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Hills like white elephants: a drama conventions approach to short-story

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Abstract

The article is a practice-theoretical exploration of a process drama workshop based on Ernest Hemingway's short-story *Hills Like White Elephants* (1927). It is an attempt to elucidate a drama conventions approach to a whole drama structure based on a literary text. Qualified by the question: How can thematic discovery within the short story, and attention to artistic form in the developing process drama, be realised through a dramatic conventions approach?, the article draws on both educational drama and theatre studies literature in relation to conventions, as well as sources related to text analysis and process drama practice.

Keywords: drama conventions, process drama, short story, Hemingway, Heathcote, Brecht

Introduction

My ambition with this article is to offer a hands-on exploration of Ernest Hemingway's short story, *Hills Like White Elephants* (1927), through conventions-oriented process drama, and to underpin my choices through reflections from literature analysis and drama education field theory. Also, I aspire to unite two relevant threads in process drama teaching: a focus on thematic investigation and a look for artistic form (O'Neill, 1995). To connect the threads, an approach based on the use of dramatic conventions has been chosen (Heathcote, 1984b, 1984c; Neelands and Goode, 2015). The basic question underlying the exploration is this: How can thematic discovery within the short story, and attention to artistic form in the developing process drama, be realised through a dramatic conventions approach? The investigation has a descriptive, illustrative side – and an analytic, interpretive side – conjointly developed through devising (Kjølner, 2000). In the context of this article, I use 'devising' in its simplest sense: to work out, to contrive. Inspired by the Norwegian drama/theatre pedagogue Torunn Kjølner's view of devising: that it is primarily based on processual production principles, often a pedagogy (2000, p.4), I devise the workshop in four sequences, each with text excerpts and dramatic conventions as building elements for the process drama.

The word 'convention' has different meanings. The *Oxford English Dictionary* operates with references comprising: 'meeting', 'event', 'gathering', 'agreement', 'practice'. The dictionary assigns the meaning of convention in the world of the arts to be "a practice, method, or rule which is widely used and accepted in a particular field" (OED, III, 8.a), and with an understanding tending towards 'custom', 'style' or 'model' (ibid.). Convention partly yields associations that something has acquired meaningful significance through a certain tradition (e.g. a certain range of expressions, a particular use of symbols) and partly it purveys that a certain meaning or meaningful practice is established by agreement (e.g. game rules, specific elements of a method, a given understanding of form). So, operating with convention as reference in one's work demands both deliberation and tact. The danger of association with conventionalism lurks around the corner, which probably belongs to the reasons why practitioners in drama education have warned against using drama/theatre conventions instrumentally or entertainingly without proper contextualising (Davis, 2005, 2014). In the following, I shall attempt to apply a conventions-approach, to illuminate – and hopefully appreciate – Hemingway's story. In doing so, I shall make use of dramatic conventions familiar to readers from drama and performance practices and from field literature but I also attempt to devise some on my own, or combine convention elements from work I have encountered with others. I do not feel compelled to follow prescriptions. Yet, it has assisted my own thinking – and positioning – to visit some core definitions from the field of educational drama. In reflecting on this work, I am also drawing on some of my own theoretical references.

Dorothy Heathcote has explained the use of conventions in drama work as a way "to highlight situations differently" (1984b, p.138), be it through distortion of time, through types of depictions, or by altering the framing of a situation. In her formative article, *Signs and portents* (1984c, p.166), she elaborates on this: "[M]ost of [conventions] shift the way in which contact with role and 'immediate time' works. Most drama that moves forward at seeming life-rate is too swift for classes to become absorbed in and committed to". Then she offers her famous list of 33 conventions, and underlines a very important

qualification of these conventions: They “*all slow down time*” (ibid, p.166). Distortion of time (and space and situation) – distortion being a central Heathcotian word-companion to convention (Eriksson, 2014) – enables contemplation, reflection and engagement. This is a view that may sound quite strange to the inexperienced facilitator, who may associate drama with fast action, but it is very much what ‘distancing’ in the meaning of ‘estrangement’ amounts to (Eriksson, 2009, 2023) and supports what I associate with the conventions-based work I present in the latter part of this article. However, I should also add the useful definition of dramatic conventions offered by Jonathan Neelands and Tony Goode: “Conventions are indicators of the way in which time, space and presence can interact and be imaginatively shaped to create different kinds of meaning in theatre” (2015, p.3). It is a definition that aligns with and supplements Heathcote and serves as an additional reference for my uses of conventions in this article.

I find these definitions useful also because they indicate that conventions help in finding connections between content and form, which I am always looking for in my drama work. Conventions represent a fictional dimension (op.cit., p.4), and thus differ from so-called warm-up exercises that in most cases function either as purely technical training, as group dynamic socialisation or as game-based mood makers. Because drama conventions are fictional structures, they are metaphors/images for something other than themselves, and as such represent metaphorical dimensions (Heathcote, 1984b, p.138; Bolton, 1986) working well alongside the metaphorical universe created by an author of a fictional text.

I like to view conventions as form structures applicable to exploring a content, i.e., aesthetics and meanings in an interdependent relationship. Often the nature of the topic will determine which convention is most suitable. Or put differently: the topics that can be investigated and experienced through drama work can be illuminated differently through different conventions. A content that is clarified through one form can take on a new dimension by being elucidated through another form. Conventions are devices – or approaches – that the teacher (or theatre instructor) can use to frame a reality in metaphorical form. The metaphor can resemble “the real”, as in dramatisation of a situation or an episode, or it can completely break or distort the logic of reality, as in montage, dubbing, hearing thoughts. It can also stop reality, as in tableau, or break the chronology of reality in time and space, as in flashback, cross-cutting, diary, collective character – many of which are listed in Neelands’ and Goode’s *Structuring Drama Work* (2015).

From sources like these, samples of new conventions have been – and are being – created by drama practitioners and facilitators. However, it should be underlined that even if collections of conventions exist and are individually described for the sake of usability, they should be applied as form elements integral to a context: “In practice there is an integration of form in which conventions run into each other, or overlap, or merge into new composite conventions” (Neelands and Goode, 2015, p.7). Heathcote, too, is concerned with form (1984a, p.117). In other articles, I have compared her poetics with that of Bertolt Brecht (Eriksson, 2007, 2014, 2023) – a point that I shall expand on in the workshop presentation.

The workshop

The workshop described and analysed below was first presented at the conference: Dorothy Heathcote Now, in Aberdeen, October 8th, 2023. *Hills Like White Elephants* was used as text corpus, and the aim of the workshop was to apply drama conventions to explore themes and dilemmas inscribed in the short story. The main part of the workshop was experiential work on the floor, utilising improvisation and text-excerpts with a process drama¹ orientation but capitalising on a conventions approach. I am indebted to my Norwegian colleagues, Elisabeth Ibsen and Kari Mjaaland Heggstad for inspiration from previous work with this short-story.

