

What Does "Read" Mean: A Demonstration

Using Ernest Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants"

During the story, we are eavesdropping on the conversation of a couple, an American man and a young woman named Jig, as they wait in the train station at Zaragosa, Spain. In the left column are leads and questions; on the right are observations and questions that might occur to a reader while reading this story. Your task is to try to think of answers to the questions as you read and **re-read** the story. Feel free to suggest additional observations and questions by email to [Prof. Eric Hibbison](#). For a summary of the clues about the kind of operation and an interpretation, see this [report by one group of students](#). (Google for [copies](#) of the story online if you don't have a book containing the story.)

Numbers throughout these notes begin with paragraph numbers from the story; questions and comments about a paragraph are after the decimal and sequential. **Questions** with letters having a yellow background are about the whole story.

[Story deleted at the publisher's request.
Simon and Schuster 9/6/04]

===== *Paragraphs 1-7*

In **the first seven paragraphs**, Hemingway introduces the scene and gives us an initial conversation to overhear. Note that the couple is sitting outside of the bar, unlike the other travelers at this train station.

2. Students often wonder why Jig starts by asking about drinks. Some speculate that Jig is distracting the American by asking questions about one of his favorite topics, yet other students see Jig as dependent and even subservient to the man, who is apparently older than she is. Neither of these reasons for discussing what to drink is necessarily a permanent condition for Jig.

A. Does she change during the story?

B. Does the American?

C. Do they agree on a course of action by the end of the story?

D. By the end of the story is their relationship developing on a new "track" or doomed?

E. Most of the critics who have written about this story seem to think that either Jig or the

0 Since titles are carefully chosen, what hints to a theme or tone are in this story's **title**?

0.1 What's a "white elephant"?

0.2 Does a hill imply some difficulty?

1 Here's the hills from the title already in the first sentence. Why would hills be white? [[photo](#) and see below for satellite photos]

1.2 Not much color here; light and shade only. What could this suggest or symbolize? It's warm in the shadow; that's a positive connotation.

1.3 This station is actually at a junction between the main north-south line and the main east-west rail line in Zaragosa, Spain.

1.4 An open-air cafe/bar--seems like summer, so warm is better than hot?

1.5 Who has an identity? Isn't the girl American? If she's a "girl," is he much older? Is she intimidated by him?

1.6 They've got some time to kill.

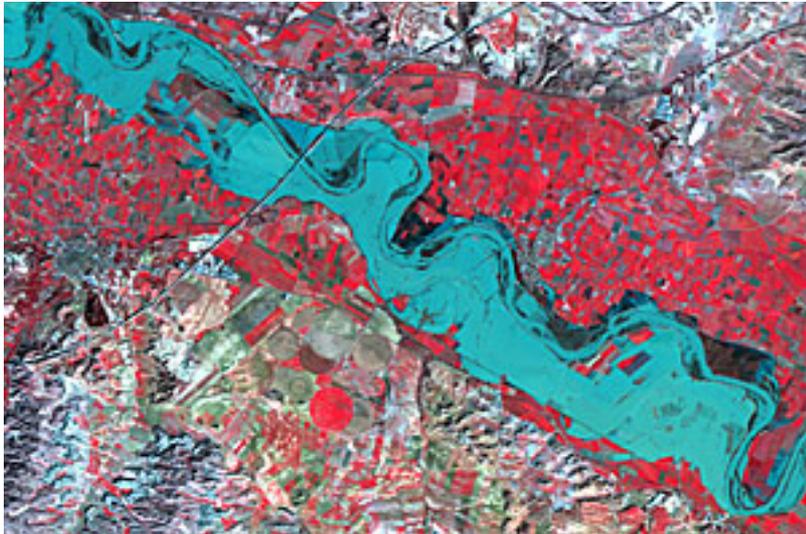
1.7 Why are they going to Madrid--government business, tourism, bull fights?

2 Why start their conversation with the drinks? Don't they have anything else to talk about? How long have these two been together?

5 He speaks Spanish; does she?

American will break up after the question of the baby is settled, one way or the other--no matter which. (Click the link and try searching for "baby" or "abortion" or "break," maybe "break up" to sample their opinions.)

For a history of the *positive* connotations of "white elephant," click to [this explanation](#) that links white elephants with ancient Burma and Siam.



6 The "woman" must be the waitress at the bar; is she Spanish? Is she trouble?

At left is a photo from SPOT satellite of flooding in the Ebro River valley in 2003. When Hemingway took the train through this terrain with his first wife, Hadley, who pointed out the white hills in the distance, it was a much calmer scene. **F1**. Don't those hills in the lower left look white?

Try [another satellite photo of the Iberian peninsula](#). **F2**. The northwest corner maybe reflects the scenery of the Ebro River valley as described in the story--or was Hemingway fictionalizing the scenery in the story to match the symbolic terrain rather than the literal terrain?



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