# “Talk That Walks”

How Hemingway's dialogue powers a story

## By JOHN L'HEUREUX

## Updated Feb. 12, 2011 12:01 a.m. ET

The novelist Elizabeth Bowen said it best: "Dialogue in fiction is what characters do to one another." This may seem rather cryptic at first hearing, but it has served me well when I try to explain how dialogue works.

Young writers often confuse dialogue with conversation, under the assumption that the closer you get to reality, the more convincing you sound. But dialogue is not conversation. Dialogue is a construct; it is artificial; it is much more efficient and believable than real conversation. Just as fiction itself distorts reality in order to achieve a larger truth, so dialogue eliminates all the false starts and irrelevant intrusions of real life in order to reveal character and move the encounter toward a dramatic conclusion.

Ernest Hemingway demonstrated over and over that dialogue alone can carry a story. One of his best stories, "Hills Like White Elephants," is almost totally dialogue.

"The man" and "the girl" are waiting in the sweltering sun of the Ebro Valley in Spain, gazing at a vast string of mountains.

"They look like white elephants," she says.

"I've never seen one," the man says, and drinks his beer.

"No, you wouldn't have."

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

She's angry and aggressive. He's determined to have his way. They order drinks. They quarrel over the taste of Anis del Toro. He tries to make peace and, for the moment, succeeds. They repeat this sequence—make nice, make quarrel—as the dialogue gradually reveals that what he wants is for her to go through with the abortion he's planned and what she wants is reassurance that, afterward, things will again be like they used to be.

"I know you wouldn't mind it, Jig. It's really not anything. It's just to let the air in." The girl does not reply. "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."

They bond again briefly, agreeing that the mountains aren't really like white elephants. But then he returns to the "perfectly natural" argument. He cajoles. He persists. She agrees to do it. She gives in, sullen, but it is not enough for him. He wants her to want it.

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

It's a maddening go-round. She walks away and stares at the mountains. He follows her, saying, "It's perfectly simple." It is all too much for her.

"Would you please please please please please please please stop talking."

Her hysteria passes. The train is coming, and they resume their public faces. Nothing appears to be resolved, though we understand that he wins. She will have the abortion. And, the dialogue suggests, they will forever hate each other.

"Hills Like White Elephants" is a small miracle. Hemingway's dialogue sets the scene, delineates the characters, fills in the background story, propels the action forward, creates the crisis and resolves the story.

Effective dialogue works by implication. The tone of a comment or the choice of words or the hesitation with which something is said can indicate that beneath the spoken words there is a feeling very different from what the words seem to express. Dialogue suggests what people mean by what they're saying, even if they themselves aren't fully aware of it.

Sometimes, of course, the most effective dialogue culminates in silence. This is more than irony. It is what characters do to one another.

*—Mr. L'Heureux is a novelist and poet and served for more than a decade as director of the Stanford Writing Program.*