Text analysis: story and plot

Inspired by Russian formalism (Eriksson, 2006 and 2009, pp.75–96), I have found that a distinction between *story* (*fabula*) and *plot* (*syuzhet*) offers a useful frame for structuring and analysing drama work – be it based on a novel, a classical drama, a learning play, or as in the present context, a short-story:

Story (*fabula*) is like a synopsis; it is a very brief narrative of what happens. It expresses a general course of action, stripped from references to time and environment. Story is presented as an abstract, schematic résumé of events. In principle this could happen anytime, anywhere to anyone in a similar situation (Lindström, 1969, p.53).

Plot (*syuzhet*), on the other hand, gives an overview of the incidents in the same succession as they take place in the author's text. It relates to concrete characters and concrete environments in the text (Lindström, 1969, p.78). The plot is a more detailed account of the action and what happens where, when and with whom.

With the workshop participants in a half circle on the floor, I share my ideas of why text analysis is important in process drama work: Distinguishing between story and plot is helpful because it assists seeing the general in the particular, or vice versa. It also offers devising a process drama a starting point, like a pre-text (O'Neill, 1995, pp.19–27), or simply a frame of analysis for structuring the drama – points that I hope will become clearer during the development of this exploration. Approaching it from the convention of 'visuals', I have produced a "booklet" of prints in A3 format. Inspirational references for my booklet, are context-building conventions like 'making maps/diagrams' and 'unfinished materials' (Neelands and Goode, 2015, p.22 and p.35). They are partly stimulus and partly clues; information designed as visual forshadowing. The first page defines the concept of story (fig. 1):

¹ I understand 'process drama' as a form of participant-based improvised drama, structured through episodes, where various forms of dramatic conventions, including text excerpts, can be used to explore, reflect upon and express a (usually) social theme.

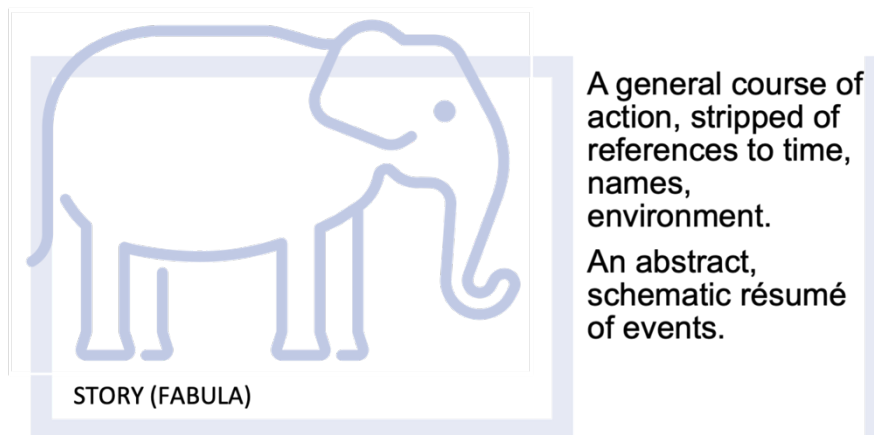


Figure 1

- *Comment: In the general, something universally human can emerge; and in the abstract, some universal fates can be glimpsed.*

Deciding to concretise the main agents in the story as a young couple, I offer the following bid for a fabula (fig. 2):

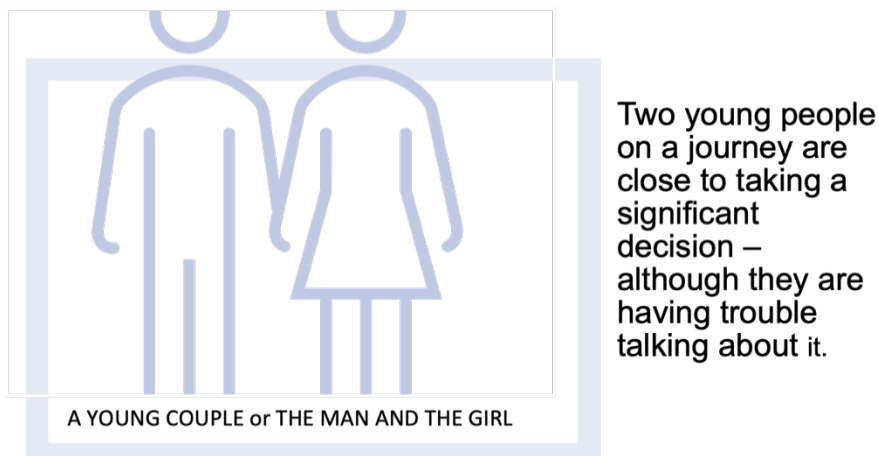


Figure 2

- *Comment: The formulation of story, or fabula, in this contained generic form, gives us a never-ending supply of starting points for drama structures. Just reflect for a moment on what an enticing pre-text the suggested fabula (fig.2) represents.*

I ask the participants to close their eyes and to imagine what a moment of this story may look like. Then volunteers are invited to use fellow participants with the convention 'still image' (a tableau/photo/freeze frame) to depict their inner pictures.

- *Comment: This convention is probably the most common of all in a drama teacher's teaching arsenal, described by Cecily O'Neill in one of the conference sessions (Aberdeen, October 2023), as both overused and undervalued. In Drama Worlds (1995), she underlines that "in both theatre and process drama, the significance of the use of a tableau lies in its expansion of the participants' capacity to perceive. It is both significant and reflexive" (O'Neill, 1995, p.127). Its value in my own context is to start imagining through imagining what the suggested tension in the fabula amounts to*

– and as facilitator I try already from this start on to direct attention to the aesthetics of the images. I ask for compositions with content, in form.

