

# Understanding the Thematic Symbolic Meanings of Some American Short Stories

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**ABSTRACT.** *The paper analyzes the thematic meanings of some American short stories Hills Like White Elephants, In Another Country, A Good Man Is Hard to Find, In the Zoo, The Man Who Was Almost a Man, King of the Bingo Game, and tries to discuss issues of human nature, identity crisis and other outstanding American social problems.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Thematic meaning, Irony, Human nature, Identity crisis*

## 1. Introduction

Ernest Hemingway was highly celebrated for his laconic language, easy to read but deep within revealing significant social problems that prevailed.

Unlike exquisite portrait description in traditional novels, no status or appearance information is traced in Hills Like White Elephants, except the unknown “American” and the unnamed “girl”. When the girl first compares hills to white elephants, the man does not seem to hit the nails on the head. She already knows that there has been an irremediable discrepancy in between, not just for the man’s barren imaginative thinking but for his failure in understanding a much deeper connotation of white elephants-burden, uselessness. Bag labels from all the hotels where they spend nights illustrate what the man and the girl are going through, homelessness and instability. Life becomes so painful that the girl utters sarcastically “I was being amused. I was having a fine time”, but the fact that “Everything tastes of licorice” would make her scream at the top of her lungs. With regard to the small operation, repeatedly, the man emphasizes earnestly “If you don’t want to you don’t have to”. What he really means is only the operation, just as a lot more people had done, could retain their happy time like before and most crucially get rid of the only thing that bothers them, the baby. The man’s irresponsibility and loss of hope fight against the girl’s longing for a peaceful family life in the dialogues of “can” and “cannot” where the contradictory values of the American lost generation are faithfully presented.

No bullet shooting, cannon bombing, blood shedding is seen from In Another Country, but that “much game hanging outside” stiff, empty, blown in the wind, feathers turned. A fragment of lifeless street scene is vivid enough to remind readers of the outcome of war, death. The courtyard, close to the hospital, from where the

funerals start, once again corresponds to the gloomy tone of the story. The doctor blindly encourages “me” that “You will play football again like a champion”, obviously too impossible to make “me” believe it or go to the war any more. And most strikingly, the Milan boy, a military academy graduate, who intended to be a soldier, is bereaved of his nose within just one hour in his first battle. War becomes nightmarish and terrifying for those young men who devote themselves passionately for the heroic and patriotic cause, since everyone could have “lived a very long time with death”. The devastating wartime kills the major’s love, his would-be-wife. People could do nothing about it except to see her painfully die of pneumonia. “He’ll lose” condenses all the losses that a living human being could suffer from war-health, valiance, zest, love and everything.

These two stories profoundly express Hemingway’s serious thought on the themes of values, life, death and war, although they are linguistically simple.

## **2. Both Flannery O’ Connor and Jean Stafford Dealt with the Dark side of Human Nature in Their Stories.**

Commented a lot as a grotesque horror novel, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* is ended with thrilling destruction of the whole family due to grandmother’s selfish folly. The story is set after WWII when the world needed reconstruction especially in Europe, the same as human moral. The grandmother, self-centered, seizes every chance to change Bailey’s mind of where to make the journey and craftily invents the secret panel in purpose of sparking children’s fervent curiosity to relive her old romance. Grandmother’s selfishness is accurately presented in her reaction at the recognition of the Misfit that she herself is the first person coming to her mind when the family are on a life-risky occasion. It totally contravenes her former speech “I wouldn’t answer to my conscience if I did”. She receives, on the other hand, no respect from the family when “The children’s mother didn’t seem to hear her”, and that June loathes “She has to go everywhere we go” and rebuts her hair is naturally curly which will not bother grandmother to coil it. Sinister vanity is another distinct character of grandmother, dressing up to the nines, being the first one to get into the car and even thinking of dying in a pointed fair lady way in case of an accident. Ironically she eventually makes it at the murder, the end of her life, to remark that she is a fine woman from the good old time when people were nice. Children’s discourse should have followed an innocent sweet way, yet their languages we read are imbued with abhorrence and filth, for example “I wouldn’t live in a broken-down place like this for a million bucks.” “Tennessee is just a hillbilly dumping ground and Georgia is a lousy state.” “We’ve had an ACCIDENT!...But nobody’s killed” says June disappointedly.

