

UNVEILING THE ICEBERG IN THE ANALYSIS OF IMPLICATURE AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFLICTS IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S SELECTED SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

Ernest Hemingway's Iceberg Theory is built upon minimalist dialogue that is often ambiguous or seemingly unrelated to the narrative surface, creating a deliberate gap between what characters say and what they truly mean. This study investigates how such dialogue operates through the mechanism of Conversational Implicature across five selected short stories: Hills Like White Elephants, Cat in the Rain, A Clean, Well-Lighted Place, The Snows of Kilimanjaro, and The Killers. Employing a qualitative descriptive approach, the research examines how characters intentionally flout Grice's Cooperative Principle—specifically the maxims of Quality, Quantity, Relation, and Manner. Analysis reveals that these violations function as subtle communicative strategies, enabling characters to circumvent sensitive subjects, express restrained aggression, or conceal psychological turmoil they are unable to articulate directly. The pragmatic cues generated by these violations illuminate the hidden "seven-eighths" of Hemingway's narratives, bringing to the fore deeper themes of alienation, existential emptiness, and emotional distance. The study concludes that Hemingway employs conversational implicature not merely as a linguistic phenomenon, but as a deliberate narrative method for constructing psychological depth and emotional truth beneath his sparse, understated prose.

Keywords: *Conversational Implicature, Gricean Maxims, Ernest Hemingway, Iceberg Theory, Pragmatics*

INTRODUCTION

In linguistics and language studies, scholars draw a fundamental distinction between semantic meaning—which is fixed and literal—and pragmatic meaning, which is inherently context-dependent. In practice, speakers routinely employ language to convey messages that diverge from the literal sense of their words, making use of devices such as irony and metaphor to express intended meaning (Allott, 2018). Yule (2014) characterizes this phenomenon as "invisible meaning," wherein the listener must infer the speaker's true intent from what lies beneath the surface of an utterance. Such indirect communication is not merely a feature of everyday conversation; it is also strategically deployed in literary works to construct more complex characters and narratives (Bach, 1994).

Ernest Hemingway stands among the most accomplished practitioners of this linguistic strategy. Celebrated for his minimalist prose, Hemingway developed what is commonly known as the Iceberg Theory—a compositional principle in which only one-eighth of a story's meaning is made visible on the surface, while the remaining seven-eighths, comprising the emotional and psychological content, remain submerged (Connell, 1987). Rather than spelling out characters' inner states, Hemingway entrusts dialogue to serve as the primary channel through which readers access the true dimensions of the narrative.

This stylistic choice, however, creates a significant linguistic challenge: a pervasive gap between what is said and what is meant. Characters frequently appear evasive, change the subject abruptly, or offer conspicuously minimal responses (Bala, 2022). Read at face value, such exchanges risk appearing incoherent or arbitrary. A deeper pragmatic engagement is therefore required to unlock their full significance.

This study employs Grice's (1975) theory of Conversational Implicature as its analytical framework. Grice proposed the Cooperative Principle, comprising four maxims: Quantity, Quality, Relation, and Manner. In Hemingway's fiction, the hidden layers of meaning emerge precisely at those points where characters deliberately flout these maxims. Building on this framework, the present study analyzes the operation of Gricean maxim violations in five selected short stories: Hills Like White Elephants, Cat in the Rain, A Clean, Well-Lighted Place, The Snows of Kilimanjaro, and The Killers. The study aims to classify the various forms of maxim violation and to interpret the resulting implicatures, thereby unveiling the meanings that remain unstated. Theoretically, this work seeks to enrich the understanding of pragmatic principles as applied to literary analysis. The scope of the study is deliberately limited to dialogues between principal characters that contain identifiable maxim violations; other narrative and descriptive elements are excluded so as to allow for a more concentrated examination of the characters' psychological conflicts.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive approach, which is well-suited to its interpretive nature. In qualitative inquiry, research is conducted within natural conditions, with the researcher serving as the primary instrument of analysis (Sinaga, 2023). Sugiyono (2008) notes that this type of research prioritizes meaning over observable fact and foregrounds the research process rather than the final outcome. Accordingly, the data collected in this study are descriptive in character—rendered in words and narrative sentences rather than in numerical or statistical form—consistent with Creswell's (n.d.) view that qualitative research entails in-depth examination of documents alongside detailed reporting.