Now, the concept of plot is defined (fig. 3):

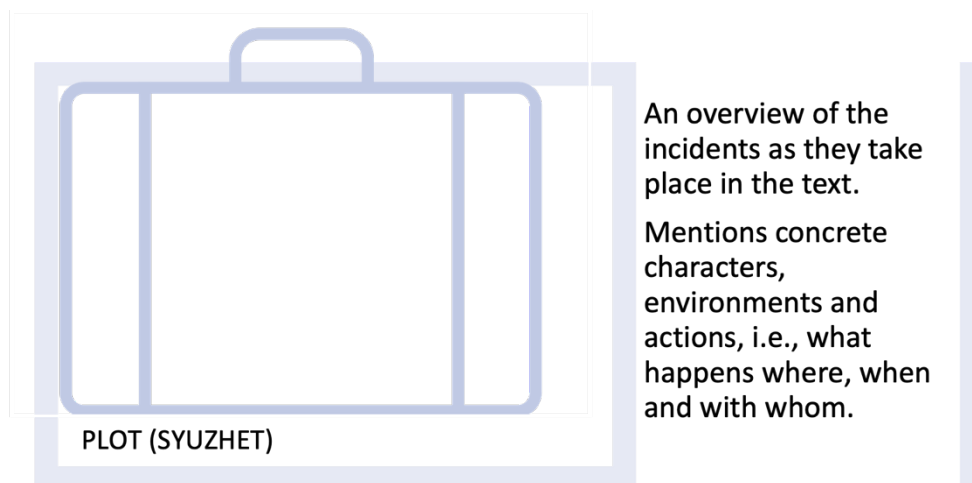


Figure 3

- *Comment: Through formulation of plot, or syuzhet, we are introduced to actual characters, situation and happenings. It may contrast with ideas born in the formula sequence but it also creates a more concrete frame for interaction with the text². The formulation of the plot, exposes dramatic forecasts in the text, indicates how it is sequenced, and provides the facilitator with ideas for possible perspective shifts and use of conventions.*

I present my proposal for a plot sequence. In Hemingway's text the characters are just called the American and Jig (fig. 4):

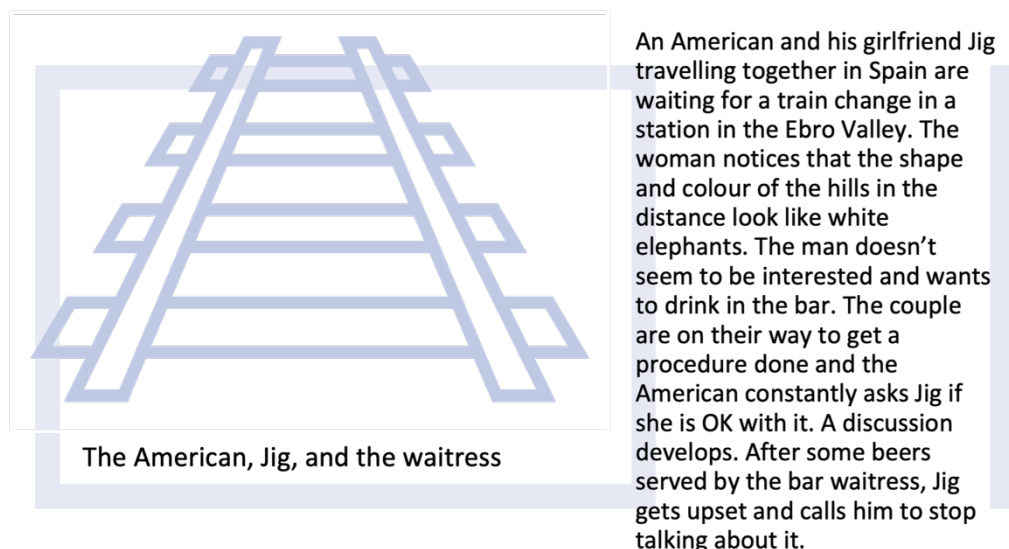


Figure 4

² Obviously, a facilitator can decide to let the pre-text and participants' response to it, direct the development of the ensuing drama. In the present context, however, the interest is in exploring Hemingway's text.

- *Comment: The plot description is to a degree subjective; it could also be formulated a bit differently, adding or omitting more detail; but I am concerned to make it as brief as possible and try not to use up arising story details. I am inspired by Bertolt Brecht's idea of captions telling what is going to happen as condensed as possible, so that the participants can be more concentrated on how or why things happen, and not on what comes next (Brecht, 1964a, p.276).*

To get some impressions from the plot description, the participants are divided into groups of 4, each group with table and two chairs. Each group creates a still image inspired by the plot description, using one or two group members as sculptors.

- *Comment: The depictions "function as 'other', but in relation to 'people'" (Heathcote, 1984, p.166), i.e., they function as estrangement devices. As such "they strengthen the reflective element" and "arrest attention" (O'Neill, 1995, p.126–127), as well as prepare for an expansion of our knowledge about these people and their situation by 'defining space' (Neelands and Goode, 2015, p.16).*

Defining space

Big sheet of paper on the floor: a map of the location (fig. 5). There is the station building with one track on each side: One leading towards Barcelona, the other towards Madrid. There is a bar area, inside and outside of the building, and two openings to the bar. Then the surrounding nature: on one side, brown and dry countryside with hills in the background; on the other, the river Ebro and mountains in the horizon beyond. There is a hot sun but shade along one side of the station building, where there is a table and two chairs.

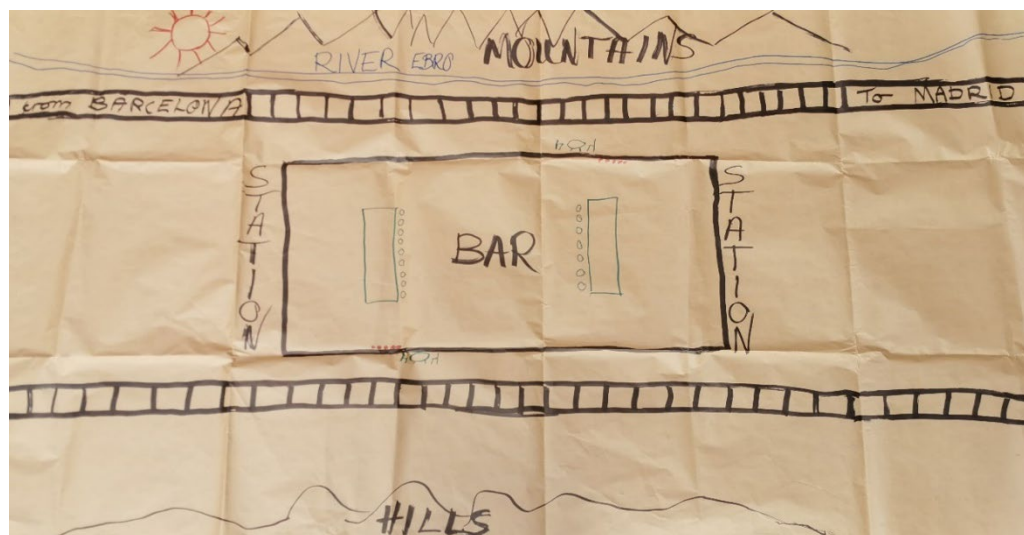


Figure 5

- *Comment: Defining space is typically a context-building convention (Neelands and Goode, 2015). In the context of the process drama, it "economically" brings the people into the location, by a device slightly reminiscent of "poor theatre"³ (Grotowsky, 2002). It stimulates scenographic imagination and prepares for resonance with the subsequent text work.*

³ Grotowski coined the term 'poor theatre', defining a performance style that rid itself of the excesses of theatre, such as lavish costumes and detailed sets (hence 'poor') (<https://thedramateacher.com/poor-theatre-conventions/>).

