different directions, and our story provides an example of such a phenomenon. A reader dissatisfied with the current balance of power between men and women may tend to portray the girl as occupying a position of minimal power (as a characterization of reality) or maximal power (as a characterization of desirable ideal). Still, this criterion may explain how "Strong Woman" readings, not considered in the past and in the first survey, enjoy

wider support nowadays, especially if we combine it with the next one on the list.

This criterion, which I name *plausibility*, has to do with the verisimilitude of the fictional world created by the reader, as judged by the reader's extra-textual knowledge.²³ Plausibility is distinct from simplicity. The reading "Breakup and Birth" receives a fair amount of support in the second survey. The assumptions it relies on are as follows: the woman recognizes the man's shortcomings; she wants to keep the baby; and she feels confident in her ability to live as a single mother. These assumptions have not become simpler over the years, but changes in women's status in reality and in their fictional representations may have made them more plausible for many. Indeed, one may argue that the readers have "failed" in applying the plausibility criterion, not taking into account the place and especially the time in which the story unfolds, thereby imposing an anachronistic reading on it.

* * *

Professional readers have left no stone unturned and have found a variety of readings for the end of the story. They are aware of previous readings and are motivated to find new ones, since interpretive innovation plays an important role in justifying their occupation and professional advancement. A previous reading may even be perceived as a rival and object of critique on aesthetic or ideological grounds. Sometimes a professional reader perceives even the author as a rival and tries to challenge his or her authority and "hijack" the meaning of the story. In order to make a point, professional readers may even offer tongue-in-cheek readings they do not truly support.

The ordinary reader, who reads for enjoyment, wants to understand what "really" happens in the story (or what the author's intention is)²⁴ and find in it insights relevant to his or her own life. Thus, the old reading that excels in simplicity and plausibility ranks first in the first

survey. "Strong Woman" readings that have an advantage of morality are selected by many of the readers exposed to them, especially since they were told that each reading is supported by some "Hemingway scholars," giving legitimacy to any choice.

* * *

It is hard to avoid the temptation of ending this article by offering a new answer to the question why Jig smiles. So here it is: she is not pregnant at all. She has misled the man, telling him that she was pregnant, probably in order to assess his character and their relationship, perhaps to pressure him into marriage. By the end of the story, she knows all she needs to know about him. As she has suspected, he is not the kind of partner she wants, and she will leave him soon.

Unlike the idiosyncratic readings of those who have failed to understand what operation is being discussed, this reading recognizes that the story is indeed about pregnancy and abortion. This reading, "Girl Not Pregnant," may be compared with "Abortion and Breakup." In both, the woman reaches by the end of the story a new understanding of her needs and rejects her partner. In both, she seems to take a light-hearted attitude to parting with the man. This attitude is easier to understand if she is not pregnant, giving "Girl Not Pregnant" a plausibility advantage. This comes at a heavy cost of simplicity, however. Indeed, "Girl Not Pregnant" places the author in the position of a trickster, playing at riddles, hiding information and testing the ingenuity of readers.²⁵ As for the morality criterion, many contemporary readers would object to "Girl Not Pregnant," which attributes to the woman a stereotypically manipulative behavior. No wonder, then, that this reading has not been mentioned in published criticism of the story so far, nor is it likely to be mentioned again.

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APPENDIX

Open questionnaire

Q1: Dear participant, you are about to participate in a study that is conducted as part of a PhD thesis in the literature department in the Hebrew university. Participating in the study will take five to ten minutes and will include answering a few short questions about the story you just read. The questionnaire is anonymous. All of the data is confidential and is used only for the purpose of this study. You are allowed to stop answering the questionnaire at any stage. Do you agree to participate in the study?

Q2: Please answer the following questions briefly. Write one or two sentences for each question. If you would like to view the story again click [here](#) (the story will open in a separate tab).

- At the end of the story, what are the woman's plans regarding the pregnancy?
- At the end of the story, what are the woman's plans regarding her relationship with the man?
- At the end of the story, what are the man's plans regarding his relationship with the woman?

Q3: Thanks for answering our questions! Did you refrain from giving a definitive answer in response to one or more of the questions? (for example, did you write "I do not know" or "I am not sure" in any of your answers?). If you did, we would like to ask you to write a more definitive answer. Even if you are unsure of what happens at the end of the story, we would still like to hear what you think, or what you are leaning towards thinking regarding the ending. If all your answers were definitive, feel free to skip this question and go on to the next page.

Q4: What is your age?

Q5: What is your gender?

Q6: Have you read this story before today?

