

Assignment: Write a “responsive essay” in which you present your personal response to a work of literature. In the course of your essay, answer these questions:

1. What in the literary work prompts my response?
2. What are my feelings, memories, or associations?
3. What experiences, observations, or beliefs explain my responses?

Cheryl has chosen to respond to Ernest Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants,” a very short story in which two characters, Jig, a young woman, and her unnamed American lover discuss whether she should have an abortion, which the American wants and Jig does not. For whatever reasons, Jig is unable to express her feelings or desires directly.

### **The Truth about White Lies** by Cheryl Vaccarello

As I browsed through the literary pieces looking for the perfect work to focus my essay on, I kept coming back to Ernest Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants.” I recalled many conversations in my life where, like Jig, I would say, “I’m fine,” when I really wasn’t, or “that’s okay,” when the situation really wasn’t okay with me. While reading this story, I was annoyed with Jig for not being honest with her lover, and I was also sad for her, because it seemed that she wasn’t able to be honest. She was putting the man’s feelings and wants before hers. I, too, have been in situations when I have used the white lie to avoid confrontation.

The most recent telling of this little “white lie” happened just a month ago. My oldest niece is getting married in Wisconsin on September 23<sup>rd</sup>. My husband Al and I were discussing the details of the trip, trying to decide when we would leave for Wisconsin and where we would stay. At that time, Al informed me that he could not leave on Friday morning because he had a band job Friday night (he plays in a wedding band). Inside, I was steaming, but all I said to him was that it was fine with me, and he could come on Saturday. There was an edge to my voice that he must have picked up on, and so he pushed me further. Like Jig, I said I didn’t want to discuss it anymore. The situation was the way it would be. I would be going alone, and he would come the next day. I was very angry but could not express my anger.

It’s always been difficult for me to express anger. I am still trying to find why, but I think part of the reason is that I am afraid of losing control. Hurtful words are said in anger, and I am afraid of saying something that can’t be taken back and would be really hurtful. I try to see the other point of view of the situation before getting angry. I understood Al’s side of the situation, which was that he had the opportunity to play music. To Al, music is a top priority. The wedding was on Saturday, so he could just drive up Saturday morning. My side was that this was a family wedding, a time for all of us to be together. I felt it was essential that I be there early for my niece Sarah, because she doesn’t have a mom to help her with those last minute details. Instead of telling him all the reasons I was upset, I just said, “Okay, come up Saturday. It’s okay.” I don’t know why I couldn’t explain to him my reasons for wanting to go to Wisconsin as a family.

“Hills Like White Elephants” made me examine the use of the white lie. What exactly is a white lie? It is a phrase such as “I don’t care,” “I’m fine,” or “okay.” Sometimes the use of the white lie is good. The white lie can be used to be polite or when you want to avoid hurting someone’s feelings. But at what point is the “self” lost after constant telling of the white lie? When do you begin to ignore your own feelings and only give in to what others want of you? Reading this story made me stop and look at why I tell those white lies and what effect the telling of the lies has on me.

I think I learned to say those white lies when I was very young. An older couple, Mr. and Mrs. Henry, baby sat for my sister Bonnie and me when we were young because my mom worked full time outside the home. My sister was 5 and I was 3 when this couple began watching us. They lived a few blocks away from our house, so sometimes we would go to their house for the day. As far as I can remember, they baby sat for us for about one year. A year of abuse and neglect. There were days when lunch (if we got any) consisted of hot water. We were locked in dark closets or kept outside on the back

porch for many hours. Many days we were forced to wear only our underwear so that we would stay clean for when mom got home. You see, Mrs. Henry could then boast about how well she could take care of us. We could not play games; we could not make noise. I don't know how many hours I sat with my hands folded on my lap, just sitting. Every day when mom came home from work, she would ask, "How was your day today?" I would always say, "It was okay. It was fine." We never told mom what was really going on because we were the ones that were bad. We made Mrs. Henry do the things to us that she did. Mom knew that, too. Why don't you think she stopped Mrs. Henry? Mrs. Henry said those things to us so many times that we believed her. As young as we were, we knew Mom had to work and we didn't want her to worry; therefore, the white lie.

Well, one summer day came the breaking point. I stopped saying everything was fine. I stopped smiling and started screaming. Mrs. Henry had gone out and we were left with Don, her husband. He was downstairs in the basement and called to us to go into the bathroom and look at him through the vent in the bathroom floor. When we did, he exposed himself to us. I ran out of the house screaming, while my sister stayed inside. The neighbor, a policeman, was home and I ran to him. I kept pointing at the house and crying. The words would not come. He went into the house and saw Don. When Don was arrested and the story of the abuse came tumbling out, my mom was devastated. We had to go to court and testify against him. Convicted for his exhibitionism, Don was sent to jail, and Mrs. Henry was sent to Elgin State Mental Hospital. Finally, they were out of our lives.

As I brought this memory forward, I asked myself, at what point does the telling of the white lie become harmful? I told my mom that everything was fine for different reasons. As I look back on this painful time, the foremost reason was probably that I was afraid. Mrs. Henry made me believe I was bad and that I was at fault. She was the adult, and my mom wasn't making her stop, so she must have had my mom's approval. That was the thinking of a 3-year-old. I also believe that I told those white lies because I didn't want my mom to worry. She had to work, and in my way, I was trying to help make it easier for her. A part of me also believed that my mom should have known what was happening, so when I said everything was fine, it was what I thought she wanted to hear. Jig used the same white lie, "everything's fine," when she told the American man what she thought he wanted to hear.

In both episodes from my life, the outcome would have been different had I not told the white lie. Had I told my husband how I really felt, I probably would be traveling to Wisconsin with my family as a whole. Had I put my needs before what I thought were my mother's, I would not have to contend with the memory of that year in my life. Most specifically, I would not carry the picture of that old man exposing himself to my sister and me.

White lies allow people to hide their feelings. Sometimes feelings are too painful to speak about. Maybe the time is not right. Well, it is now the time in my life to take a stand. I am really pushing myself to stop the white lies before they stop me. I can understand why I felt such a pull to "Hills Like White Elephants." I related strongly to Jig. I know I don't want to be like her and say, "I feel fine. There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine." It is time to stop the white lies and find the truth.

I hope Jig finds whatever she has inside to stand up for what she wants and needs, as I am trying to do.

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