Use this high school lesson in an ethics class or English Literature class. After reading “Hills Like White Elephants” and the Life Theme, spend the last 20–25 minutes of class time discussing it with the students.

Teacher/Parent note
After reading the story, remind students that alcohol consumption during pregnancy was not widely known to be harmful at the time that Hemingway wrote this story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Ernest Hemingway was one of the most influential American authors in history. Born in Oak Park, Illinois, in 1899, Hemingway began his writing career in journalism. Rejected by the army during World War I, Hemingway volunteered with the Red Cross as an ambulance driver in Italy. After being wounded during the war, Hemingway had a difficult time readjusting to civilian life and began to travel as a foreign news correspondent to places like Paris and Spain, and then as a war correspondent during World War II. Hemingway is best known for A Farewell to Arms, For Whom the Bell Tolls, and The Old Man and the Sea. After a long battle with depression, Hemingway committed suicide in 1961.

SUMMARY OF “HILLS LIKE WHITE ELEPHANTS”
A man, referred to as the American, and a girl are sitting at a train station in Spain, drinking beer and waiting for their train to Madrid. The girl observes that the hills in the distance look like white elephants. Her observation breaks the silence and allows them to talk about their problem.

They never mention what the decision is that they have to make, but the reader gets the sense that it is a difficult decision with life-changing consequences. The man continually reassures the girl that she needs a simple operation to “let the air in” so that they can get on with their lives. The girl at first believes the man, but then has second thoughts and hints that she would only get the operation for his sake, not for her own. Standing up, the girl observes the other side of the station, the greenery of the trees, the river, the fields, and majestic mountains. She understands that the decision they are discussing has two possible ends—a fruitful solution, or a barren solution—just like the landscape surrounding the train station. If she chooses the barren solution, the girl knows that she will never again have a chance at choosing happiness.
After seeing the river, the girl has made up her mind and insists that the man stop talking. He keeps trying to tell her that he wants the best for her, but then he leaves her alone as she requests and takes the luggage to the other side of the station. The man then returns and asks the girl how she feels. She declares that she feels fine and that nothing is wrong with her, indicating that she has no need of the “operation.”

**LIFE THEME: MAKING THE DIFFICULT CHOICE**

NOTE: In order to demonstrate Hemingway’s use of scenery to represent the decision being discussed, create an illustration on the chalkboard. First draw the station. One one side, draw the dry, barren field. On the other, draw the green valley with the river. Talk with the students about the symbolism evident in his depiction of the landscape.

The conversation between the man and the girl is about whether or not the girl should get an abortion. At first, the man and girl only drown their sorrows in alcohol before the girl brings up the “elephant in the room”—the preborn baby—by mentioning the hills. At once, the man begins to pressure the girl to get an abortion while downplaying the seriousness of the operation by referring to it as natural and simple. The pro-abortion language of today often tries to reduce the seriousness of abortion to a safe and simple operation. The man argues that after the abortion they will be just as happy as before and that he will still love the girl as much, if not more.

During their short conversation, the man and the girl discuss their difficult situation. While the man talks about how he favors the quick and simple “operation”—the abortion—the girl gazes onto the green fields and the fruitful valley and realizes that no matter what the man promises her, the operation will force her to lose the life of the preborn child—something that she can’t ever get back. By saying that there is nothing wrong with her, the girl decides that she does not need the “operation” as a sick person might. Instead, she intends to keep the child, even though the man might leave her because of her decision.

Coercion in abortion happens every day. Often in an unplanned pregnancy, even if the man does not accompany the girl to the abortion clinic, she still feels the pressure of his threats to leave her if she has the baby. Friends and relatives may also pressure the girl into getting an abortion because it is the “best thing” for her. No one ever considers what is the best thing for the child, and no one reminds the girl that having an abortion will change her life forever and leave her with an emptiness that is many times almost impossible to overcome. Neither do they remind her that even a child born in difficult circumstances can be an unbelievable blessing and the cause for a positive change in her life.

**HOW CAN I APPLY THIS TO MY LIFE?**

Have you ever been pressured to do something? Whether we realize it or not, we receive hundreds of messages per day about movies, music, and books, and from different forms of media that tell us how to think, speak, act, dress, and dictate what kind of lifestyle choices we make. Like the girl in the story, we need to stop for a moment and thoroughly examine what society is telling us to do and decide for ourselves what is the best decision to make. For the girl in the story, the best thing for her is to ignore the pressure of her boyfriend and defend the life of her preborn child. Examine your daily actions and ask yourself how these actions affect other people. Are you treating others with the respect and dignity that they deserve, or are you listening to the pressures and temptations of the culture of death?

Choose to be a shining light in the darkness even when it’s difficult.
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are the characteristics of the land on each side of the tracks? Which words does Hemingway use to describe the landscape?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>the hills like white elephants</th>
<th>the fields</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>long, white, sun, no shade, no trees, brown, dry, white elephants, dry side of the valley</td>
<td>fields of grain, trees, the bank of the river Ebro, mountains, shadow of a cloud</td>
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2. Why is the girl disappointed with the new drink she tries?
When she tries the new drink, the girl realizes with sadness that it is not as exciting for her as she thought it would be. With the changes in her life, the girl realizes that the pleasures she has been enjoying are no longer fulfilling and do not matter to her anymore. What matters more is the life of the child she is carrying and the life the couple could have in store for them if they keep the child and stay together.

