
Hemingway's Soldier Experience In Hills Like White Elephants And In Soldier's Home

After World War One, many war heroes returned to an unrecognizable society that had majorly changed both materialistically and emotionally since they left. These men came back as outcasts to a society that evolved without them despite their sacrifice of fighting for its survival. "In Soldier's Home" and "Hills Like White Elephants" Hemingway reveals how soldiers' inability to communicate with others leads to feelings of meaninglessness.

After such a terrifying and deadly war the soldiers came back heavily changed while the civilians oblivious to the change in the world remained the same. While anti German sentiment heightened tremendously among civilians, the soldiers sat in the trenches fighting against those Germans and their allies. These young men suffered from misinformation or lack of information at all. They joined the military to feel patriotic and heroic (The Impact of World War I on the United States). Unexpectedly though they encountered trenches constantly bombarded by the opposing forces (The World War I Allied Trenches). The horrific events that these young men witnessed like their friends getting blown up into pieces right in front of them caused them to suffer from shellshock. Shellshock similar to post traumatic stress disorder caused fatigue, hearing and vision problems, confusion and many other symptoms. At the time people did not understand this condition so doctors could not treat it. Many civilians believed that the symptoms resulted from cowardice. Eventually with the help of Charles Myers a lot of World War One soldiers received psychiatric treatment for shellshock, but for others this physiological condition meant they could not function regularly in a civilian function which often caused isolation (Jones). Upon their return to civilian life many American soldiers received help from the government as well as from organizations such as the AEF to find jobs and to get rehab. Despite this help many soldiers who returned after the passion from the the soldiers' initial homecomings and victory parades wore off struggled to get help and to integrate into society (Coming Home). Before these men came home trying to reintegrate back into society and work to provide for their families someone had to do this for them. As men left overseas in droves the women back home had to fill out the workforce. This made women more independent and ambitious for more equal rights as they proved they can do a man's job. This caused post war women to stand up for themselves to men who subdue them (striking women).

As someone who served in World War I, Hemingway wrote about the war's aftermath from his own experience ("Ernest M. Hemingway."). Born on July 21, 1899 in Oak Park Illinois found interest in nature and writing. When he got older World War 1 swept Europe so he wanted to help (Ernest Hemingway). Hemingway volunteered as an ambulance driver in the war. At eighteen years old, he got shot by the Austrians and suffered a severe wound. Hemingway received the silver medal of valor for saving his fellow soldier despite his injuries. Hemingway discovered through this injury and near death experience the lack of individuality in life as every man goes through the same pain and so the pain becomes the normal (Putnam). Though this injury led Hemingway to his love Agnes, it also led him home where he felt out of place. His journey back home started by finding out that Agnes would not join him and instead break up with him (Short Stories For Students 26). He then returned to find that though he changed dramatically as a result of the war, the people back home did not (Putnam). The extremely different experiences between those who fought in the war and those who stayed home made it

impossible for them to properly communicate (Smelstor). After living with no love Hemingway suffered of depression causing him to commit suicide on July 2, 1961 in Ketchikan, Idaho (Ernest Hemingway).

Krebs returns to a practically unchanged society in "Soldier's home" that cannot and do not want to comprehend the war from the soldier's real point of view. Returning home later than many of his fellow soldiers, Krebs did not experience the homecoming atmosphere that they did. Changed dramatically by the war, Krebs felt like an outcast in his own hometown (Putnam). Because Krebs could not translate his wartime experiences into normal civilian life, he became an outsider. He could not function in a normal society with a normal job and a normal family household. His own mom becomes no different to him than all the other civilians who cannot understand his experiences (Baerdemaeker). Asked by his mom if he loves her, Krebs responds "I don't love anybody" (7), he no longer felt particularly about any individual as he now saw them all as the same (Smelstor). He seems to only have a relationship with one person, his sister Helen. Because of the social norms surrounding siblings, and his sister's male characteristics, Krebs can communicate with her in any way to make up for his lack of relationships. Realizing that he does not fit into society, Krebs starts observing society and its norms as a spectator. He spectates, longing more structure and longing for the norms of his life in Europe to replace the norms in his life in America. Unfortunately he cannot achieve this as it would require him to initiate change in a society that will not listen to him. Because in Europe Krebs spent his time with other men he could not follow the American norm of love. He could not possibly fall in love with a woman as he does not connect with them at all. Meanwhile he could not love men according to society. He feels restricted as society teaches to love but prohibits him from it at the same time. His voice silenced, his experiences unwelcomed, his love non-existent, and him misunderstood, the hero moved from the home that he fought for into isolation to live with the one person who heard and understood him, himself (Baerdemaeker).

