Teaching Hemingway’s “Hills Like White Elephants”
Steve Lane

Several years ago, I realized that many of Ernest Hemingway’s short stories are so heavily made up of dialogue that I was reading them like scripts for plays, so I decided to try the “staging” of one such story in class. Over several years of teaching first-year literature and composition, this approach worked well for me, and here’s why.

For the purposes of my particular approach to the story, an edition with no notes or revealing "study questions" works best, as I think you will understand shortly. The Norton Anthology of Short Fiction, for example, did not work well because of the study question at the end which asked "[d]oes the man seriously try to understand the girl’s feelings about an abortion?” Now, in a typical first-year class, some students would read the story and the discussion questions, some would read only the story - and some would read neither! Those who read the study questions and had seen the one quoted above came to class with the feeling that they have the “secret key” to the story. For many of these students, that is what the whole exercise in reading literature is about - finding the secret key, the template, by which the entire work becomes clear. That's precisely one of the things I wanted to challenge in the classroom. I wanted students to sensitively and closely read the text, rather than to smugly assume they'd found a secret about the story. And I wanted students to use their own knowledge of people to try to determine what the conversation in the story is all about.

So, starting with a "clean" copy of the story, here is the process I followed:

1. The story is assigned to be read out of class, just like any other work in my course. Naturally, some students have not read it beforehand, but, rather than sit quietly at the back and take notes, this approach draws them into a close reading of the story.

2. When the students arrive at class, I begin by noting the high proportion of dialogue in the story. I then tell them they will be preparing the story as if it were a play. [Groans]. The class is then divided into pairs, male/female as far as possible, which almost always means some "same sex" pairs will be formed. I choose the partners; in doing so, I am trying to pair stronger readers (as far as I have been able to determine so far in the semester) with weaker ones, or shy with outgoing, and so on. Also, I tell them that I will "cover" the lines spoken by the woman in the bar when we get to a performance.

3. Then, the students are given 30-60 minutes of class time to prepare the "play". They are told to concentrate on the dialogue, although, since most of them have read the whole story already, narrative or other additional parts of the story are "available" to them to understand the characters and their motivation. I circulate around the room so they can ask for clarification on certain points.

This is where the action is - the students engage with the text, and they generate critical questions as they encounter problems in the dialogue, and must then overcome those problems if they want to perform successfully.
4. Next, I ask a pair of students to perform what they have prepared. The rest of the class, having gone through a similar process of preparation, observes in the role of "directors" or "stage managers". We let our performers get through the story/play, then we discuss different ways of saying a line, different possibilities for movement, pauses, and so on. Often, another couple of students want to perform to show how they have done it. As a class, then, we work on a "model performance".

5. The issue of "the operation" must be dealt with, too. By now, someone usually has figured out that they might be talking about an abortion. The idea is well-received by this point in the exercise, because all students have been paying attention to the tone and nature of the speech by both parties, and now they realize how much time may be spent with no speech - staring into space, staring at each other, staring at beads, staring at table legs, or whatever.

At this point, let me reflect on some of the "problems" which arise when discussing this story. The two issues mentioned just above, the drinking and the abortion, loom large in the 18-year-old consciousness of many of my students. Some students, naive and obviously wholly convinced (they think) by decades of Saturday morning anti-drinking-and-driving commercials, cannot get past an initial condemnation of the couple. Other students, of any age, have strongly-held beliefs pro- or anti-choice when it comes to abortion. Usually, then, some time must be spent defusing and diffusing the discussion, and re-focusing the class on the story. In fact, some useful observations on the very act of interpretation can follow, as we discuss the place of the individual, modern-day reader engaging with a text constructed by an author at a time in the past.

6. If all has gone well, other things I want to talk about in relation to the story are well set up now. We discuss the simple notion of communication/non-communication which is so evident after watching the performances. I will raise questions of character and theme: is the male character admirable? what does he want? is the female character admirable? what does she have going for her? what is the nature of their relationship? why does she look with fascination at the fields and trees across the plain? Is her comment about the hills being like white elephants silly or profound? The discussion of their relationship brings back the observation that the man can speak Spanish but the "girl" cannot, which leads to further conclusions about the nature of the relationship. We often get into a discussion of gender, too, speculating on whether males sympathize more with the male character, and females with Jig. And so it goes, depending on the class.

Those were the things that happened when I used this approach in the classroom. The students gained a better sense of how character and action work together in a dramatic piece. The students read this story probably more closely than any other they had ever read. The focus was on the actual dialogue in the story, and on the direct engagement of reader/text, and not on the immediate impulse to summarize in interpreting (that idea of finding the "secret key"). It achieved all these goals, and more - and it was fun!