3. What does the girl mean when she says, “We could have all this [the mountains, river, and fields] . . . we could have everything and every day we make it more impossible”?
The girl understands that the life of the child she carries could change so much for the couple. She also knows that once they destroy their child, life will not be the same. She says she doesn’t care about herself, but she does. She cares about her future with the man and their child. The landscape indicates two opposing choices. On one side of the tracks (and one possible path she could pursue in life), she sees a barren land; on the other, fields of grain, indicating a decision between a full vibrant life if she chooses life for her child, and a stale, barren life if she chooses abortion. Before she became pregnant, the man and girl only thought about themselves in selfish ways, only doing things for their own pleasure. The life of the child has brought a change into their lives. The girl sees it immediately, realizing that their lives could be happy and full of life, like the fields she sees on one side of the tracks. An abortion would make that kind of life impossible for them. They would just go back to doing the same things and life would be as meaningless as the barren landscape.

4. How does the man describe the situation and how do his words remind you of the culture of death?
The man talks about the “operation” as normal, natural, and simple, ignoring the fact that the abortion kills a living human person. The man tries to convince the girl that many people who have had an abortion are happy afterwards, but the girl reminds him that an abortion takes away something that can’t ever be gotten back. The man tries to make the girl feel at ease with the idea of abortion, but the girl firmly asks him to be quiet. With his constant flow of words and his lack of compassionate action, the man seems more interested in his own desires than in the well-being of the girl or their preborn child.

5. How does the girl ultimately react to the situation and what does her reaction tell you about her character?
Note that the girl is not referred to as a woman, indicating that she is not as mature or worldly as the man. She relies heavily on the man to communicate with other people and she appears naive. The man also calls her by a nickname, Jig, more of a dog’s name than a romantic moniker, which could show that he treats her more as an object than a woman or lover. However, when faced with the difficult decision, the girl is the only character who is able to come to terms with the situation and realize that the preborn baby is a unique person. The girl knows that once the baby is killed, he will never be gotten back. She understands the value of human life, even if she cannot give the man concrete evidence.
6. How does the man ultimately react to the situation and what does his reaction tell you about his character?
The man seems to be confident and dependable, but he completely refuses any responsibility for the child and rejects his role as the baby’s father. He says that he doesn’t “want anyone else,” meaning that he doesn’t want another person—the baby—in addition to the girl. Although he appears to genuinely care about the girl, he does not accept responsibility for his family. It is clear from their affair that the man does not care enough about the girl to marry her, nor does he care enough about his family to take responsibility as a father.

When he tells the girl that he doesn’t want her to do anything she doesn’t want to do, is he being sincere?
The man says he loves the girl, but appears to want her to have the abortion. We know that the girl doesn’t believe him when he tries to reassure her that he doesn’t want her to have the abortion. Even when he says “I’m perfectly willing to go through with it, if it means anything to you,” he quickly follows that statement by repeating that he doesn’t want anyone else and that the operation is “perfectly simple.” If he truly loved her, he would do what is best for her without thought of the cost to himself. Love is total self-giving. In the end, he is still thinking only of himself.

7. What do the bags mean in the story? What does the man do with them at the end of the story?
The bags are a symbol of the couple’s relationship. They have stickers on them from all the hotels at which the girl and the man have stayed. Their presence indicates all the memories the two have shared together. At the end of the story, the man takes the bags to the other side of the station—the side of the station next to the fields and mountains—possibly indicating that he has also changed his mind about the abortion and is willing to support the girl in her decision to choose life.

8. How does Hemingway use shade and shadows throughout the story to help us understand the girl’s decision not to have an abortion?
Like the dichotomy of the landscape, the sunlight, shadows, and shade also play a role in understanding the girl’s decision. When she looks out onto the fields, she sees a cloud, indicating that, even if she chooses life for her child, there will still be rough moments. The man asks the girl to step back into the shade, back into the darkness of the culture of death. When the girl says “I realize,” we see that she understands what an abortion would mean for the both of them. At that point in the story, she sits down at the table again and continues to agonize over her decision.

9. How does Hemingway use style to create story?
Hemingway uses very little description and very few dialogue markers during the conversation in the story to create tension and focus on the problem for the man and the girl. Movement and where the characters gaze show what they are thinking or trying to decide. “Hills Like White Elephants” is a more powerful story because of what the characters don’t say than what they do say. In this case, we don’t need to know the couple’s background or the details of their affair to understand their conflict at choosing life or choosing abortion.

CATHOLIC CONNECTIONS
Read Deuteronomy 30:15-20. What choice is before Israel?
The Lord is giving Israel a choice between life and death—life in the fruitful land that the Lord promised them or death in the barren wilderness of the desert. The life and death the Israelites also have to choose is between the life that comes from obeying God’s commandments or death through sin.
How is this choice similar to the choice before the man and the girl from “Hills Like White Elephants”? Like the Israelites, the man and the girl also have a choice between life and death—the blessing of their child or the curse of barrenness and desolation if they choose abortion. In both cases, the metaphor of the fruitful land creates a powerful, lasting image about the seriousness of the decision.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**