The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber Study Guide

The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber by Ernest Hemingway

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Introduction

Ernest Hemingway first published "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" in the September, 1936, issue of *Cosmopolitan* magazine. Later, It was among the stories collected In Hemingway's *The Fifth Column and the First Forty-Nine Stories.* The reception of Hemingway's fiction has always been intertwined with the understanding of Hemingway as a figure. Hemingway was the consummate sportsman; few others in American history, with the possible exception of Teddy Roosevelt, have come to symbolize with such consistency the spirit of the outdoorsman. Yet Hemingway's characters add an interesting and telling dimension to this myth. Their solitude is almost always interrupted, and their ruggedness almost always complemented by sensitivity and aesthetic sensibility. Because "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" does not represent this Hemingway norm, It stands apart from the author's other short fiction. Its hero, Francis Macomber, is anything but the consummate sportsman. He is inept and somewhat cowardly, but Hemingway portrays him with sympathy, revealing the anxiety and tragedy that such narrow definitions of manhood can produce. The juxtaposition of Francis Macomber and his nemesis, Robert Wilson, clearly underscores this tension, as does Macomber's struggle to win the favor of his perpetually jaded wife, Margot. Margot's final act has been the source of great debate among critics for decades, and it is difficult, upon reading and rereading the story, to determine anyone simple explanation for her actions. The story is based upon an actual scandal that had taken place in Kenya involving a wife, a love affair, and the wife's implication in the death of her husband, which was suppressed in the media and covered up by the British government.

Author Biography

Ernest Hemingway is one of the most famous American writers of the twentieth century. His rugged lifestyle and terse, penetrating prose have inspired generations of imitators. As much as for his writing, he is known for his adventurous personality and love of the outdoors. He was an avid fisherman and hunter, a firsthand witness of many wars, and a bullfighting aficionado. He was born in 1899 in Oak Park, Illinois, where he was raised. His childhood experiences in the woods of Michigan, where his family owned a summer home, contributed to several of his most famous stories which feature the character Nick Adams. After graduating from high school in 1917, where he had contributed a weekly column to the school newspaper and contributed fiction to the school's magazine, he went to work for the *Kansas City Star.* Many attribute his terse writing style to his experience as a journalist

Hemingway was an ambulance driver in Italy during World War I and received shrapnel wounds on his legs. He married for the first time in 1921the first of four trips to the altar- and returned to Europe to begin his career as a writer of fiction. For the next forty years, he published numerous short stories and novels, among the most famous of which are the short stories "Hills Like White Elephants," and "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," and the novels *The Sun Also Rises* (1926) and *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). A memoir of sorts was published in 1964 as *A Moveable Feast,* in which he related many of his early experiences in Paris during the 1920s when the city was a haven for American expatriate artists and writers. Hemingway and his cohorts, F. Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, James Joyce and Ford Madox Ford among them, are sometimes called the "Lost Generation" because of their cynical view of life forged in the modernist era between the world wars.

Though primarily known as a writer of fiction, he continued throughout his life to function as a journalist, covering several wars, including the Greco-Turkish War in 1920 and the Spanish Civil War from 1937-38. In 1944, he served as a reporter and paramilitary aide during the liberation of France. In 1953 he was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for his novel *The Old Man and the Sea.* He was awarded the 1954 Nobel Prize in Literature but did not attend the ceremony to accept the prize. In 1960, after suffering a mental breakdown, he entered the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, to undergo electroshock therapy. He committed suicide in 1961 in Ketchum, Idaho.

Plot Summary

"The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" opens with Francis Macomber, his wife, Margaret (known as Margot), and Robert Wilson preparing for lunch at their camp in Africa. The Macombers are a wealthy and socially prominent American couple in Africa on a safari. Wilson is a professional hunter, paid to guide their adventures. The three begin discussing the morning's hunt. This topic appears to cause them some discomfort, and soon the source of their discomfort is revealed: while stalking a lion, Francis Macomber panicked and ran. He is embarrassed about it, and Wilson tries to reassure him. Wilson actually has little respect for Macomber, but hides this fact. Margot, however, makes several sarcastic references to the incident.

