Ernest Hemingway's short story, *Hills Like White Elephants*, is mostly told in dialogue, with little portions devoted to explaining details of the setting. Even the parts that describe the environment are heavily dialogue, using the characters to explain the details of their surroundings. If anything, this lack of environmental description makes it all the easier to discern the purpose and meaning behind the setting. Only details that Hemingway felt were important to the theme did he deem fit to take up space in his limited three and a half page story. Almost every detail of setting, even those that may seem innocuous, is actually demonstrating the struggle in the two main characters' minds about whether or not to have an abortion.

The white hills in the distance are probably the first theme oriented setting that readers will notice since Hemingway refers to them in the title. "They look like white elephants," the story's female lead describes them. White elephants are unwanted things that bring shame to their owners and are to be hidden from the public, and the fact that the girl so readily sees white elephants in the most random of surroundings implies that she is thinking a lot about the impending abortion. Shortly afterwards she has this to say about the hills: "They're lovely hills...They don't really look like white elephants." This may be demonstrating that she is having second thoughts about going through with the procedure because her baby might not be the white elephant she once believed it to be.

Or, this change of perception regarding the hills could instead be her attempt at denial. She may feel guilty about the procedure already, and once she starts seeing the universal symbol of
unwanted things in the hills, she chooses to use logic to see that they, in fact, do not resemble white elephants, thus suppressing her guilt on the issue. Though the hills may be the first symbolic piece of scenery the reader notices, upon a second read through, one will find that the train station is actually the first that the reader comes across in the story. It is described in the first paragraph as "between two lines of rails." The paragraph later describes that the station is a junction between Barcelona and Madrid. The implication seems to be that trains here run in both directions as they often do at many stations. But at this particular train station, one direction leads to the place where the girl is to have her abortion, and the other does not. The station, situated between these two railways, one leading to aborting their child and the other leading to keeping their child, symbolizes the choice they are trying to make. Though they are at the station and ready to travel, it is obvious from the dialogue that the decision is far from made in their minds. Hemingway employs a variant of the old fork in the road scenario to symbolize the characters two possible paths and the verdict they must come to of which to follow.

Finally, hidden throughout the entire story is the number two. Though not as emphasized as some symbolic numbers are in other stories, the number two does make its presence known here. There are two directions from which to choose. The couple's beers are consistently referred to as "two beers" rather than "their beers." It may seem like grasping at straws, but the number two definitely plays some significance in this story as shown by this line spoken by the man: "But I don't want anybody but you. I don't want anyone else." Despite the fact that they are having drinks and that it is a rather hot day, the couple chooses to sit outside the barroom on the platform of the station, calling to the waitress through the curtain divider. It is obvious that these two are at the stage of love where they do not want to even be around other people. The man feels that the addition of a third party to the relationship may be in someway threatening. This is, in fact, the only concern he expresses with having a child. He never shows any fear for monetary reasons or for the shame of having a bastard child. The only worry he demonstrates in the story is the worry that he wishes to have his girlfriend and his girlfriend only. He does not want anyone else in the equation.

Ernest Hemingway does not waste a word in this short story, using every line to demonstrate something of importance. It is very easy to miss the symbolism as readers are used to it coming slowly throughout a story and often more clearly. But, with only three and a half pages, Hemingway makes his point clear without need for explanation, as the symbolic setting and actions do the work for him. Though the decision the couple is trying to make is never clearly addressed, it is the setting and the symbolism that allow the reader to realize they are contemplating having an abortion.