Text-work

In text analysis, it is highly relevant to look at *themes* and *motifs* as well. Just like for story and plot, I have found it particularly useful to identify themes and motifs for planning the workshop. From the point of view of facilitating, it is of course relevant to be open for discussing themes and motifs during the course of the workshop, if participants express a need for it. However, it is interesting not to interpret too much too early and instead wait for the participants' growing understanding of what is going on between the couple as the text and the drama work reveal more and more. I have learned in previous work with young people that the problem for Hemingway's couple is not immediately clear to them, and most are not familiar with the text. Still, it helps the facilitator's planning, and awareness of dramatic turning points, to make an analysis of theme and motifs before starting on the text work. I have outlined mine in the table below (but the entries in the left and the right columns are self-contained).

Table 1:

THEME	MOTIF
Abortion.	The woman who in vain expects partner support.
Identity crisis.	The man who evades responsibility.
Egotism.	The couple faced with a life-changing decision.
Ambivalence.	
Change.	(Hu)man vs self.
Consequence.	(motherhood, the unborn life, responsibility, ethical dilemma).
	(Hu)man vs (hu)man.
	(love, respect, equality, empathy, gender: views, priorities).
	(Hu)man vs society.
	(sex outside marriage, parenthood, family life) ⁴ .

Just as the formulation of story has a subjective dimension, the identification of theme is a question of interpretation. Theme in this context means "the fundamental idea of a text, formulated as a general statement and with no linkage to particular persons in a particular environment" (Lindström, 1969, p.58, my translation).

The concept motif used as a technical term of text analysis is "the pattern for a concrete situation, before it is tied to particular individuals in a particular environment" (Lindström, 1969, p.55, my translation). Motif designates a stock situation, which can be recognised in many stories.

- *Comment: Just as with story and plot, theme and motif constitute pre-text qualities – and at the same time, they produce possibilities for gear-shifts and change of perspectives within the given text foundation.*

It may work best to detain a thorough discussion of themes and motifs inscribed in the work as much as possible to the end.

⁴ In Morgan and Saxton (1987, pp.182–183) there is a reference to Heathcote's use of the motifs "man vs man, nature, gods", which inspired my analysis here.

Four-part structure

I inform the participants that the rest of the workshop will be text-based and that the short story has been structured into 4 plot parts; each part with a brief plot-description, like Brecht's scene captions⁵.

Plot part 1:

An American man sits at a table outside a train station with his girlfriend. They have 40 minutes before the express train from Barcelona to Madrid will arrive. It is hot and the man orders beers. The girl remarks that the nearby hills look like white elephants, to which the American responds that he has never seen one. It leads to a brief squabble and the American says they should try to enjoy themselves. The girl replies she is having fun but that the hills do not look like white elephants to her anymore.

Groups of 4 participants. Three will be players, one will be director (to be decided within the groups).

Equipment: beer glasses, table cloths, chairs, tables. I hand out **text excerpt 1**:

- a. Director (in cooperation with the players) sets the scene: Table, two chairs, and director marks with masking tape on the floor the curtain made of bamboo beads. The director will read the narrative parts, i.e., the stage directions (grey print), aloud during the scene.
 - b. The players take the roles of the American, Jig and the bar woman. In the dialogue, the players should try to avoid 'acting' (Morgan and Saxton, 1987, p.49) and instead 'present' (or 'enact') their lines; and they should include the third person comments: "he said", "she said" (yellow print). We are doing it in Brechtian epic theatre style, with 'epic theatre conventions' (Brecht, 2001, p.138).
 - c. I narrate:
"Jig and the American are young travellers. We don't know much of their pre-history, but judging from the labels on their travel bags, they are doing Europe by rail. They have been journeying for quite a while, and some difficult thoughts are affecting their minds."
- *Comment: This is the convention of 'narration'. One one level, it aligns with Brecht's narrator commenting on the action⁶ on another it belongs to what Morgan and Saxton call "Techniques where the teacher uses language for specific purposes" (1987, pp.142–143). I use narration in a somewhat different way in the next sequence, here as background information. Relevant for the present exploration, both in these two sequences and in other parts of the workshop, is Morgan and Saxton's note of register: that teacher language conventions can "create atmosphere, build volume, crystallize, move plot line, ..., compress time, infuse tension and provide material for reflection" (ibid.).*

⁵ For example, in *Mother Courage*, Brecht projects on screens a condensed description of what happens in each scene, like in the first scene the audience can read: "Spring. 1624. In Dalarna, the Swedish Commander Oxenstierna is recruiting for the campaign in Poland. The canteen woman Anna Fielding, commonly known as mother Courage, loses a son" (Brecht, 1977, p.23).

⁶ Brecht uses the convention of narrator in famous plays, like: *The Threepenny Opera*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Mother Courage and her Children*, *The good Person from Sezuan*. It belongs to his arsenal of estrangement devices.

Text excerpt 1:

The hills across the valley of the Ebro were long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees, and the station was between two lines of rails in the sun. Close against the side of the station there was the warm shadow of the building and a curtain, made of strings of bamboo beads, hung across the open door into the bar, to keep out flies. The American and the girl with him sat at a table in the shade, outside the building. It was very hot and the express from Barcelona would come in forty minutes. It stopped at this junction for two minutes and went on to Madrid.

"What should we drink?" the girl asked. She had taken off her hat and put it on the table.

"It's pretty hot," the man said.

"Let's drink beer," she said.

"Dos cervezas," the man said into the curtain.

"Big ones?" a woman asked from the doorway.

"Yes. Two big ones," he answered.

The woman brought two glasses of beer and two felt pads. She put the felt pads and the beer glasses on the table and looked at the man and the girl. The girl was looking off at the line of hills. They were white in the sun and the country was brown and dry.

"They look like white elephants," she said.

"I've never seen one," the man drank his beer.

"No, you wouldn't have," she said.

"I might have," the man said. "Just because you say I wouldn't have doesn't prove anything."

The girl looked at the bead curtain.

"They've painted something on it," she said. "What does it say?"

"Anis del Toro. It's a drink," the man explained.

"Could we try it?" the girl asked.

The man called "Listen" through the curtain. The woman came out from the bar.

"Four reales," she said.

"We want two Anis del Toro," he said.

"With water?" she said.

"Do you want it with water?" the man said to the girl.

"I don't know," the girl said. "Is it good with water?"

"It's all right," he said.

"You want them with water?" asked the woman.

"Yes, with water," the man answered.

"It tastes like licorice," the girl said and put the glass down.

"That's the way with everything," he said.

