

QUESTIONS

GABRIEL GARCÍA MÁRQUEZ, *A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings*

1. What is an allegory? How is the García Márquez story an example of an allegorical tale? What was your initial response to the story?
2. How does García Márquez combine realistic detail and plot line with the fantastical and surreal?
3. The point of view of the story is offered by a third-person omniscient narrator. How does the narrator's attitude towards the townspeople shift in the course of the plot?
4. What statement might García Márquez be making given the cruel treatment of the angel by the people in the village? Were you surprised by their response? Why or why not?
5. What is the role of the priest in the story? What happens when he seeks guidance as to the meaning of the angel?
6. Why does the plot shift—spin off really—to the account of the girl changed into a spider for disobeying her parents?
7. This story is an example of what is referred to as “magical realism.” Research this literary movement and explain its significance in a brief report.
8. Some critics have asserted that the angel represents the artist and an impoverishment of the imagination. Are there any signs of such conditions in our culture today? Is there reason to be cynical about the state of the imagination? Explore possible justifications for this view in a short essay. Cite pertinent examples of social or moral disorder.



Ernest Hemingway

[1899–1961]

151

ERNEST HEMINGWAY was born in Oak Park, Illinois. His father was a devoted naturalist who shared his outdoor pursuits with his family during summers spent in rural Michigan. His mother was a professional-level musician, who followed the Victorian practice of dressing all toddlers in feminine clothing. This has fueled speculation regarding Hemingway's hatred of her; their problems stemmed more directly from their similar strong, artistic personalities. Although he is often accused of misogyny, most critics now say that he was questioning gender roles, and subtly critiquing their artificiality. In his writing, Hemingway displaced his sympathy for his female characters and his awe at their innate power onto the natural world.

Hemingway first worked as a reporter for the *Kansas City Star*. At the outbreak of World War I he volunteered for the ambulance service (he never served as a combatant with any army), was stationed in Italy, and was wounded at the front. During convalescence, he fell in love with his nurse, on whom he later modeled Catherine in *A Farewell to Arms* (1929). He returned to the United States a celebrity—the first American wounded in the war. After the war, he lived briefly in Chicago, where he met his first wife, Hadley Richardson, and the writer Sherwood Anderson, on whose advice the couple moved to Paris. There he met Gertrude Stein, who strongly influenced his early style, and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Still a journalist, he strove for literary publication, but a suitcase containing almost all of his work was randomly stolen. He overcame subsequent writer's block by deliberately crafting single sentences and paragraphs. Critics cite these efforts as the formation of his concise early style. These paragraphs became the “chapters” between short stories in his first major work, *In Our Time* (1925). He achieved early critical success with *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). Critics were stymied by his 1930s work, especially *Death in the Afternoon* (1931), an allegory for the conflict between aesthetics and capitalism, but disguised as a bullfighting encyclopedia. Critics celebrated his return to a form they understood with *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940), his greatest mature novel, set during the Spanish Civil War, (which he had covered in the 1930s, predicting the spread of fascism and the advent of World War II). After covering the war in Europe, he began several ambitious projects that occupied the rest of his life. Dismissed as a has-been in the reviews for *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950), he stunned the world with *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). This novel drew on his fear instilled by two near-fatal plane crashes, and it earned the Nobel Prize in 1954. He published no more literature in his lifetime; much work appeared posthumously, including *A Moveable Feast* (1964) and *The Garden of Eden* (1986).

152

In the two plane crashes, Hemingway suffered severe internal injuries and a skull fracture, but it was weeks before he received adequate medical care. He sought interim pain management through alcohol; his drinking, which had never had any impact on his writing, became a spiraling problem. He came under government scrutiny for his uncanny perception of political and ideological trends, especially in Cuba, where he had lived since 1939. Always prone to depression, and finally unable to write due to memory loss exacerbated by electro-shock therapy, Hemingway ended his life with a shotgun in Idaho on July 2, 1961.

—Hillary Justice, Illinois State University

153

Hills Like White Elephants

ERNEST HEMINGWAY

THE HILLS ACROSS THE valley of the Ebro¹ 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 on 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 glasses 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?"

¹River in northern Spain.

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

"Four reales."²

"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 licorice," the girl said and put the glass down.

"That's the way with everything."

"Yes," said the girl. "Everything tastes of licorice. 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 coloring 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.

²Spanish coins

"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 afterward?"

"We'll be fine afterward. 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 afterward 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?"

156

"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 any more."

"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 any one 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.

157

"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 barroom, 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."

[1927]

QUESTIONS

ERNEST HEMINGWAY, *Hills Like White Elephants*

1. What is the couple arguing about in the story? What specific lines best illustrate their positions in this argument in the first half of the story? In the second half?
2. Toward the beginning of the story, the narrator notes that, "the express from Barcelona was coming in forty minutes." Near the end of the story, the man translates the barmaid's announcement that "the train is coming in five minutes." The couple does not have thirty-five minutes' worth of conversation between these lines. Where, specifically, in the story, does time pass in silence? What must each character be thinking, privately, during each silence in order for the next dialogue to make sense?
3. Compare the description of the Ebro valley that begins the story with the one that occurs halfway through (when Jig moves to the end of the station). Draw a map of the story's setting, including as many details as you can find. How does Hemingway use setting to symbolize the couple's problem and to illustrate possible "solutions"?
4. Consider that this story was written in the 1920s and set in Spain, a Catholic country. How do those details complicate the balance of power in this relationship, especially given the specifics of the couple's current circumstances?
5. Hemingway is often considered a misogynist—a woman hater. What evidence can you find for this in the story? What evidence can you find in the story that contradicts it?
6. If there is no character change in a story, it is not a very good story. Consider Jig's attitude toward their situation throughout the story, and her attitude toward the American man. Identify any moments of change, however subtle. Then do the same for the American man's attitudes toward their situation and toward Jig. Who changes? When? How? Why?
7. The story follows the musical pattern of a "theme and variation." Everything that happens in the first half of the story also happens in the second half, but with slight alterations. Locate where in the story the "variation" half begins, list as many points of similarity as you can, and then describe the differences.
8. Many Hemingway stories involve a sporting conflict set in an arena—a matador engaging a bull in a bullring; a fisherman's epic battle with an enormous fish encircled by the ocean's horizon. How does this story—which has nothing to do with sport—fit this pattern? What does this say about the larger stakes in the story? Does it elevate them to a universal, epic grandeur, or diminish them to the point of triviality? Or does the story support both readings?
9. What does the couple decide, either individually or together, to do at the end of the story?
11. Research the various options that have been historically available to women and couples who find themselves in similar situations to the one discussed in the story. Discuss how these options have evolved over the last hundred years, and then assess what elements of the couple's predicament remain unchanged despite changes in culture and technology.
12. Write about gender relations as you see them in your town, school, or social groups. How do men and women communicate, and how do they miscommunicate? Decide what, if anything, has changed since the 1920s.
13. Hemingway wrote this story on his honeymoon in 1927 and dedicated the manuscript to his Catholic bride, Pauline, who had just moved across the Atlantic to live with him in France. Write about how this biographical detail contributes to your understanding of the moment at which the man moves the suitcases in the story, and about how it might affect your conclusion regarding what the couple's final decision might be.