

How to Use Literature in the Teaching of English Students

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How to use literature in the teaching of English

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“Ozymandias”

By Percy Bysshe Shelley

I met a traveller from an antique land,
Who said—“Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. . . . Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;
And on the pedestal, these words appear:
My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.”

“Out, out—”
By Robert Frost

The buzz-saw snarled and rattled in the yard
And made dust and dropped stove-length sticks of wood,
Sweet-scented stuff when the breeze drew across it.
And from there those that lifted eyes could count
Five mountain ranges one behind the other
Under the sunset far into Vermont.
And the saw snarled and rattled, snarled and rattled,
As it ran light, or had to bear a load.
And nothing happened: day was all but done.
Call it a day, I wish they might have said
To please the boy by giving him the half hour
That a boy counts so much when saved from work.
His sister stood beside them in her apron
To tell them ‘Supper’. At the word, the saw,
As if to prove saws knew what supper meant,
Leaped out at the boy’s hand, or seemed to leap—
He must have given the hand. However it was,
Neither refused the meeting. But the hand!
The boy’s first outcry was a rueful laugh.

As he swung toward them holding up the hand
Half in appeal, but half as if to keep
The life from spilling. Then the boy saw all—
Since he was old enough to know, big boy
Doing a man's work, though a child at heart—
He saw all spoiled. 'Don't let him cut my hand off
The doctor, when he comes. Don't let him, sister!
So. But the hand was gone already.
The doctor put him in the dark of ether.
He lay and puffed his lips out with his breath.
And then—the watcher at his pulse took fright.
No one believed. They listened at his heart.
Little—less—nothing!—and that ended it.
No more to build on there. And they, since they
Were not the one dead, turned to their affairs.

Ernest Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants" (1927)

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. 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. The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building. 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.

'What should we drink?' the girl asked. She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.

'It's pretty hot,' the man said.

'Let's drink beer.'

'Dos cervezas,' the man said into the curtain.

'Big ones?' a woman asked from the doorway.

'Yes. Two big ones.'

The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glass on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

'They look like white elephants,' she said.

'I've never seen one,' the man drank his beer.

‘No, you wouldn’t have.’

‘I might have,’ the man said. ‘Just because you say I wouldn’t have doesn’t prove anything.’

The girl looked at the bead curtain. ‘They’ve painted something on it,’ she said. ‘What does it say?’

‘Anis del Toro. It’s a drink.’

‘Could we try it?’

The man called ‘Listen’ through the curtain. The woman came out from the bar.

‘Four reales.’ ‘We want two Anis del Toro.’

‘With water?’

‘Do you want it with water?’

‘I don’t know,’ the girl said. ‘Is it good with water?’

‘It’s all right.’

‘You want them with water?’ asked the woman.

‘Yes, with water.’

‘It tastes like liquorice,’ the girl said and put the glass down.

‘That’s the way with everything.’

‘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 a 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.’

The girl looked across at the hills.

‘They’re lovely hills,’ she said. ‘They don’t really look like white elephants. I just meant the colouring of their skin through the trees.’

‘Should we have another drink?’

‘All right.’

The warm wind blew the bead curtain against the table.

‘The beer’s nice and cool,’ the man said.

‘It’s lovely,’ the girl said.

‘It’s really an awfully simple operation, Jig,’ the man said. ‘It’s not really an operation at all.’

The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.

‘I know you wouldn’t mind it, Jig. It’s really not anything. It’s just to let the air in.’

The girl did not say anything.

‘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.’

The girl looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two of the strings of beads.

‘And you think then we’ll be all right and be happy.’

‘I know we will. You don’t have to be afraid. I’ve known lots of people that have done it.’

‘So have I,’ said the girl. ‘And afterwards they were all so happy.’

‘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.’

'And you really want to?'

'I think it's the best thing to do. But I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to.'

'And if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you'll love me?'

'I love you now. You know I love you.'

'I know. But if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you'll like it?'

'I'll love it. I love it now but I just can't think about it. You know how I get when I worry.'

'If I do it you won't ever worry?'

'I won't worry about that because it's perfectly simple.'

'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.'

The girl stood up and walked to the end of the station. Across, on the other side, were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro. Far away, beyond the river, were mountains. The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees.

‘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.’

‘We can have everything.’

‘No, we can’t.’

‘We can have the whole world.’

‘No, we can’t.’

‘We can go everywhere.’

‘No, we can’t. It isn’t ours anymore.’

‘It’s ours.’

‘No, it isn’t. And once they take it away, you never get it back.’

‘But they haven’t taken it away.’

‘We’ll wait and see.’

‘Come on back in the shade,’ he said. ‘You mustn’t feel that way.’

‘I don’t feel any way,’ the girl said. ‘I just know things.’

‘I don’t want you to do anything that you don’t want to do -’

‘Nor that isn’t good for me,’ she said. ‘I know. Could we have another beer?’

'All right. But you've got to realize –'

'I realize,' the girl said. 'Can't we maybe stop talking?'

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.

'You've got to realize,' he said, 'that I don't want you to do it if you don't want to. I'm perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you.'