"Yes," said the girl. "Everything tastes of licorice. Especially all the things you've waited so long for, like absinthe."

"Oh, cut it out," he said.

"You started it," the girl said. "I was being amused. I was having a fine time."

"Well, let's try and have a fine time," said the man.

"All right. I was trying. I said the mountains looked like white elephants. Wasn't that bright?" said the girl.

"That was bright," he said.

"I wanted to try this new drink. That's all we do, isn't it—look at things and try new drinks?" she said.

"I guess so," he said.

The girl looked across at the hills.

"They're lovely hills," she said. "They don't really look like white elephants. I just meant the colouring of their skin through the trees."

"Should we have another drink?" he asked.

"All right," she answered.

(Scenes start)

- d. After the first run-through in the groups, I relate the etymology of the expression ‘hills like white elephants’:
 - According to historical legend, kings of ancient Burma gave white elephants as a gift to pacify unruly courtiers who might plan coups. While ownership of a white elephant commanded great respect in the kingdom, owners of these animals had to incur huge expenses to maintain the elephants which required large amounts of fodder but were not much use. So, a gift of a white elephant was seen as both a blessing and a curse; a blessing because a white elephant was a sacred animal and a curse because the maintenance costs were extremely expensive.
- *Comment: ‘White elephant’ has become an expression of a valuable object that an owner has difficulty getting rid of, and that costs more in operation and maintenance than it manages to bring in in terms of income or benefit. Here, Hemingway is using the convention ‘expression as symbol’.*
- *Discussion: What seems to be at stake here? Possible symbolic meaning? (But still at this stage, I try not to disclose all content interpretations normally associated with Hemingway’s text).*
- e. Following a Brechtian drama pedagogical practice⁷, we repeat the scene, using the convention ‘role reversal’: Jig becomes the American, the American becomes Jig, the bar woman becomes director and vice versa – and still with spoken stage directions and third person statements. The new players may well make their own adjustments in the presentation of the scene, e.g., physical actions, voice, temperature. Try to ‘represent’ the characters rather than to ‘be’ them (Brecht, 2001).
- *Comment: In Brecht’s Lehrstück, like in process drama, there is no division between player and audience. In his learning-play methodology, Brecht wants the participants to learn through playing roles, adopting postures, trying out attitudes – role reversal being a much used element (Brecht, 1964b, pp.82–84).*
- *Discussion: What are your thoughts about ‘representing’ versus ‘being’? Facilitator may introduce the Brecht-Heathcote connection (Eriksson, 2009, pp.154–169)⁸.*

Plot part 2:

They order more drinks, and the American proposes to Jig that she should have an operation. He tries to downplay the seriousness of the operation and argues that it will be simple. She says nothing for a while but then she asks what will happen after she has had the operation. The American answers that things will be fine afterwards. Jig disinterestedly agrees with him. He then emphasises how much he cares for her, but she claims that she does not care about what will happen to herself.

Whole group in circle. I hand out **text excerpt 2**:

⁷ I regard Brecht to be a drama education pioneer, through his Lehrstück methodology (Author, 2009, p. 15).

⁸ For readers interested in this connection, I also recommend to look at Oliver Fiala’s article on the artistic affinity between Heathcote and Brecht (1977), and Sandra Hesten’s Ph.D.-dissertation (1994), which laid the foundation of the Dorothy Heathcote archive.

Text excerpt 2:

The warm wind blew the bead curtain against the table.

"The beer's nice and cool," the man said.

"It's lovely," the girl said.

"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig," the man said. "It's not really an operation at all."

The girl looked at the ground the table legs rested on.

"I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in," he said.

The girl did not say anything.

"I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time. They just let the air in and then it's all perfectly natural," he said.

"Then what will we do afterward?" she said.

"We'll be fine afterward. Just like we were before," he said.

"What makes you think so?" she said.

"That's the only thing that bothers us. It's the only thing that's made us unhappy," he said.

The girl looked at the bead curtain, put her hand out and took hold of two of the strings of beads.

"And you think then we'll be all right and be happy," she said.

"I know we will. You don't have to be afraid. I've known lots of people that have done it," he said.

"So have I," said the girl. "And afterward they were all so happy."

"Well," the man said, "if you don't want to you don't have to. I wouldn't have you do it if you didn't want to. But I know it's perfectly simple."

"And you really want to?" she said.

"I think it's the best thing to do," he said. "But I don't want you to do it if you don't really want to."

"And if I do it you'll be happy and things will be like they were and you'll love me?" she said.

"I love you now. You know I love you," he said.

"I know. But if I do it, then it will be nice again if I say things are like white elephants, and you'll like it?" she asked.

"I'll love it. I love it now, but I just can't think about it. You know how I get when I worry," he answered.

"If I do it you won't ever worry?" she said.

"I won't worry about that because it's perfectly simple," he said.

"Then I'll do it. Because I don't care about me," she said.

"What do you mean?" he said.

"I don't care about me," she said.

"Well, I care about you," he said.

"Oh, yes. But I don't care about me. And I'll do it and then everything will be fine," she said.

"I don't want you to do it if you feel that way," he said.

- a. I ask the participants first to read aloud the text around the circle, including the narration parts and the third person statements in the dialogue. Again, try to do it with a quality of representing the characters, almost like commenting or reflecting on the lines whilst saying them.
- *Discussion:* Brief round on form and style in relation to this attempt of an epic theatre rehearsal approach.
- *Comment:* *The reason for bringing in the epic theatre rehearsal method, is motivated by my belief that trying out a Brechtian enactment style is a suitable way in to understand role work in a Heathcotian tradition. I argue for this view in more detail in another context (Eriksson, 2023).*
- b. Conventions: 'Photograph' and 'inner thought'. Equipment: 3 m long, 3 cm broad, elastic string, the ends sown together, so that it can be shaped by people into a picture-frame.



Figure 6: K.M. Heggstad demonstrates how a string picture-frame works (Photo: Dong Yan, 2006).

- c. Volunteers to be the American and Jig. Two volunteers to hold the corners of the frame. All others are audience.
- **First frame:** The American positions himself in the frame, sitting or standing, and delivers the lines: *"It's really an awfully simple operation, Jig."* [Pause] *"I'll go with you and I'll stay with you all the time."* He can have 3 attempts, and then ask the audience which version they would like him to keep.
- *Comment:* *Expanding on the idea of tableau/freeze frame referenced earlier, photograph placed within a picture-frame adds an extra aesthetic quality as well as a sharper focus on the person(s)*

in the picture.⁹ The insertion of spoken lines is inspired by the age old theatre convention of 'moving tableau' ([Tableau vivant - Wikipedia](#)). The task of trying out, in consultation with the audience participants, is to highlight and to prepare for the ensuing confrontation with Jig (h.).