Data Sources and Collection

The primary data source is *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway (The Finca Vigía Edition)* (Hemingway, 1987). The analytical focus is confined to the dialogue of principal characters in five short stories: *Hills Like White Elephants*, *Cat in the Rain*, *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place*, *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, and *The Killers*. Data collection was carried out through a careful reading and note-taking technique, employing purposive sampling. Only dialogue instances that demonstrably involve the intentional flouting of Gricean maxims were selected for analysis, as it is precisely such violations that signal the presence of pragmatically relevant implicatures (Ceccaldi, 2015).

Data Analysis

The analytical procedure adapts the interactive model proposed by Miles et al. (2014). Analysis proceeds through four systematic stages: (1) identifying utterances that exhibit maxim violations; (2) classifying them according to the type of maxim violated—Quantity, Quality, Relation, or Manner; (3) analyzing the implicit meaning or implicature generated by each violation to uncover the communicative intent not expressed on the surface; and (4) situating the findings within the framework of the Iceberg Theory to reveal the psychological dimensions concealed beneath the characters' utterances.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The predominance of dialogue in Hemingway's narrative structure demands a mode of reading that reaches beyond surface-level textual meaning. From the perspective of the Iceberg Theory, characters' utterances frequently represent only the visible tip of a far more complex emotional and psychological landscape (Boyd & Schwartz, 2021). This section presents the findings of an analysis examining how incongruity, indirectness, silence, and ambiguity in dialogue—pragmatically classified as maxim flouting—function not as communicative failures but as essential narrative strategies for constructing meaning and psychological tension (Grice, 1975; Ikawati, 2022).

Through close analysis of the five selected stories, this study not only identifies the types of maxims violated but also reconstructs the conversational implicatures that arise from those violations (Mukhtasar Shokirjon qizi, 2024). The comparative approach across five texts distinguishes this study from prior work, enabling the identification of systematic and consistent patterns in Hemingway's use of maxim violations as narrative devices (Prastyarningsih & Harida, n.d.). As the analysis will demonstrate, each departure from the Cooperative Principle represents not an absence of meaning but a deliberate linguistic marker that Hemingway exploits to trace and expose repressed psychological conflict, social alienation, and unspoken power dynamics—the very core of the human tragedy in his fiction (Freud, 1983).

The Snows of Kilimanjaro — Flouting the Maxim of Quality

The following dialogue takes place in a safari tent in Africa, where the protagonist Harry lies critically ill with gangrene. As death approaches, his anguish is not merely physical; it stems from a profound awareness that he has squandered his creative potential as a writer in exchange for a life of luxury. When his wealthy wife Helen attempts to comfort him with expressions of love and solidarity, Harry responds with a sharp verbal assault—an outright refusal to engage on her terms.

"Love is a dunghill," said Harry. "And I'm the cock that gets on it to crow." "If you have to go away," she said, "is it absolutely necessary to kill off everything you leave behind? I mean, do you have to take away everything? Do you have to kill your horse, and your wife and burn your saddle and your armour?" "Yes," he said. "Your damned money was my armour. My Swift and my Armour."

In this exchange, Harry commits a pronounced violation of the Maxim of Quality through the use of crude, non-literal metaphor (Brown, 2013). Declarations such as reducing love to a "dunghill" and casting himself as a rooster crowing atop it are patently false in any literal sense. The implicature generated by this violation is that Harry is actively rejecting and closing himself off from Helen's attempt to reach him emotionally (Su & Zhang, 2025).

Viewed through the Iceberg Theory, the phrase "My Swift and my Armour" operates on two levels. On the surface, Harry treats Helen's money as a shield against life's hardships—a source of comfort and respectability. Yet beneath that surface lies a far more corrosive truth: the money has rendered him a commodity, compelling him to sacrifice his artistic promise for material ease. This double bind also explains the apparent brutality of his verbal attacks. His caustic words are not truly aimed at Helen; they are an act of self-loathing (Connell, 1987)—a reflexive condemnation directed inward, at his own capitulation.

Cat in the Rain — Flouting the Maxims of Quantity, Relation, and Manner

Set in a hotel room on a rainy day, the scene positions the unnamed wife near the window, voicing a stream of desires that her husband George, absorbed in his book, entirely disregards.