Later that afternoon Francis and Wilson go hunting again, and Francis shows skill in shooting an impala. He is still ashamed of having shown cowardice when confronting the lion, though. That night he lies on his cot remembering the lion hunt, and the story's action flashes back to that morning. Francis had been bothered by the lion's roar the night before, and at breakfast he confesses that he is nervous. The trio set out in their car and stop when they spot a lion Macomber gets out of the car, still frightened, but he fires three shots, two of which find their mark. The lion bounds away, and Macomber and Wilson follow him, although Macomber is reluctant to kill the beast. Wilson volunteers to take the lead. As they draw near to the lion, the animal charges and Macomber runs in terror. Wilson shoots and kills the lion. After the men return to the car, Margot kisses Wilson. Macomber perceives that his wife has lost all respect for him. This signals new trouble in their marriage; they have known trouble previously, but their marriage has endured for eleven years despite their problems. "They had a sound basis of union," Hemingway writes. "Margot was too beautiful for Macomber to divorce her and Macomber had too much money for Margot ever to leave him."

Macomber finally falls asleep. When he awakens from a nightmare about the lion, he realizes that Margot's cot is empty. She returns after a couple of hours, and it is apparent that Margot, who has a history of infidelity, has been with Wilson. At breakfast it is equally obvious to Wilson that Macomber knows this. Wilson feels no remorse, however; he believes Macomber has driven Margot to him.

After breakfast the Macombers and Wilson set out to hunt buffalo. Francis Macomber's anger at Wilson blots out any fear he might have felt, and Macomber goes after the buffalo enthusiastically. He kills the biggest of the three that the hunters encounter, and finishes off another one that Wilson has wounded. The experience thrills Macomber and instills a new confidence in him. Margot points out, however, that the hunters have pursued the buffalo from their car, something that is not only unsportsmanlike but illegal. Her remarks fail to dampen her husband's spirits, though. Wilson admires Macomber's new strength and guesses that he will no longer tolerate Margot's infidelity. Margot appears to feel threatened by the change in her husband.

Before they have much time for contemplation, they must go after the third buffalo, which has been wounded. Wilson outlines for Macomber the best shot with which to kill

the buffalo. The animal comes charging out of the bush and Macomber stands firm, shooting, until the buffalo is nearly upon him. At that instant Macomber is shot in the head by his wife and killed instantly. According to the narrator, she "shot at the buffalo. .. as it seemed about to gore Macomber and had hit her husband." Wilson thinks, though, that Macomber was Margot's target all along. The story ends with Margot sobbing as Wilson assures her the outside world will believe her husband's death was an accident, but he lets her know that he believes it was murder.

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

Francis Macomber and his wife Margaret are on safari in Africa. Robert Wilson, a professional hunter, accompanies them, along with several local hired servants. The story begins at lunchtime where the three have gathered in the dining tent, drinking vodka gimlets. Shortly before, a group of servants had carried Macomber to his tent in a display of triumph followed by a brief, wordless exchange with his wife. In the dining tent, Wilson congratulates Macomber on his lion, eliciting a slight glare from Mrs. Macomber, a beautiful woman of distinguished social position. Wilson smiles at her in response with his red face and cold blue eyes. Francis Macomber is described as 35, relatively handsome, and tall. Despite the fact that he considers himself physically fit, good at court games and a successful fisherman, he has just shown himself to actually be a coward.

Mrs. Macomber dismisses the subject of the lion and unsuccessfully attempts to turn the conversation instead to Robert Wilson's ruddy complexion. When the men return to the lion in irritation, she flees to her tent in tears. In her absence, Macomber thanks Wilson again for his help.

The instigation of a strange look from one of the servant boys carries the men to the topic of the suitable punishment of servants. While an employer is legally instructed to fine the errant servant, many still frequently resort to beatings. Francis, putting his foot in his mouth, asks Wilson if he will refrain from repeating the story of the lion. Taken aback by the American's question, he assures him that as a professional hunter, he does not discuss his clients and informs him that it is bad form to request his silence. An apology from Macomber for having bolted during the hunt confuses Wilson, who is not sure what to expect from this man.

Before Mrs. Macomber returns, they discuss the buffalo they will be hunting in the morning. With a new calm, Mrs. Macomber joins the men. Wilson ponders the quandary of the American woman while husband and wife discuss whether she will be present at the next day's hunt. The bickering continues and Wilson tries to figure out what kind of a game Mrs. Macomber is playing with her husband.