- d. This time, after having delivered his first line, he freezes in a position. Convention: 'thought tracking' – one of Neeland and Goode's reflective action conventions (2015, p.138). One of the persons holding the frame expresses an inner thought that may pass through his head when saying the line. Then he continues with his second line and freezes in a position. Now the second person holding the frame expresses a possible inner thought to go with it.
- *Comment: "This reveals publicly the private inner thoughts/reactions of participants-in-role at specific moments in the action so as to develop a reflective attitude towards the action and to contrast thinking-for-self with outward appearances or dialogue" (ibid.). My version of this convention was motivated by wanting to integrate and commit the people holding the string-frame to the situation, as well as to create a new aesthetic convention inspired by Neelands and Goode's category of poetic action (2015, p.61ff.). In terms of attention on theme and motif, I have now decided to zoom in on "the procedure":*
- e. **Second frame:** Jig positions herself in the frame, sitting or standing, and delivers the lines: "Then what will we do afterward?" [Pause] "And you think then we'll be all right and be happy." She can have 3 attempts, and then choose one final version. After the final version, the same process as above.
 - f. **Third frame:** Impro (if the two players agree). Both players in the same frame. The situation is in principle the same but the arguments, the exchange of lines, may be different. Both players can invent new lines but nice if they also use some of the lines we already heard in the two first frames or in the text excerpt itself. Opening line: "It's not really an operation at all". The audience should listen with sensitivity, and they are allowed, after some initial rounds of dialogue, to express advises to the players, or comments, or suggestions of arguments. Convention: 'Audience participation'.
- *Comment: This convention is not listed as such in field literature that I am aware of, but my inspiration behind it stems from historic and contemporary immersive theatre poetics. An obvious example is Augusto Boal's forum theatre. There is a charming little account of how forum theatre may work with young people in [Playing Boal](#) (Boal, 1994, pp.81–83).*
 - *Discussion: What kind of operation are they discussing? Comments about form and conventions?*

Preparation for part 3:

Using the convention 'speaking in one voice' (Johnstone, 1994, p.95) as rehearsal: Groups of three, participants with arms around each other waists, walk around in the space, whilst inventing (simultaneously) a story. All groups start with the line: "once – upon – a – time – ..."

⁹ I am indebted to my colleague, Kari Mjaland Heggstad, for this idea, which we first used in a From-text-to-theatre project on Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* (Heggstad and Eriksson, 2004).

Plot part 3:

Then the girl walks to the end of the station, looks at the scenery and wonders aloud if they really could be happy if they had the operation. They argue for a while and then the girl gets tired and asks the American to shut up.

Two groups. One group will (collectively) be the American, another group will be Jig. Facilitator will read the narrative comments. Convention: 'Choral speech', i.e. everyone in each group will try to speak in one voice, as synchronised and precise as possible.

- *Comment: The convention builds on Johnstone's but it has an ancestry of theatre conventions reaching back to ancient times, e.g. the Greek tragedy or comedy choruses. It's strength is that it demands individual concentration and collective focus in order to work. Ideally, there should be enough time for each group to work through the text for themselves, detecting the small shifts and turns in the dialogue between her and him, preparing for the pauses between the interactions, noticing where it may be appropriate to express emotion, assertion, uncertainty, or some other modulation that feels right. Doing it too quickly, or glibly, runs the risk of reducing the focus on exploring the meaning of the text.*

I hand out **text excerpt 3**:

Text excerpt 3:

The girl stood up and walked to the end of the station. Across, on the other side, were fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro. Far away, beyond the river, were mountains. The shadow of a cloud moved across the field of grain and she saw the river through the trees.

JIG:

"And we could have all this. And we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible."

AMERICAN:

"What did you say?"

JIG:

"I said we could have everything."

AMERICAN:

"We can have everything."

JIG:

"No, we can't."

AMERICAN:

"We can have the whole world."

JIG:

"No, we can't."

AMERICAN:

"We can go everywhere."

JIG:

"No, we can't. It isn't ours anymore."

AMERICAN:

"It's ours."

JIG:

"No, it isn't. And once they take it away, you never get it back."

AMERICAN:

"But they haven't taken it away."

JIG:

"We'll wait and see."

AMERICAN:

"Come on back in the shade. You mustn't feel that way."

JIG:

"I don't feel any way. I just know things."

AMERICAN:

"I don't want you to do anything that you don't want to do—"

JIG

"Nor that isn't good for me. I know. Could we have another beer?"

AMERICAN:

"All right. But you've got to realize—"

JIG:

"I realize. Can't we maybe stop talking?"

When the two groups are ready after studying and discussing the text (see comment above), I remind them that the dialogue will be done collectively, as if being two characters, using the convention speaking in one voice. Each participant must be attentive to the other members of the group – but to the partner group as well. Do not speak too fast. Think stylisation rather than realism. Thinking epic theatre enactment may be helpful. It is the carrying aesthetic in this sequence.

Suggested progression:

- a. Facilitator marks with tape a cross on the floor, to indicate the bar area.
 - b. The group 'Jig' is standing at a distance to the bar area of the station. Find yourselves a position that feels "close", a position of inner identity, perhaps with eye contact first of all within the group but also occasionally directed towards "him".
 - c. The group 'the American' positions itself closer to the bar. Find a position that feels "composed", yet a little "evasive", perhaps with occasionally breaking or avoiding eye contact with "her".
 - d. The groups start from tableau. The facilitator initiates the scene with the narration part. Then the dialogue begins. It ends in a freeze.
- *Discussion.* Comments. Opinions. The experience as well as the form.

Preparation part 4:

Before engaging with the final text excerpt, participants are asked first to look at the idea of being travellers. There are many concrete references and symbolic indicators to travelling in the short story – relevant to the American and Jig's current life-style and their future life together. The couple is from the very start framed as travellers; they are on a journey, both literally and metaphorically, which is expressed by the labels on their luggage.

Equipment: One big sheet with a drawing of two big travel bags; felt pens or colouring pencils, different coloured and shaped post-it stickers. I have prepared for Heathcote's convention 15: 'Objects to represent person's interests' (1984c, p.166). Heathcote notes that objects (or clothing) "can indicate concerns rather than appearance" (ibid.). This is my focus when leading the work with this convention, as related below.