"I want to pull my hair back tight and smooth and make a big knot at the back that I can feel," she said. "I want to have a kitty to sit on my lap and purr when I stroke her." "Yeah?" George said from the bed. "And I want to eat at a table with my own silver and I want candles. And I want it to be spring and I want to brush my hair out in front of a mirror and I want a kitty and I want some new clothes." "Oh, shut up and get something to read," George said. He was reading again.

The wife's extended litany of desires constitutes a violation of the Maxim of Quantity—far exceeding what the immediate conversational situation requires. Pragmatically, however, this excess is not empty repetition; it functions as an accumulation of longing that symbolizes a deeper hunger for emotional validation and a stable sense of selfhood. George's responses, by contrast, enact clear violations of the Maxims of Relation and Manner. His dismissive "Yeah?" and the blunt imperative "Oh, shut up and get something to read" are conspicuously uncooperative and disproportionate.

The implicature emerging from these layered violations renders visible the emotional topography of the marriage: the core issue is not the length of the wife's wish-list but the vast emotional distance between the two characters. George's indifference is not merely a failure of courtesy; his words, though superficially commonplace, acquire a cutting quality when situated within the context of an emotionally evacuated relationship. His preference for his book over conversation with his wife signals, beneath the surface, a marriage hollowed out by disengagement—what the Iceberg Theory would designate as the repressed emotional reality concealed beneath an otherwise unremarkable domestic scene (Freud, 1983; Prastyansih & Harida, n.d.).

Hills Like White Elephants — Flouting the Maxims of Quality and Manner

The scene is set at a train station in the Ebro Valley, Spain, on a sweltering afternoon. An American man and a young woman named Jig sit drinking beer while waiting for their train to Madrid. The man persistently attempts to persuade Jig to undergo a medical procedure connected to her pregnancy—without ever naming it directly.

"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." 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."

The American man commits two simultaneous maxim violations. The first is a breach of the Maxim of Quality: his characterization of the procedure as "not really an operation at all" and merely a matter of "letting the air in" is medically false. Abortion is an invasive medical intervention carrying both physical and psychological risks—it is decidedly not a trivial, naturalistic process. The second is a violation of the Maxim of Manner: his consistent recourse to vague, euphemistic language is a deliberate strategy to avoid naming the procedure directly. The word "abortion" is never spoken.

The implicature arising from these violations points to a dynamic of psychological manipulation. The man's language systematically minimizes the weight of what he is asking, placing Jig—already

ambivalent—in a position where she feels pressed to comply. The conversation is tonally casual, yet the tension it carries is intense. Jig's gaze fixed on the ground, her silence, her flat affect all signal that she is not simply processing a difference of opinion; she is navigating a collision between conscience and coercion. Her position is emotionally exposed but rhetorically constrained, while the man's verbal fluency masks his fundamental unwillingness to take responsibility.

The Killers — Flouting the Maxims of Quality and Relation

The story opens in the otherwise quiet village of Summit, where two strangers—Al and Max—arrive at Henry's Lunch-Room and immediately disturb the atmosphere through a pattern of unusual, menacing behavior. Their interactions with George, the waiter, and Nick Adams, a customer, involve verbal aggression rather than physical violence, yet their presence generates a climate of unambiguous threat.

"You're a pretty bright boy, aren't you?" / "Sure," said George. / "Well, you're not," said the other little man. "Is he, Al?" / "He's dumb," said Al. He turned to Nick. "What's your name?" / "Adams." / "Another bright boy," Al said. "Ain't he a bright boy, Max?"

/ "The town's full of bright boys," Max said.

Al and Max repeatedly violate the Maxim of Quality through sustained verbal irony. The repeated epithet "bright boy," directed at both George and Nick, carries no genuine praise; it is a means of asserting that both young men are naive, powerless, and without recourse. The Maxim of Relation is simultaneously flouted: questions such as "What's your name?" bear no functional relationship to ordinary restaurant interaction. Crucially, these questions are not posed to elicit information—they are instruments of domination, deployed to heighten psychological pressure and to demonstrate that social and ethical norms can be violated with impunity.