From *In the Zoo*, it is a harshly heartbreaking thing to witness the conversion of a creature from innocence to devil, as in the transformation from lovely Laddy to ferocious Caesar. Daisy and “I” are steeped in hidden plots, double meanings, fraud and uppity when growing from childhood to adolescence. The owner and the lodgers of the boarding house are as “dour and dire” as its decoration and the “ugly-colored meal”. Orphans and adopters are despised upon in such odoriferous social

atmosphere even at school which should have been a sanctuary. However the poor girls are refused by the school clinic to be treated their tonsils. More formidably, Gran takes keen pleasure in heartlessly excoriating Mr. Murphy, the girls' only friend from whom they warmly sense the meaning of love. Gran, additionally, gravely hurts them with the crimes she deliberately goads Caesar to commit and smashes their hope of running away into millions of pieces. Even Mr. Murphy, the incarnation of purity and saint, like the polar bear in the zoo, would go extremes to turn ruffled and with a heart of stone he poisons Caesar. The influence of Mrs. Placer, an insatiable flibbertigibbet, like the gossipy monkeys at the beginning of the story, is somewhat the girls might not forget throughout their lives.

These two stories focus precisely on the darkness of human nature that is stained by the corruptive society and the ugliness of morality that is in need of criticism and salvation.

### **3. Discuss the Identity Crisis of the Black People in Richard Wright's and Ralph Ellison's Stories.**

From *The Man Who Was Almost a Man*, in Dave's world, the closely bound relationships between the black and the white, the black parents and the black children are something the 17-year-old teenager would not ever shake off. Gun is regarded as a powerful token to protect himself and the house because "You kin never tell what might happen", which fully displays the hostility between these two races. It is an indisputable fact that Dave lives in a time lacking in social security and equality. In mother's eyes, Dave is nothing but a boy who should be economically dependent on her, though he works hard like a mule. Dave's enormous fear of father prevents him from mentioning the purchase of gun at father's presence. The store owner Joe preliminarily considers Dave's idea as a joke. All these above prove that Dave's flaming eagerness to become a man is not positively supported from within and without. He has this good intention but physically "feeling his long, loose-jointed limbs", behaviorally "scratched his head, scratched his thigh", "bumped into a chair", "not daring even to point" he is not a ready man yet. When the truth comes out that it is none other than Dave who shoots the mule Jenny to death, everyone, a knot of black and white people laugh rather than punish him. He gets hurt deep inside because people around still treat him like a little boy that simply has nothing to do with a gun, "his eyes welling with tears." Indescribable anger mounts up in his bosom so high that he makes clearly four reports with eyes open the next day, followed by quivering excitement. And he wishes to have just one more bullet to scare a bit the old Hawkins. Finally Dave gripes the gun tightly, the sturdy proof of his manhood, and grabs the moving train, the symbol of progression and freedom, which could take him somewhere free of discrimination, where he wants desperately to be a real man.

The hero of the *King of the Bingo Game*, "He", whose name is unknown to readers is in the same predicament like Dave, one of the countless rootless black individuals struggling to find a place for himself. He is struck severely by the pain of hunger when "the smell of the peanuts stabbed him like a knife", because he is broke,

no birth certificate to get himself a job, no money to pay Laura's treatment. The black are generally discriminated by the northern white with their sharp mockery that "So you decided to come down off that mountain to the U.S." In some chaotic episodes of his blurred dreams, he could think of no way to get rid of the demon train that is crushing down upon him. The train, unlike the one Dave hilariously expects to disentangle himself from his teenage surroundings, embodies the devilish external pressure, his fear and hatred towards white people. He is not self-identified for he screams "Who am I?" For days and nights, the only thing that he could do is study the cards and watch the winners press the button. As the chosen person, he vehemently feels that his luck has come to make him run the show and become God. He does not dare to turn loose the wheel, the life wheel of him and Laura, nor does he dare to let go of this only chance so soon. His trial is destined to be no exception from failure that is ended by a hard blow at his skull.

The fate of American black people was, in one time, unavoidably led to joblessness, poverty, bereavement, discrimination and despair, which is well worth sympathizing with.

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