

ASPECTS OF THE SHORT STORY
A COMPARISON OF JEAN RHY'S "THE SOUND OF THE RIVER" WITH ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S
"HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS"

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And then, at another table much nearer the dancing-floor, we see Stella and Olga and Jean and Ernest and Bill and realize this is Ford's Night at the bal musette.¹

As this recollection suggests, Jean Rhys and Ernest Hemingway became acquainted in Paris in the early 1920s through their mutual association with Ford Madox Ford.² Ford, famous for his encouragement of young writers, employed Hemingway to assist in editing the *Transatlantic Review*, which enabled him to practise his craft and display his burgeoning talent to good effect. But for Rhys, another promising young writer, Ford had no comparable offer of steady employment. Instead, he incorporated her into his household, eventually becoming her lover, gave her sporadic writing tasks, such as translating,³ and wrote a long and largely irrelevant introduction to her first book of short stories, *The Left Bank*.⁴ It is tempting to speculate about the degree to which the tacit assumptions behind such differential treatment contributed to the sense Rhys developed of her literary potential, particularly to notions of how confident and autonomous her artistic voice could be. Certainly, it will be argued in this paper that none of the bold, self-assured manner which came to characterize Hemingway's best work is present in the scrupulous, controlled, but much less aggressive narrative technique that Rhys evolved, which owes, it should be noted, a debt to Ford's own literary style.

Rhys and Hemingway were never close companions, but neither were they estranged; many years after that period in Paris, Rhys remembered Hemingway fondly as "a very nice-looking young man," not "catty" in those years as she felt he later became.⁵ More significantly, she spoke repeatedly of her admiration for his work.⁶ What he thought of her is unfortunately unrecorded, although we know one of her novels was among the books in his library in the last years of his life.⁷

A certain "Hemingwayesque" quality has, however, been discerned by several critics in Rhys's work,⁸ and it is true that the atmosphere of the English-speaking expatriate society in Paris between the wars and the fate of those who were its members is a feature of each author's work, as is a relish for incorporating and developing autobiographical detail. Rhys's style, too, has been admired in ways which are reminiscent of what is most valued about Hemingway's:

There is no one else now writing who combines such emotional penetration and formal artistry or approaches her emphatic, unblinking truthfulness. . . . She knows every detail of the shabby world she creates, knows precisely how much to leave out - surprisingly much - and precisely how to modulate the utterly personal speaking voice which controls it all.⁹

There has been, however, no rigorous examination done to date on any specific aspect of that famously praised style. It is the intention of this paper to focus on several characteristics of Rhys's narrative technique which particularly distinguish her work as a whole: her handling of time, and the nature and role of the narrating voice. In order to look more closely at the premise that Rhys and Hemingway share certain aspects of style which can be usefully compared, this paper will examine a short story by each writer, Rhys's

"The Sound of the River,"¹⁰ approximately 1800 words in length, and Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants,"¹¹ slightly shorter at approximately 1500 words. Each story focuses on a brief period in the lives of a man and a woman who are, for various reasons, isolated from all but the most trivial contact with other people. The couple in the Hemingway story are waiting for a train at a small Spanish station; the couple in the Rhys story are spending an unspecified period of time at a remote cottage on the English moors. Both stories are told by a third person narrator, and rely on the dialogue between the characters to advance the action of the story, though the Hemingway story relies more heavily on this technique than does the Rhys.¹²

In both stories the couple are unnamed, although the "girl" in the Hemingway story is twice called "Jig." We are not given, in either story, information about the couples' relative ages, their past or future activities, or their professions. Nor are we, in either story, given any specific information about the nature of their relationship, how long standing or how committed it is. Each story relates the effects of a certain kind of pressure on the relationship, and it could be argued that in both stories the impact of this pressure is felt most intensely by the woman. In the Hemingway story, the couple have a crisis to resolve which involves making a decision about whether or not the woman is to have "an operation." The decision clearly involves them both, but the woman will have to suffer its effects, and is having to make her decision in a situation in which her options are limited by her dependence on the man's love and approval. Her inability to speak Spanish makes her additionally reliant on him.