Wilson and Macomber head out by themselves in the evening to scout out the next day's route. Macomber manages a good shot, killing an impala. Both men are trying to put the business of the lion behind them. However, lying in bed that night, Macomber realizes that it will not be such an easy thing to do. He contemplates his fear, remembering the first time he heard the lion roar.

The story then follows Macomber's reminiscence through a first hand account of what happened with the lion. In the morning, preparing for the hunt, they had heard the lion's roar. He and Wilson had discussed strategy and Macomber had tried to shrug off his

uneasiness. Mrs. Macomber joined them in the motor car as they stalked their prey. Macomber describes the experience of getting out of the car and facing the lion, and then the lion's experience of being shot. Macomber tried to take the animal down as he began to run, but the lion made it into the tall grass. Wilson instructed Macomber that they needed to wait before going in for him to finish the job. Macomber's reluctance was obvious, portraying his ignorance about the rules of the sport.

The men then approached the injured lion. Hearing their voices, the animal charged at his attackers. Macomber, acting instinctually out of fear, turned and fled. He heard Wilson kill the lion. He quickly realized that everyone, including his wife, had watched him flee the kill. As they sat in the shade while the gun handlers skinned the lion, Mrs. Macomber made it clear to her husband that she was disgusted by his show of fear, and then boldly kissed Wilson on the mouth before snubbing Macomber. The rest of the day moved on in silence. Macomber contemplated the consequences of his actions, his wife's response and whether or not she would leave him. That night, having difficulty sleeping, Macomber woke to realize that his wife was not beside him in the tent. When she returned, she made little attempt to conceal where she had been. Macomber reminded his wife that she had promised that there would not be any of that kind of behavior on the trip and she sweetly reminded him that she has the advantage because she is certain that he will never leave her.

In the morning, the tension has increased between the two men. Mrs. Macomber threatens her husband, telling him that if he makes a scene, she will leave him. He does not believe her. They tell each other to behave, but each replies that they are too tired. Wilson brings up the car and they follow the river in search of the buffalo. Wilson contemplates the location of the animals and the lady's visit the night before. He does not feel badly about his digression, rather he is accustomed to certain benefits of the profession.

Having located three buffalo, the two men get out of the car and face the animals with their rifles. The first goes down quickly with Macomber's first shot and Wilson nails the second. The third animal takes off and the men climb into the car to chase him. Both men take the buffalo down once they are within range. Then they pat each other on the back and retire to the shade for a drink. Mrs. Macomber is slightly shaken but excited by the kill. She asks Wilson whether it was fair to chase the animals in a motor car and he replies that they gave the animals their due respect. He says that it was equally as dangerous as pursuing them on foot, if not more so, but that it is considered illegal. Mrs. Macomber inquires as to what would happen if they were to hear about his practices back in Nairobi and Wilson replies that he would lose his license and be out of business. Francis Macomber points out that now his wife has something to hold over Wilson.

Realizing that they are missing one of the gun handler servants, Macomber began to panic. The man, approaching from the distance calls out to Wilson that the first buffalo had gotten up and gone into the bush. Mrs. Macomber curtly points out that this will be just like the lion incident. Wilson quickly disagrees. Macomber suspects that the fear will return, but it does not. The three of them examine the second bull killed, his massive horns spread wide. At Mrs. Macomber's request, they retire to the shade. She looks

pale and sick as they discuss Macomber's success. Macomber explains that he feels like a new man and Wilson reflects on seeing men come of age and let go of their fear. Mrs. Macomber bitterly comments that her husband seems to have gotten suddenly brave and wonders aloud that it is a little late for that kind of a change.

Having given the buffalo some time to die in the bush, the two men discuss their strategy for approach. They all get back in the motor car and drive over to the area where the buffalo disappeared. The gun bearer goes in ahead of them and announces that the buffalo is dead, but just as the men begin to congratulate each other, the servant comes running out of the bush screaming. The buffalo charges behind him, his eyes on the white men and with blood dripping from his nose. Wilson kneels and begins to shoot, while Macomber, still standing aims directly under the animal's horns. Macomber describes how he can see the animal's eyes and its head lower as it approaches him, but then there is a blinding flash inside his head. Wilson ducks to the side to aim for the animal's neck and just as the buffalo seems about to gore Macomber, his wife shoots from the car and hit her husband at the base of his skull. Kneeling over him, Wilson instructs her not to turn the body over and to get back in the car. Wilson curtly tells her "That was a pretty thing to do; he would have left you too" (page 36). She begs him to stop speaking.