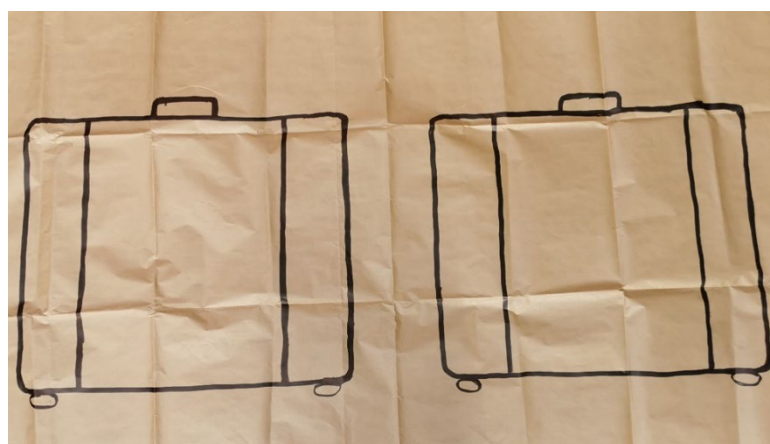


Figure 7

- a. Everyone in a half circle, facing the “travel bags”. Facilitator invites the participants to associate around the idea of being a traveller: What qualities regarding lifestyle do we associate with being travellers? What’s the attraction? What does it involve? Figurative meanings? If we use Heathcote’s term ‘brotherhoods’ (Wagner, 1979, pp.48–52; Neelands, 1984, pp.72–74), what do travellers have in common ... with? With the felt pens participants write their ideas on the sheet around the “bags”.
- b. Facilitator writes HIS and HER above each of the bags. Apart from the obvious “essentials” that are different in his or her bags, are there any characterising personal belongings, “treasures”, special items that can be written into their bags?
- c. When and if travelling must stop, what feelings of loss or passing may be triggered in HIM or in HER? Such qualities can go into their bags as well.
- d. Each group member receives a couple of stickers (post-it in different shapes and colours). They will prepare “labels” of invented hotels – in European cities that the American and Jig have visited during the last year.

Plot part 4:

He tries to continue with his argument, but she stops him. He looks at the labels on their bags from all the hotels where they have spent nights. Then the bar woman brings them more beer and says that the train will arrive in five minutes. After finishing their drinks, the American carries their bags to the platform and then walks back through the bar. He asks the girl whether she feels better. She says she feels fine.

- a. When preparing the labels, I give the participants the lines of dialogue from the last part of the short story (**text excerpt 4**). The lines are numbered from 1 to 16, glued on strips of paper. They are Jig, the American and the bar woman. I will do narration parts.
- b. Participants in two curved lines on each side of “the travel bags”. *Line A*, the American, has odd numbers: 1, 3, 5 etc. – but not 11 who is the bar woman. She is placed between the lines. *Line B*, Jig, has even numbers: 2, 4, 6 etc. Now each participant has two labels and a number of lines (**text excerpt 4**):
- c. Convention ‘ritual’: “Ritual is a stylised enactment” (Neelands and Goode, 2015, p.101) but in the present context not “bound by traditional rules and codes” (ibid.). What I want to achieve, is a ritual of sharing and shared attention through collective participation as either HIM or HER. This requires concentrated commitment in each participant, imbued with a sense of figure¹⁰ and situation bred by all the episodes so far of this process drama.

¹⁰ I prefer ‘figure’ before ‘character’ in reference to acting behaviour (Bolton, 1998) in process drama, the former being more in line with a descriptive, Brechtian acting behaviour than a Stanislavskian expressive one, often associated with the latter.

Text excerpt 4:

No.	Who	Line
	Narrator	They sat down at the table and the girl looked across at the hills on the dry side of the valley and the man looked at her and at the table.
1	American	"You've got to realize, that I don't want you to do it if you don't want to. I'm perfectly willing to go through with it if it means anything to you."
2	Jig	"Doesn't it mean anything to you? We could get along."
3	American	"Of course, it does. But I don't want anybody but you. I don't want anyone else. And I know it's perfectly simple."
4	Jig	"Yes, you know it's perfectly simple."
5	American	"It's all right for you to say that, but I do know it."
6	Jig	"Would you do something for me now?"
7	American	"I'd do anything for you."
8	Jig	"Would you please please please please please please stop talking?"
	Narrator	He did not say anything but looked at the bags against the wall of the station. There were labels on them from all the hotels where they had spent nights.
9	American	"But I don't want you to, I don't care anything about it."
10	Jig	"I'll scream."
	Narrator	The woman came out through the curtains with two glasses of beer and put them down on the damp felt pads.
11	Woman	"The train comes in five minutes."
12	Jig	"What did she say?"
13	American	"That the train is coming in five minutes." (Slight pause). "I'd better take the bags over to the other side of the station".
	Narrator	She smiled at him.
14	Jig	"All right. Then come back and we'll finish the beer."
	Narrator	He picked up the two heavy bags and carried them around the station to the other tracks. He looked up the tracks but could not see the train. Coming back, he walked through the barroom, where people waiting for the train were drinking. He drank an Anis at the bar and looked at the people. They were all waiting reasonably for the train. He went out through the bead curtain. She was sitting at the table and smiled at him.
15	American	"Do you feel better?"
16	Jig	"I feel fine, there's nothing wrong with me. I feel fine."
	Narrator	"Freeze"

- Alternating between Line A and Line B, the participants in number order step forward as individual Americans and Jigs, place a hotel sticker onto their bags, then address the partners in the opposite line – as if being *one* character – and step back to their own line. Do not rush in towards your partner, take your time. Again: Think representation, not realism.
- The Americans and the Jigs may display small physical reactions but no extra words or big actions.
- The bar woman, when it is her turn, takes a few steps forward, delivers her line to the couple, and steps back in place.
- As facilitator I am the narrator. I start off the scene and interrupt the dialogue 4 times.

Comment: Ritual is inherently theatrical and in Western theatre has a lineage going back to the rites and processions associated with the cult of Dionysos in ancient Greek. As pointed out by O'Neill, "most rituals, although they do not have a plot, embody some kind of significant alteration in those involved, and these changes accompany the turning points of personal and social life – marriage, maturity, change of status, death" (1995, p.147). "Ritual has structure. Actions are repeated" (Wilson, 1994, p.264). In Hills of White Elephants, we sense quite strongly that Jig has had an existential experience, and parallelly that the American is apparently untouched by it, or perhaps even ignorant of what is going on. But we perceive that some life-changing moments have taken place between the couple. The ritual is meant to assist the participants in understanding this. The repeated stepping forward, one by one with hotel stickers symbolising the couple's journeying together over a long time span, followed by delivery of line by line dialogue – performed as ritual – is intended to poetically enrich the exchange of lines. The sequence could have been acted out in smaller groups as a dramatic scene. Instead, it was estranged and collectively framed in a slowing down time mode.