In the Rhys story, the woman's point of view is predominant, and it becomes clear that the pressure she is under is largely self-imposed. She is oppressed by the weight of her fears - which torment and mystify her - and which she tries but fails to articulate to her companion. Unlike the girl in the Hemingway story, Rhys's woman has no practical issue on which to focus; her anxiety is without a root cause, though pervasive. She is haunted by a profound sense of the world's instability, imaged in the story by the restless and relentlessly-running river, and of the attendant, precarious nature of happiness. Hemingway's girl could be happy, were she to find a successful resolution to her problem; Rhys's woman would find any suggestion of lasting contentment inconceivable.

Both stories are therefore, in a sense, specifically about the pressures which can be put on language itself, about the frustrating limitations which become apparent when language is the only means available to assuage human loneliness and fear. Each makes a powerful statement about the isolation which results from an inability to articulate a sense of oneself to even the most intimate of companions. In "Hills Like White Elephants," the antagonistic couple adopt an oblique, elusive manner of speaking which allows each to articulate a sense of anxiety, of suffering, and potentially of power over the other, but not in a constructive fashion which might offer hope of a reconciliation. In "The Sound of the River," the couple are not antagonistic; as far as he is able, the man tries to understand what is troubling the woman. He asks her questions and listens to her replies, but the couple do not achieve any sense of communion because the woman, although in some ways willing to explain herself, is constrained by her overpowering awareness of the inability of language to convey her emotions. She gives up the attempt in despair, and instead begins to reconcile herself to coping alone.

The stories share another point of comparison. We know in each story only as much of the characters' surroundings as is directly relevant to our understanding of the characters themselves. What Tony Tanner says of

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Hemingway's stories is also true of Rhys's: "The characters' emotion and the surrounding concrete details inter-permeate."¹³ In the Hemingway story, the "surrounding concrete details" establish a pattern of alternatives: "this" side of the tracks is sterile and dry, "the other" side has trees which grow and fields of grain which flourish. In the Rhys story, the environment which surrounds the couple takes on an inhospitable, even a menacing air, which contributes to the increasing sense that happiness is elusive at the best of times, and definitely not to be found here. This is a world in which pines "shut you in," hills are "lowering," and more intangibly, but as it happens, more powerfully, luck cannot be depended upon (p. 141) and "things are more powerful than people" (p. 140).

Despite these similarities, there are obvious points at which the stories are dissimilar. They cover quite different amounts of time, and in different ways. The Hemingway story chronicles approximately forty minutes of continuously running time. The Rhys story takes place during an evening and the following morning, and is interrupted by various "recalled passages," marked by the shift from past to pluperfect tense, which record the woman's intrusive memories. As such, "The Sound of the River" relies for its effect on a much more impressionistic sense of time passing than does "Hills Like White Elephants," and its emphasis, therefore, is more overtly on the impact and potential significance of sensation and emotional reaction. The disjointed narrative encourages the reader to make a pattern of the story out of an intuitive linking of the emotional reactions, and distracts his/her attention from the chronological sequence of events which forms the plot.

The effect of including material which occurs only in the mind of one of the characters is apparent in the following passage from "The Sound of the River":

She said, "I'll like it again when the rain stops."

"You weren't liking it just now, were you? Down by the river."

"Well," she said, "no. Not much."

"It was a bit ghostly down there tonight. What can you expect? Never pick a place in fine weather." (Or anything else either he thought.) "There are too many pines about," he said. "They shut you in."

"Yes."

But it wasn't the black pines, she thought, or the sky without stars, or the thin hunted moon, or the lowering, flat-topped hills, or the tor and the big stones. It was the river.

"The river is very silent," she'd said. "Is that because it's so full?"

"One gets used to the noise, I suppose. Let's go in and light the bedroom fire. I wish we had a drink. I'd give a lot for a drink, wouldn't you?"

"We can have some coffee."

As they walked back he'd kept his head turned towards the water.

"Curiously metallic it looks by this light. Not like water at all."

"It looks smooth as if it were frozen. And much wider."