Viewed through the Iceberg Theory, the killers' sarcasm and contempt are merely the exposed surface of a far more brutal reality: the mechanics of organized criminal violence, to which ordinary individuals like George and Nick are wholly subordinate. Hemingway captures the terror of this encounter without a single act of physical violence, relying entirely on the ironic texture of language to make the threat palpable.

A Clean, Well-Lighted Place — Flouting the Maxims of Manner and Quantity

The scene is a quiet café late at night. Two waiters observe an elderly deaf man sitting alone, slightly drunk. The younger waiter is impatient; the older is reflective and empathetic. Their exchange reveals that the old man had attempted suicide the previous week.

"Last week he tried to commit suicide," one waiter said. "Why?" "He was in despair." "What about?" "Nothing." "How do you know it was nothing?" "He has plenty of money."

This exchange violates both the Maxim of Manner and the Maxim of Quantity. The expected conversational norm would call for complete, clearly articulated information; instead, the response is compressed into a single word: "Nothing." The brevity and hesitancy of the reply are conspicuous. To the younger waiter, "nothing" reads as a simple negation of financial hardship—an absence of material problems. For the older waiter, however, the word opens onto a far more vertiginous interior landscape: emptiness, the loss of purpose, and the existential dread of mortality.

Applying the Iceberg Theory, "nothing" occupies only the surface of the utterance; beneath it lies the existential despair that has driven the old man to the edge of his life. Hemingway's emphasis here is not on material deprivation but on the unbearable psychological weight of nothingness. The old man's presence in the café—his insistence on a clean, well-lighted space—reflects a modest but urgent need: to find, however briefly, a stable and ordered enclave against the chaos and meaninglessness of existence. The brevity of the exchange thus serves as a portal into the story's deepest psychological register, staging an implicit meditation on the untenability of life that only the temporary structure of a tidy, illuminated room can partially hold at bay.

CONCLUSION

This pragmatic analysis of five Ernest Hemingway short stories—The Snows of Kilimanjaro, Cat in the Rain, Hills Like White Elephants, The Killers, and A Clean, Well-Lighted Place—demonstrates that violations of Gricean maxims operate as essential narrative devices, enabling Hemingway to construct

profound psychological depth in his characters without recourse to explicit exposition (Mukhtasar Shokirjon qizi, 2024). Across all five texts, characters consistently depart from the Cooperative Principle, most prominently through violations of the Maxims of Quality, Quantity, and Manner, deploying these departures as mechanisms of verbal self-protection (Su & Zhang, 2025).

Violations of the Maxim of Quality are the most conspicuous, manifesting through irony, sarcasm, and harsh metaphor. Harry's equation of love with filth, and the hired killers' contemptuous use of the epithet "bright boy," both illustrate how language is weaponized to conceal aggression, to project the speaker's own sense of failure, and to mask their deepest fears. Violations of the Maxims of Quantity, Relation, and Manner, meanwhile, take the form of silence, topic avoidance, and deliberately opaque responses—most strikingly the single word "Nothing." Such evasions function as strategies for protecting the self and for evading confrontation with emotional truths that are too painful to be named directly (Freud, 1983).

The conversational implicatures generated by these violations unlock the Iceberg Theory structure across all five stories, exposing three interconnected psychological themes concealed beneath the surface of the dialogue. The first is existential crisis and nihilistic world-view, most powerfully realized in *A Clean, Well-Lighted Place* and *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, where uncooperative language becomes a medium for confronting—or deflecting—despair in the face of death and existential emptiness. The second is emotional distance and interpersonal manipulation, which pervades *Cat in the Rain* and *Hills Like White Elephants*; the non-cooperative dialogues lay bare the fractures in these relationships, the asymmetry of power between men and women, and the erasure of female identity within transactional relational dynamics. The third theme, emerging in *The Killers*, is the use of false courtesy and sustained irony as instruments of intimidation—a mode of speech that enforces criminal authority over individuals stripped of any meaningful defense.

Taken together, these findings affirm that the ambiguity permeating Hemingway's dialogue is not a failure of communication but an artistic strategy for rendering the most intimate emotional truths about fragile, alienated, and internally conflicted human beings. What appears calm at the surface conceals, in every case, a turbulent psychological interior—a dynamic that is, in essence, the operational logic of the Iceberg Theory itself.

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