The two characters in "Hills Like White Elephants" attempt to resolve their conflict of differing mindsets. The setting of "long and white" hills on one side and the "brown and dry" countryside on the other shares a similar contrast to the two characters (Weeks). Brown and dry refers to the man's blunt personality and rejection of change and nature. Long and white represents the woman's more open adventurous personality as these words all have positive connotations. Though the woman controls the conversation, the conversation seems as plain as the man. While the woman attempts to start a conversation about the beautiful nature surrounding them, the man shuts her down as he continues to drink (Hardy). One important separation of the two characters' mindsets comes in their reasoning. The man lives his life with nothing but reason. Happy with what he has, he reasonably does not give it up or risk doing so by putting a burden on himself such as a child. The woman though does not care much about reason and thinks of the child as a new life that adds true meaning to the life of the family. Her lack of reason allows her to think that the mountains look like white elephants. The white elephant also symbolizes "a sacred beast in some cultures, but in Europe and America something that is only apparently valuable and is in actuality more trouble than it is worth". Europe and America represent the man and his feelings towards the baby and the other cultures represents the woman's views towards the baby. While the man represents a close minded majority of the postwar society the woman tries to escape that bleak world (Holladay).

His statement about not loving anyone including his mother served as the only truth Krebs told at home, but he realized that the truth hurt people too much and so he covered this one up with more lies (Smelstor). As much as the truth wanted to escape Krebs, the people of Oklahoma did

not accept it. The civilians did not want to hear about his real war experience. Instead they wanted to believe the lies told to them by the government about heroism. Krebs gave into society and started spewing lies about his experiences. He painfully spoke the same lies that dragged him into the war and that he despised (Baerdemaeker). Krebs does not do this only to lie to the public but also to himself about his military experience. He wants to believe that he fought well and heroically when he knew that he did not show such high quality as a soldier. Therefore Krebs denied the effect of his lying psychologically as it made him believe what he wanted to believe (Kobler). As he let his lies set in as his reality "All of the times that had been able to make him feel cool and clear inside himself when he thought of them; the times so long back when he had done the one thing, the only thing for a man to do, easily and naturally, when he might have done something else, now lost their cool, valuable quality and then were lost themselves" (2). Krebs though longed for the memories while also not wanting some of the knowledge that came with them. No longer could Krebs live a normal simple life with the loss of his most important memories. For example he lost interest in love as love became too complicated. He viewed love as more lies and a woman who would not understand him. No one could possibly love him for him as no one understood the real him. He did not want to be known for or loved for being a hero that he was not (Baerdemaeker). Without a chance at love and with all the lies he told taking away his real memories of war and hence its purpose, Krebs' life lost purpose.

It only becomes apparent many lines into the story that the two characters' unborn child will serve as the main topic in this story. While the woman wants the child so that they could have real meaning in their life instead of just looking at things and drinking the man wants her to have an abortion (Holladay). Though they both want the same thing, to stay together whatever choice the woman makes will most likely lead to their breakup because it would result in one of theirs' unhappiness. Even though the woman knows what decision she will make as the consequences would not differ based on which decision she makes, she still asks the man for his opinion. The man, in no position to make the decision for the woman lies that "it's an awfully simple operation..." (2), to convince her to do it. The whole dialogue therefore had little reason to begin with the choice already made and little reason to continue as it only produced pointless lies. The dialogue, meant to surround the most important decision in the characters' lives had no meaning thus rendering the characters' lives meaningless (Short Stories for Students 6). While the man claims that if she does not agree with him she can make her own choice, he clearly does not want such a significant change in their life. He seems to view a child as an unnecessary burden and he would rather continue living comfortably even if it means living without real meaning. Like many in the post war generation the man has given into an empty society with constant lies and hypocrisy (Holladay). He prefers this simple way of life to a complicated life with real responsibilities and real problems. Through this preference not only does the man give up the bad that comes from living a real meaningful life but also the good like love, curiosity, ambition and much more (Hardy).

"In Soldier's Home" and "Hills Like White Elephants" Hemingway reveals how soldiers' inability to communicate with others leads to feelings of meaninglessness. Using his own experiences Hemingway depicts in Soldier's Home how soldiers could not reconnect with the innocent civilians in their communities. Hemingway also shows that in order to fit in one must give up the entire meaning of their life. In Hills Like White Elephants, Hemingway uses an argumentative dialogue surrounding the biggest topic of the characters' life, full of lies and lacking off any progress to show the meaninglessness of their lives caused by a lack of communication. Using these stories Hemingway portrays how the inability to understand others

through communication led the postwar generation to lose meaning in their lives. This lack of communication in some ways has only gotten worse as people refuse to listen to each other making much of the argumentative climate meaningless.

edubirdie.com