"Frozen - no. Very much alive in an uncanny way. Streaming hair," he'd said as if he were talking to himself. So he'd felt it too. She lay remembering how the brown broken-surfaced, fast-running river had changed by moonlight. Things are more powerful than people. I've always believed that. (You're not my daughter if you're afraid of a horse. You're not my daughter if you're afraid of being seasick. You're not my daughter if you're afraid of the shape of a hill, or the moon when it is growing old. In fact you're not my daughter.)

"It isn't silent now is it?" she said. "The river I mean."
(pp. 139-40)

It is by no means clear how much "real" time is meant to have elapsed between the woman replying "Yes" and her saying "It isn't silent now." Certainly she feels she has lost the drift of their conversation, realizing as she speaks again that what is "silent now" requires further clarification. But in the interim she has moved far away from her bed in the cottage, and we have moved with her. The man has dropped out of focus, and it is impossible to know if he has made any comment to follow "Yes."

The use of brackets also affects the sense we have of how much time is passing. Putting the man's solitary thought into brackets in between two of his spoken sentences suggests it hardly interrupts the pace of his speech, or alters its rhythm. Without the brackets, the sense would have been of the words taking up as much time to think as they would have taken to speak - which of course does not always accord with our experience of thoughts. The brackets at the end of the longest passage in the excerpt distinguish the second recalled passage from the narration which immediately precedes it, and also suggest the speed and coherence with which subliminal notions arise from the subconscious. This second recalled passage is a memory of quite a different impact from the first one, which recalls an earlier conversation with the man, and is more leisurely, even thoughtful. The brackets emphasize the highly dramatic quality of both the repetitive language and the arresting content.

Rhys can also make decisions about where to begin paragraphs in such a way as to suggest that during the time occupied by a thought, there has been a pause in "external" time:

"My dear, really. You are an idiot."
"Yes, I know."
Not about this, she thought, not about this.
"It's only a mood," she said. "It'll go."

(p. 138)

In this case, giving the woman's thought a paragraph of its own suggests not only the possible pause in "real" time which would have elapsed but also that there are two, equally weighted responses to this comment, one internalized, one spoken.

The decision about what to include in a single paragraph can, like bracketing, suggest the pace of a speech very effectively. Compare the woman's conversation here:

"Poor devils, I bet they have an awful time if they're rare.
What'll he do? Organize a hunt? Perhaps he won't, we've agreed that he's soft-hearted. This is a bird sanctuary, did you know?
It's all sorts of things. I'll tell him about that yellow-breasted one. Maybe he'll know what it was."
(p. 140)

with this passage which follows her awakening in the morning:

"I knew it would be fine today," she thought when she saw the sunlight through the flimsy curtains. "The first fine day we've had."
"Are you awake," she said. "It's a fine day. I had such a funny dream," she said, still staring at the sunlight. "I dreamt I was walking in a wood and the trees were groaning and then I dreamt of

the wind in telegraph wires, well a bit like that, only very loud. I can still hear it - really I swear I'm not making this up. It's still in my head and it isn't like anything else except a bit like the wind in telegraph wires."

"It's a lovely day," she said and touched his hand.

"My dear, you are cold. I'll get a hot water bottle and some tea. I'll get it because I'm feeling very energetic this morning, you stay still for once!" (p. 142)

The paragraphs in which question and answer are compressed into one seem breathless by comparison with the more measured pace of this last excerpt which, in leaving space for replies from the man which do not (as it happens, can not) come, increase the feeling of accumulating tension.

Another device used by Rhys to indicate the passage of time is the spacing between lines of text. On one occasion (p. 143), Rhys uses the space conventionally, indicating a gap in the events of the narration, which allows her to restructure the remaining paragraphs in such a way as to stress the woman's isolation. On another occasion (p. 142), there is no space in the line of text where one might have been expected, between the end of the woman's thoughts for the night, and the next morning when she is again thinking. The transition is established by the substitution of "today" for "tomorrow" in otherwise similar sentences, and by the mention of sunlight through the curtains, just as Rhys had, in the opening paragraph, established the late evening by having the "night air" blowing these same curtains. In this economic use of detail, Rhys and Hemingway are much alike. The continuity of Rhys's story is not here disturbed by a visual space, and it need not be, for the "real" time which has elapsed is of no consequence to the story, since it is occupied by neither thought, emotion nor action on the part of the character.