Q7: What language do you mainly speak at home?

Q8: If you have any other comments about the story or about the questionnaire you just filled out, you are welcome to write them here. If you'd like to get the results of the study you are also welcome to leave an e-mail address:

Closed questionnaire

Q1: Dear participant, you are about to participate in a study that is conducted as part of a PhD thesis in the literature department in the Hebrew university. Participating in the study will take five to ten minutes and will include answering a few short questions about the story you just read. The questionnaire is anonymous. All of the data is confidential and is used only for the purpose of this study. You are allowed to stop answering the questionnaire at any stage. Do you agree to participate in the study?

Q2: Hemingway scholars disagree about what happens at the end of the story. Some of them have proposed these alternative answers to this question:

1. The woman now realizes that the man is not a worthy partner for her. He is selfish and immature. She can see that he considers her as a pleasant partner for travel and sex, and is not committed to a lifelong relationship. She is determined to keep her baby and decides to leave the man. There is no a need for her to fight with the man anymore. Her final words express her good feeling about this decision and her confidence in being able to carry it out.
2. The woman now realizes that the man is not a worthy partner for her. He is selfish and immature. She can see that he considers her as a pleasant partner for travel and sex, and is not committed to a lifelong relationship. She has decided to end the relationship, and as part of this decision, to abort her baby. She needs the man's practical and financial help to get an abortion, but she will leave him soon after. There is no a need for her to

fight with the man anymore. Her final words express her feeling that she had found a good solution to her problem.

3. Despite some expressions of resentment and intellectual superiority, the woman is completely dependent on the man and wants to stay with him at any cost. She gives in to his (implicit) demand that she go through an abortion, as a condition for the continuation of their relationship. Her final words express her willingness to present her previous outbreak as a moment of feminine hysteria not to be taken seriously. Unbeknownst to her, the man has already made up his mind to leave the woman after the abortion.
4. Despite some expressions of resentment and intellectual superiority, the woman is completely dependent on the man and wants to stay with him at any cost. She gives in to his (implicit) demand that she go through an abortion, as a condition for the continuation of their relationship. Her final words express her willingness to present her previous outbreak as a moment of feminine hysteria not to be taken seriously. We do not know what the man plans to do.
5. The woman has convinced the man of her earnest desire to have the baby. The man now adapts himself to the idea of a long-term relationship. He will stay with her and assist her in her pregnancy. There is no longer any question of abortion. The woman's final words express her contentment. The couple will stay together and raise the child.
6. The woman has convinced the man of her earnest desire to have the baby. He will stay with her and assist her in her pregnancy. There is no longer any question of abortion. The woman's final words express her contentment. We do not, however, know what the man intends to do after the birth.

Now that you have seen all these different possible ways of interpreting the ending, which one seems to you the best? Please select your choice from the options above (You will not be asked to give reasons for your choice).

If you would like to view the story again click [here](#) (the story will open in a separate tab).

Q3: What is your age?

Q4: What is your gender?

Q5: Have you read this story before today?

Q6: What language do you mainly speak at home?

Q7: If you have any other comments about the story or about the questionnaire you just filled out, you are welcome to write them here.

If you would like to get the results of the study you are also welcome to leave an e-mail address:

NOTES

¹An early milestone in this direction is the inclusion of the story in a widely accepted anthology aimed at exposing young students to the best of world literature (Trilling). In the introduction to the story, the editor recounts that the young Hemingway had difficulty finding a magazine editor interested in it. The use of the story in education is evidenced by the fact that much of its criticism has been published by *Explicator*, a magazine dedicated to helping students and teachers understand literary works commonly used as learning material (see, apart from the *Explicator* articles cited elsewhere in this article, Consigny, Elliott, Passey, Rankin, Sipiora, Urgo). Another piece of evidence is the inclusion of the story in the popular literature guidance websites (Enotes, Sparknotes, Cliff's Notes, Shmoop, Gradesaver).

²Hemingway calls his female protagonist "girl," and that is how I refer to her when discussing the story and its readings. In the surveys, I called her "woman" in order not to bias the participants towards Weak Girl readings (see below).

³The MLA database includes 64 items related to the story. Since 1990, the rate of publications based on the story has been decreasing slowly. Nowadays, a new item is added about once a year. The publications differ in their approaches to interpretation. Some deal with the characters as if they were real people, while others are more interested in symbols or style. For the purpose of this article, these differences may be ignored. Not all publications deal even implicitly with my question: "What happens at the end of the story?"