- *Discussion:* Towards the end, as the American and Jig are on the platform together with fellow passengers, the phrase "they were all waiting reasonably for the train" appears. Why does Hemingway write this phrase?¹¹

Conclusory comments

Themes and motifs

Most interpretations of *Hills like white elephants* consider abortion to be the main theme. As suggested earlier, it may be more interesting for the participants if this theme is not put on the table from the very start. I have experienced that participants are intrigued with what kind of operation is at stake – and that it takes some close reading/experiencing to realise what it is. The drama work with the text "on the floor" makes them feel the tensions in the personal relationship of the couple. As suggested in the table of THEME and MOTIF, even other themes come to the fore when experiencing the text more closely – and actual motifs associated with these themes. Discussion of what happens next between Jig and the American is an obvious subsequent step. I shall refrain from further interpretation here, only suggest

¹¹ Most likely, the American is feeling relief when he looks at the other people in the station. The phrase subtly underscores the tension between the pair and highlights their differing perspectives on what is still to be faced.

that interesting dramatisation can also arise from referencing historical facts related to the question of abortion. For example in 1927, when Hemingway wrote this short-story, abortion was illegal. Now in 2024, it has again become a big issue, as in the infamous legal process of *Roe vs Wade* (Guardian, 2024) in the US.

Conventions and internal coherence

As indicated in the call for contributions to the present special issue of *Education in the North*, conventions have by some authors been critiqued as being essentially instrumental and often used “as stand-alone techniques”, e.g. Davis (2014, p.37). Seeing the relevance of such criticism, I have tried in the present sample to integrate the selected conventions in a holistic drama structure, in which the gradual building up of tensions are contextualised to keep “internal coherence” (Clark et al., 1997, p.130), and to find explorative connections of form and content in practice. As indicated, I believe that a Brechtian enactment style is very suitable to induce felt reflection in the experience. Many of the conventions commonly used in drama work are, in my view, making-strange devices germane to the practice of both Brecht and Heathcote (Eriksson, 2007, 2014, 2023).

The exploration question

In the introduction, I presented the question qualifying the exploration of this article: How can thematic discovery within the short story, and attention to artistic form in the developing process drama, be realised through a dramatic conventions approach?

Firstly, it must be emphasised that I have approached this work from two “givens”: a) the Hemingway text and b) a conventions approach. From these two references, I have devised a structured process drama. For many process drama practitioners, the pedagogical ideal is to leave as much as possible of developing theme and content to the participants, through improvisation and negotiation, an approach that is well expressed in the title of John O’Toole’s classic: *The Process of Drama. Negotiating Art and Meaning* (1992). In the present drama, I have chosen a directed structure over an improvised one. There is room for improvisation but only within the frames of the plot sequences and the conventions. Improvisations related to text exploration investigate the interactions between the figures in the story and the circumstance in which they are in, and the dilemma they are caught up in but not able to speak about.

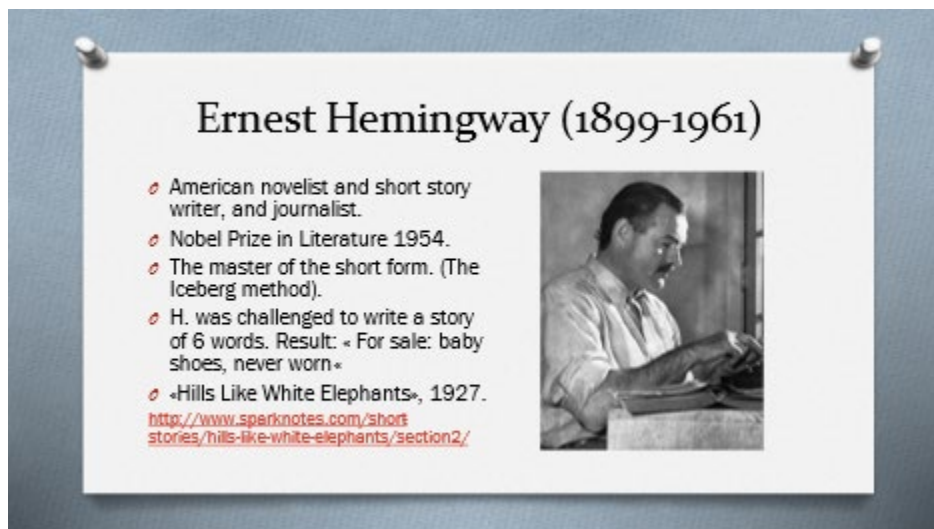
Secondly, it must be noted that the format of the workshop is a from-literature-to-drama approach, similar to from-text-to-theatre (Heggstad and Eriksson, 2004; Heggstad, Heggstad and Eriksson, 2019). I like to think that the text confers an aesthetic quality to the work that is often lost in a more open improvised process drama, where the lines are delivered spontaneously.

I find that the episodic structure and the conventions together realise a genuine investigation of core tensions at play in Hemingway’s short story, and after each plot sequence there is room for discussion and reflection. I also find that this combination of episodic dramaturgic structure with insertions of dramatic conventions – most of them bearing an imprint of estrangement or poetic distortion (Eriksson, 2014) – adds to the aesthetic quality of the work. At the risk of stretching the ambition of the workshop

a little too far, I have attempted to realise a taste of form that bear a resemblance to Brecht's epic theatre dramaturgy.

The approach may perhaps be criticised for using story to explore conventions, rather than using conventions to analyse story, so that exploration of the meaning of the story and the writer's intention in writing it wind up in the background. To that, I would say that the drama structure presented here is somewhat similar to what Geoff Gillham called "the play for the teacher" (Bolton, 1979, p.51); although not quite: In my article, a main attention has been directed towards teacher planning and thinking – and with the added scholarly meta perspective. The teacher who wants to apply it in own classroom, must be more focussed on making it a play for the students as well (ibid.).


Another possible criticism is that the workshop loses an opportunity in not exploring further in the end what happens next between Jig and the American. This moment is indeed what my 'slowly reveal' method has built up to – in line with Hemingway's compositional style: the Iceberg Theory: The words on the page represent only a small part of the whole story, with a larger, unwritten narrative lying beneath the surface, constituting a rich subtext for enactment. It is so close to drama, as all four text excerpts illustrate so well. I do see what a powerful example of dramatic dilemma is inscribed in the unknown future of this couple (and therefore that this is an opportunity for a facilitator to use). But I also think that this unknown, at this stage of exploration of their relationship, is still working on the participants' minds and needs not to be addressed more explicitly. Hemingway's absorbing use of sparse dialogue and omission of explicit terms like "abortion" aligns with the choice of letting the tension of the unknown be the ending.



Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961)

- ◊ American novelist and short story writer, and journalist.
- ◊ Nobel Prize in Literature 1954.
- ◊ The master of the short form. (The Iceberg method).
- ◊ H. was challenged to write a story of 6 words. Result: « For sale: baby shoes, never worn »
- ◊ «Hills Like White Elephants», 1927.

<http://www.sparknotes.com/short-stories/hills-like-white-elephants/section2/>



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