The first space to occur in the lines of text is less easily explained. It occurs (p. 141) in the middle of the conversation the man and the woman are having in bed that night. On the one hand, it serves to separate the comment, "He was smiling as if he knew what she'd been thinking" from his question, which immediately follows the space, "Is there anything you're not afraid of in these moods of yours?" It makes his question seem more genuine, less supercilious, than it would have seemed had it followed on immediately from the narration.

But what makes this an interesting use of a spacing is that the space must "occur" within the time it takes for a match to flare up and go out. In the sentence immediately preceding "He was smiling . . .," the man strikes a match, and immediately after her one word reply to his question ("You"), the match goes out. The demands of realistic time work most interestingly against the demands of impressionistic time. Just as one can be "lost in thought" for seconds or hours of "real" time, so one can legitimately have a "space" elapsing in the text which covers hours, or the briefest of seconds.

By way of contrast, the Hemingway story seems remarkably uncomplicated in structure, even unambitious. We are offered time as a linear progression, moving evenly and continuously from its start, some forty minutes before the train the couple are waiting for is due to arrive, to its end, a few minutes before the arrival. We are given no indication that any action or fragment of conversation which involves the couple in this space of time, and which would be visible or audible to a neutral observer, is unreported, nor do we have a suggestion that anything is included as material for the story which such a neutral observer would not see.

"The White Elephants" is made up of a much greater percentage of

dialogue than "The Sound of the River," and insofar as there is a structure, the dialogue determines it. The story divides informally into "movements" or sections of conversation which are distinguished from one another by the recurring discussions about what the couple should drink. Drinking is a "safe" topic for conversation and either character returning to a mention of it signals a retreat to neutral ground from the stressful confrontational tactics of other parts of the conversation. This continues until, in a final gesture indicative of the ever-widening schism between them, the man goes off, first to move their luggage to a more convenient location, and then to have a drink by himself, choosing to order the very drink whose taste has been a disappointment to the girl.

The handling of third person narration in each story also makes a useful point of comparison. In "The Sound of the River," it can be difficult to detect precisely what is narration and what are the woman's thoughts. Take, for example, the paragraph beginning "Frozen - no" from the long excerpt, pp. 139-40, quoted above. It shifts from her recalling the three comments the man makes, which she remembers "he'd said as if he were talking to himself," to "So he'd felt it too," which is either the woman's present realization of what he had then felt, or the narrator's comment. The following sentence is certainly narration, the next two are the woman's thoughts, and then there is the bracketed passage which recalls voices from an even earlier time. The problem is that the recalled passages are often "narrated" and there is virtually no difference between the narrator's point of view and the woman's. The narrator, for instance, seems no more certain of the man's thoughts (with the one bracketed exception, his brief and prophetic foreboding about fine weather), than the woman is. The narrator tells us that the man "was smiling as if he knew what she'd been thinking," the same "as if" construction the woman uses when she remembers him talking "as if" to himself about the river.

On the other hand, the narrator does know some of what the woman is experiencing, if not why. S/he recognizes the woman is "postponing the moment when she must lie down stretched out straight" (p. 141) as she tries to fall asleep, and at the point the woman discovers the man dead in bed beside her, we are told:

As soon as she touched him her heart swelled till it reached her throat. It swelled and grew jagged claws and the claws clutched her driving in deep. . . . "Oh God," she said staring at his face . . . not speaking, not thinking any longer.

(pp. 142-43)

This excerpt also indicates the one way in which the narrator is distinguishable in "voice" from the woman; s/he is much more clearly confident about the experience of fear, and articulates this in a richer, more figurative language than is used at any other point in the story. This is also true of the passage which recalls the comment the man made on their first day in the cottage:

That's the second time. He said that before. He'd said it the first day they came. Then too she hadn't answered "yes let's" at once because fear which had been waiting for her had come up to her and touched her, and it had been several seconds before she could speak.