⁴I use the term "professional readers" to refer to teachers, critics and scholars who publish their interpretations of works of fiction, as opposed to "ordinary readers" who at most discuss their interpretations within a small circle of friends. This is related but not identical to the distinction between "expert" and "novice" or "inexperienced readers" (Dorfman), based on their level of formal training in reading literary fiction.

⁵This is not an empirical study, informed by social psychology and cognitive science. Empirical literature research methods make objective measurements, sometimes using short artificial texts (see Bortolussi and Dixon; Miall). My interest here is in the macro level of meaning integration ("What happens in the story?"), and I cannot use such methods.

⁶Why are the hills like white elephants? Several non-mutually exclusive explanations have been offered. First, a "white elephant" is a gift that impoverishes its receiver who cannot afford the cost of its maintenance. According to the most common interpretation from this perspective, the fetus is a white elephant, a burden for the man. Similarly, the girl herself may be a white elephant for him, although, as seen below, for some readers, the man is a white elephant for the girl at this point. The white elephant may also be related to the shape of a pregnant woman's body (Hollander) or that of an aborted fetus (Abdoo).

⁷For example, the girl says that by calling the hills white she meant to describe “the colouring of their skin through the trees.” But the trees are on the other side of the station, which she cannot even see!

⁸As for the more distant future, all readings share a measure of pessimism regarding the relationship (cf. Wyche).

⁹They are even less sincere, because she smiles *brightly* at the waitress—an adverb that stands out in the otherwise barren style of the story.

¹⁰The questions about the protagonists’ intentions refer to the moment the story ends—five minutes before the arrival of the train. There is general agreement about their wishes at the beginning of the story: he wants an abortion, she wants to keep the baby.

¹¹Such a reading may be labeled “Man Leaves after Birth”: the man succumbs to the girl’s wish to keep the baby. She thinks she is going to raise the baby with him, but he has already made up his mind to leave her after the birth. This article is devoted to published readings so we will ignore this one.

¹²Using different versions from the author’s archives, an attempt was made to prove that Hemingway changed his mind about the ending and did not clean up the traces of previous endings (see Justice). This kind of consideration is beyond the scope of the present discussion, which deals with readers and treats the text as given.

¹³So assume all critics.

¹⁴For example: (Girl) “And you think then we’ll be all right and be happy.” (Man) “I know we will. You don’t have to be afraid. I’ve known lots of people that have done it.” (Girl) “So have I [...]. And afterwards they were all so happy” (52).

¹⁵The speech verbs used in this story are *say* and *ask*, which provide a minimum amount of information on the emotions of the speaker and the dynamics of conversation. Even the verb *answer*, which implies cooperation between speakers, is not used.

¹⁶For this reason, I do not distinguish between readings based on explicit data in the text and those based on speculation.

¹⁷The surveys were performed using the SurveyMonkey.net engine. Participants were recruited through social media. They were aged 21-62 (median 31), half of them women. Most were native English speakers. See Appendix A for the full questionnaires. No correlation was found between respondents’ answers and their age or gender.

¹⁸As mentioned above, we know from preliminary studies that some participants do not understand this by themselves. Analysis of idiosyncratic readings according to which the girl is not pregnant is beyond the scope of this article.

¹⁹Since published criticism does not make a clear distinction between “Abortion and Stay” and “Girl Surrenders,” both were merged into one entry in Table 2. Responses implying idiosyncratic readings were discounted. When respondents

hesitated between two possibilities, their contribution was divided equally, which explains the presence of non-integers in Table 2.

²⁰A Weak Girl reading is supported by two of the most popular readers' guide websites: Enotes and Cliff's Notes, which incorporate it in the plot summary. A student using these websites may remain under the impression that the story explicitly tells us that the girl surrenders and agrees to abortion in order to keep her partner.

²¹A chi-squared test reveals a significant ($p=0.016$) relationship between type of survey and choice of reading.

²²For example, all readers would agree that interpreting each word in the story as an acronym is not a simple reading.

²³Fishelov defines an economical interpretation as one that combines simplicity and plausibility. An economical interpretation makes a minimum number of assumptions and explains a maximum of textual details (it is simple). The assumptions it makes are consistent with extra-textual knowledge (it is plausible).

²⁴Empirical reading studies show the importance of the author's intention for ordinary readers, contrary to its shaky status in literary theory (see Pfaff and Gibbs; Claassen).

²⁵A reading of Nabokov's *Lolita* according to which the second half of the story takes place only in the narrator's imagination has met with this negative reaction: "It does not make sense that Nabokov would bury the clues to this reading so deeply that it would escape the attention of most readers." (Phelan 128).

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