'Doesn't it mean anything to you? We could get along.'

'Of course it does. But I don't want anybody but you. I don't want anyone else. And I know it's perfectly simple.'

'Yes, you know it's perfectly simple.'

'It's all right for you to say that, but I do know it.'

'Would you do something for me now?'

'I'd do anything for you.'

'Would you please please please please please please stop talking?'

He did not say anything but looked at the bags against the wall of the station. There were labels on them from all the hotels where they had spent nights.

‘But I don’t want you to,’ he said, ‘I don’t care anything about it.’
‘I’ll scream,’ the girl said.

The woman came out through the curtains with two glasses of beer and put them down on the damp felt pads. ‘The train comes in five minutes,’ she said.

‘What did she say?’ asked the girl.

‘That the train is coming in five minutes.’

The girl smiled brightly at the woman, to thank her.

‘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. He looked up the tracks but could not see the train. Coming back, he walked through the bar-room, where people waiting for the train were drinking. He drank an Anis at the bar and looked at the people. They were all waiting reasonably for the train. He went out through the bead curtain. 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.’

Ernest Hemingway, “Hills Like White Elephants” (1927)

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. 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. The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building. 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's HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS

Although it would overstate the matter to suggest that a single critical consensus exists regarding the resolution of Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants," a summation of the majority opinion might produce something along these lines: *in an impressive feat of dialogue-driven narrative prose, Hemingway's unnamed American male protagonist dominates the meeker, weaker-sexed Jig—the other in terms of her femaleness, her youth (she is the girl as opposed to the woman who tends bar), and her foreignness (because he receives the specific national identification, we may deduce that it's meant to distinguish his from hers)—until, broken, she submits to his will and consents to aborting the child.* Frederick Busch phrases it most succinctly when he argues that Jig "buries her way of seeing as she will bury her child" (762). Other critics have suggested that "the male's language [of distance and control] overpowers [Jig]" (O'Brien 22–23) and that "Jig [. . .] knows that she will never bear the child she is carrying" (Abdoo 238). A closer look at what Janet Burroway refers to as the *pattern of shifting power*, however, reveals a more subversive current in the dialogue—one in which Jig, the *xenofeminine*, outwits her boorish American *inamorato* and manipulates both the conversation and the man at each turn to control the shared destiny of her and the unborn child (36). Read according to this pattern of subversion, the story emerges as a series of parries that demonstrate Jig's superiority in terms of her cognitive and conative intelligence, as well as her experience, her scathing wit, and her facility with ironic sarcasm, all of which culminate in the absolute straightforwardness of the last line, a line that incidentally coincides with Jig's own dramatic epiphany: *There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine.*

In the economies of such notable theorists as Carl Gustav Jung and Karen Horney, the man's attempt to bully pregnant Jig, although certainly by no means justified, should come as no surprise. We need look no further than Jung's valuation of the mother "for whose sake everything that embraces, protects, nourishes, and helps assumes maternal form" (qtd. in Wilmer 40) to

begin to comprehend the nature of the man's feelings of inadequacy and inferiority in the face of Jig's imminent transformation from "the girl" into motherhood. Horney goes Jung one step further, contending that man's fundamental lack of "life-creating power," with which woman is imbued, has motivated the creation of such historically masculine enterprises as "[s]tate, religion, art, and science" in man's attempt to compensate for that insurmountable deficiency (366-67). Unfortunately, however, "even the greatest [. . .] achievements [. . .] cannot fully make up for something for which we are not endowed by nature" (Horney 367). Thus we may expect to encounter, in extreme cases, such attitudes as the man's in "Hills," whose "notion of behaving 'reasonably'" cannot include "birth of any sort" (Busch 761).

As the man persists in opposing the continuance of Jig's maternity, he grossly oversimplifies the issue, even to the point of self-contradiction, calling the abortion first "an awfully simple operation," and then "not really an operation at all" (212). Here and elsewhere, the excessive modifiers like "awfully" and "really" indicate the man's awareness that this will not be an easy sale and belie his understanding, whether he would be willing to acknowledge this or not, of Jig's formidable intelligence and will. We perceive these attributes directly from Jig as well, as she demonstrates an increasing awareness not only of the gravity of the situation, but also of the man's self-centered and insecure motivation for pursuing the abortion. Consider, for example how Jig initiates the story's action by asking what they should drink, and also makes the first significant observation in the story, noting that the hills "look like white elephants" (211). At first glance, these details may appear unimportant in the context of the decision they are at odds over, but in a relationship where "all [they] do [is . . .] look at things and try new drinks," these particular activities carry a substantial amount of weight. By way of contrast, the man's first three lines are entirely reactionary and essentially passive in nature. To Jig's question about drinks, he replies, "It's pretty hot" (when we have already learned in the opening paragraph that "It was very hot"); to her follow-up suggestion that they drink beer, he calls out, "two beers"; and to the bartender's question "Big ones?" he assents, "Yes. Two big ones" (211). At least initially, the man has nothing to offer, nothing to contribute to the story, just as he has nothing more to contribute to Jig's pregnancy now that he has invested his "minute share in creating new life" (Horney 367).