(p. 140, Rhys's emphasis)

The woman, too, can think vividly - of a "thin hunted moon," "lowering, flat-topped hills" (p. 139), and the "gay and horrible tune" of a tap dripping (p. 142), but she cannot imagine naming her fear:

If I could put it into words it might go . . . Sometimes you can put it into words - almost - and so get rid of it - almost. Sometimes you can tell yourself I'll admit I was afraid today. . . . But there aren't any words for this fear. The words haven't been invented.

Perhaps the purpose of the "You're not my daughter" passage (p. 140) is to suggest that childhood rejection and guilt are the cause of this inability. But whatever its cause, the woman can now only borrow language she had heard to help her understand what fear is:

Fear is yellow. You're yellow. She's got a broad streak of yellow. They're quite right, fear is yellow.
(p. 141)

This at best is only a limited way of articulating one kind of fear - cowardice. But the determination of this emerging inner voice to persist in "finding the words" for the woman's oppression forms a link between her and the calmer, more assured narrating voice.

This is not to say the narrator has no "independent" uses in the story. S/he does a certain amount of scene-setting in the first paragraph:

The electric bulb hung on a short flex from the middle of the ceiling, and there was not enough light to read so they lay in bed and talked. The night air pushed out the curtains and came through the open window soft and moist.
(p. 138)

Even here, however, only the first sentence is entirely independent; the second sentence is beginning to suggest, in the registering of "soft and moist," the possibility of a presence in the room who would recognize this.

Later we are offered a description of the man's appearance (p. 141) which is narrated, but prefaced by the words "she saw." What the woman saw is a skeletal face which contrasts with the one element in the story recognized (ironically, by the man) as "very alive" - the river. It is as if the woman ought to be aware of the man's imminent death, because of the imagery with which she registers what she saw, but she does not seem to grasp its significance. Her unconscious apprehension is passed along to us through the narration, also without comment.

The narration of the Hemingway story, by contrast, is much more recognizably detached. It is always most scrupulously restricted to paragraphs of its own, unlike "The Sound of the River," and is, more importantly, emotionally uninvolved. Roger Fowler notes that

Hemingway is usually cited as an example of the impersonal, objective writer who neither reveals himself nor pretends to privileged inner knowledge of his characters; and who creates narrators with these same characteristics.¹⁴

What is most remarkable about Hemingway's narrative technique is its consistency; any deviation, however slight, from the norm he has established in syntax or lexicon is instructive. Of the thirty-three sentences which make up the narration, twenty-eight begin with the subject, then the verb. Ten of these twenty-eight contain a further verb or two, linked with coordinating conjunctions. Of the remaining five sentences, one has only slight modifications, using a participle form to link two verbs to one subject ("Coming back,

"bright" earlier on. "Smiling" is also the only verb used by the narrator which in any way records emotion, and it occurs only in the last thirteen lines of the story, where it is used to describe the girl three times. In the final line, the girl simply and sadly asserts: "I feel fine. . . . There's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine" (p. 223). Never do we have the sense that the tragic irony of being reminded of hills "like white elephants" - useless, annoying, burdensome things - is apparent to her, although it is she who has generated the quietly evocative phrase, the story's only figurative use of language.

The stories differ in one final respect. While the Hemingway story is bleak in outlook, we are never led to believe that we are in a world where there is no possible solution. These people have not found, and perhaps will not find, a way to solve their problems, but what is at stake is nonetheless clear, as is the dangerous course they pursue by not facing up to it. It is not so clear that what Rhys omits to say, she could say if she chose. Diana Trilling comments on her early work in a way I would argue is also true of her later fiction:

To read the early work of Jean Rhys alongside that of Hemingway is as good a way as any to recognize the distance at which she stood from her famous contemporaries of the 20s and 30s. At the peak of his reputation, Hemingway was thought to have given us the ultimate statement of our modern despair: we inhabited a world without a future . . . The girl in the Hemingway short story, "Hills Like White Elephants" (1927), hasn't a language in which to resist the decision that she is to have an abortion instead of bearing her lover's child . . .

But the accompaniment to each of these failures of the future to realize itself - and here is the clue to the difference between Hemingway's view and Jean Rhys's - is his firm, if perhaps suspect, imagination of what life could be, were it only to put itself on the side of grace . . .

