Hemingway’s Portrayal Of Alcohol In Regards To Avoidance

“When there is an invisible elephant in the room, one is from time to time bound to trip over a trunk” Karen Jay Fowler. Ernest Hemingway has an indirect and subtle way to introduce conflict with his writing. The developing conflict in Hills Like White Elephants is very subtle, and is approached with avoidance. Alcohol is a prominent injection in many of Hemingway’s stories, due to his own life. In the story Hills Like White Elephants, alcohol seems to be the catalyst for avoidance. Alcohol plays a large part in how our characters interact regarding a huge decision. This is not unlike other Hemingway stories, in which the author injects his own life into his writing. Not until the alcohol has been introduced does the main concept of the story begin.

The story Hills Like White Elephants has a major and subtle theme of abortion, and how a couple must choose to deal with their conflict. Hemingway’s use of alcohol in real life was no secret, they were prevalent in his stories. His relationship problems were not held in secret either, as Hemingway wrote stories that reflected on his own horrors. “Hemingway’s writing can be seen as an adaptive defensive strategy for dealing with painful moods” (Martin 359) Hemingway had been in various. The need to drink fueled his stories, and those stories fueled his will to live. Although the use of alcohol to hide the elephant in the room is blatant, the conflict between our characters was not.

The major theme of the story is abortion, and how it will relate to the relationship between our characters. The first spoken line in the story was, “What should we drink, the girl asked” (Hemingway). The two characters have a huge elephant in the room to discuss, but they decide that they need to use alcohol as a buffer for this conversation. The couple seems disconnected, and of course once the conflict between them is more visible you can see how the alcohol is the catalyst for their conversation. A conversation regarding abortion is troubling no matter how it starts. Yet our characters are only making sound conversation and decisions while drinking. This seems quite counterintuitive because a huge decision like this shouldn’t be done while slamming down a few beers. Yet, the beers are not the only alcohol that is consumed, nor is it the main catalyst in their life.

The beverage ordered, Anise Del Toro is also a large simile for the use of Absinthe by our characters. Jib’s comment “Everything tastes of licorice. Especially all the things you’ve waited so long for, like absinthe” (Hemingway) represents the correlation of absinthe to their relationship (Lanier 1). The woman is bitter towards the man, and this is absolutely described by the correlation of Absinthe, and the symmetry related to the color of the hills. (Weeks 75) The blackness of the licorice can also be evaluated to be a contrast between life and sorrow. Perhaps “living green color” is also a direct correlation to the comparison of the country sides on the river. One is green and bountiful, which is representing life, and the other is dull and barren, which can represent death (Weeks 75). The conflict of abortion is highlighted in this comparison; should our character end the pregnancy and create sorrow, or continue the pregnancy and create joy. But again, the use of alcohol pushes the subject matter away from the woman.

Works Cited

1. Lanier, Doris. “The Bittersweet Taste of Absinthe in Hemingway’s ‘Hills Like White Elephants.’” Studies in Short Fiction, vol. 26, no. 3, Summer 1989, p. 279. EBSCOhost
2. Martin, Christopher D. “Ernest Hemingway: A Psychological Autopsy of a Suicide.” Psychiatry: Interpersonal & Biological Processes, vol. 69, no. 4, Winter 2006, pp. 351–361. EBSCOhost
3. Weeks Jr., Lewis E. “Hemingway Hills: Symbolism in ‘Hills Like White Elephants.’” Studies in Short Fiction, vol. 17, no. 1, Winter 1980, p. 75. EBSCOhost