For Hemingway, that is, the wasteland is not within us. It is out there, looming before us. For Jean Rhys emptiness has not only been achieved; we have incorporated it into our lives as individuals.¹⁶

In other words, there is a confidence in Hemingway's fiction which seems sheer folly, sheer presumption in the world of Jean Rhys. It is a confidence apparent in the extreme simplicity of Hemingway's syntax and vocabulary, and clear in his careful and deliberate construction of a dialogue that is both revealing and full of omissions, as well as in his use of an impersonal, secure, highly visible narrating voice. Rhys, with a particularly womanly understanding of the disadvantaged soul, does not lay claim to a Hemingway-like omniscience. Instead, the spare precision of her language, her concern to reproduce accurately the fluctuating sensations of time and emotion, and her skillful construction of a narration which never presumes to put a distance between itself and the protagonist, or to make an independent judgment, are used to illuminate a different understanding of truth - the sort which is understood by those unfortunate members of society whose natural course is desolation. She had taken Hemingway a step further in understanding human isolation and human despair.

NOTES

¹Nathan Asch, in Arthur Mizener, *The Saddest Story: A Biography of Ford Madox Ford* (London: Bodley Head, 1971), p. 344.

- ²David Plante, "Jean Rhys: A Remembrance," *Paris Review*, No. 76 (Fall 1979), p. 260.
- ³Mizener, p. 350.
- ⁴Ford Madox Ford, "Rive Gauche," Preface to Jean Rhys, *The Left Bank* (London; 1927; rpt. New York: Books for Libraries Press - Arno Press, 1970), pp. 7-27.
- ⁵Elizabeth Vreeland, "Jean Rhys: The Art of Fiction," *Paris Review*, No. 76 (Fall 1979), p. 266.
- ⁶Peter Burton, "Jean Rhys," *Transatlantic Review*, No. 36 (Summer 1970), p. 109; Plante, p. 277.
- ⁷Michael S. Reynolds, *Hemingway's Reading 1910 - 1940: An Inventory* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1981), p. 174. Item no. 1761 is a copy of *After Leaving Mr. Mackenzie*. Reynolds notes, p. 75, that any book in the inventory with "Key West, 1955" as its only source (as is the case with the Rhys book) "was probably in the Key West library in 1940 when Hemingway packed for Cuba. He may have left it there for a number of reasons. Perhaps he had read it, and had no further use for it. Or it may have been a book of Pauline's which he never read."
- ⁸Elgin W. Mellow, "Character and Themes in the Novels of Jean Rhys," *Contemporary Literature*, No. 13 (1972), p. 468; Diana Trilling, "The Odd Career of Jean Rhys," review of *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*, by Jean Rhys, *New York Times Book Review*, 25 May 1980, p. 17; Irene Thompson, "The Left Bank Apéritifs of Jean Rhys and Ernest Hemingway," *The Georgia Review*, 35, No. 1 (Spring 1981), 94-106.
- ⁹A. Alvarez, "The Best Living English Novelist," *New York Times Book Review*, 17 March 1974, p. 7.
- ¹⁰Jean Rhys, "The Sound of the River," *Art and Literature*, 9 (Summer 1966), p. 192-7. The story was collected in *Tigers Are Better-Looking* (London: André Deutsch, 1968). All references are to the latter edition and are included in the text.
- ¹¹Ernest Hemingway, "Hills Like White Elephants," *Men Without Women* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1928). This story was collected in *The First Forty-Nine Stories* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1962). All references are to this latter edition and are included in the text.
- ¹²Sheldon Norman Grebstein, *Hemingway's Craft* (London: Feffer and Simons, 1973), p. 99.
- ¹³Tony Tanner, *The Reign of Wonder: Naivety and Reality in American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), pp. 231-2.
- ¹⁴Roger Fowler, *Linguistics and the Novel* (London: Methuen, 1977), p. 52.
- ¹⁵Harry Levin, "Observations on the Style of Ernest Hemingway," *Kenyon Review*, No. 13 (1951), pp. 598-9.
- ¹⁶Diana Trilling, "The Odd Career of Jean Rhys," Review of *Smile Please: An Unfinished Autobiography*, *New York Times Book Review*, 25 May 1980, p. 17.