He tells her that it was an accident and that he will have pictures taken for the inquest. He says that he will have to send a truck to get a plane to bring them to Nairobi. He asks why didn't she just poison him as they do in England? Crying, she tells him to stop, but it is only when she finally says please that he is silent.

Analysis

The story begins casually as though it were a continuation of a longer tale. All three are described as pretending that nothing had happened, indicating that of course, something has happened and it was eventful enough to warrant an attempt to ignore it. Macomber's wordless exchange with his wife indicates that there is some tension surrounding his recent victory.

Mrs. Macomber is clearly uncomfortable with her husband's reaction to the lion and makes every attempt to steer the conversation toward any other topic. When she is unsuccessful, she retreats from the men in tears. In her absence, Macomber addresses Wilson directly about the lion. Wilson is taken aback by the manner which Macomber openly discusses his fear. He is insulted when the man asks him not to spread the word among the other hunters and has no qualms about pointing out Macomber's indiscretion.

Among hunters and among men in general, there is an unspoken code of conduct. Macomber's ignorance of and lack of deference to that system confuses Wilson, who prides himself on being a good judge of character. He blames the strange behavior on the fact that Macomber is an American. With poignant foreshadowing, Wilson remarks, "You know in Africa no woman ever misses her lion and no white man ever bolts." Mrs.

Macomber's return in good spirits also confuses Wilson. American women, he believes, are cruel and predatory, which increases his attraction to her.

Lying in bed that night, Macomber wrestles with his fear and shame about the lion. He describes how it began the night before when he heard the lion roar. The story then reflects back on the events of the previous day. Macomber details his reaction to seeing the lion for the first time and he narrates the lion's reaction to the hunters. When he describes shooting the animal, he does so from the animal's perspective rather than his own, indicating a deep empathy and justifying his emotional response.

Pursuing the already injured animal, Macomber verbalizes his fear and his desire to quit right then. Wilson tells him that is not an option because the lion is injured and suffering. If they were to leave him, someone could happen on him unexpectedly and be killed. He is angered by Macomber's cowardice and frustrated by his selfishness. As soon as they spot the lion and he spots them, Macomber panics and begins to run. Wilson shoots three times and kills the lion.

Everyone saw Macomber bolt. There was no way to hide his shame and Mrs. Macomber does not attempt to disguise her disgust for her husband's reaction. Instead, she kisses Wilson on the mouth right in front of him, lashing out with spite. In the silence that follows the hunt, Macomber contemplates how his wife will not leave him because of his wealth. Though she is very beautiful, she can no longer be sure to marry well.

Waking up in the middle of the night to find his wife missing, Macomber does not wonder for a moment about her intentions. When she returns to the tent, he confronts her and she does not attempt to hide her indiscretion. In the morning, the tension between the three of them has mounted. Wilson, rather than feeling guilty about having slept with Macomber's wife, criticizes him for not keeping her under his control. The husband and wife argue about whether or not she will leave him for making a scene.

Before any resolution is found, the group leaves on the hunt. On the quiet ride in search of buffalo, Wilson ponders his actions and Mrs. Macomber's motivation. He was pleased that she had remained silent when she came to his tent during the night and he also took pleasure in having hurt Macomber. He justified his actions with Macomber's ignorance about the appropriate behavior of a man.

After shooting the three buffalo, Wilson gained a little more respect for Macomber, who suddenly dropped his fear. Seeing the shift between the two men, Mrs. Macomber searches for a way to gain advantage against them. She accuses them of bad sportsmanship for chasing the animals with the motor car and inquires about how their actions would be received by their peers. Both men immediately acknowledge that she had gotten what she wanted, something to hold over them. However, this was not enough. Mrs. Macomber becomes visibly ill as she realizes that the controlled dynamic between her and her husband will immediately disintegrate. He had gained some confidence and would no longer allow her to trample him.

Macomber recognizes the change in himself as well and does not hesitate to verbalize it. Though Wilson agrees, he chastises him for bringing it up. "Talk the whole thing away. No pleasure in anything if you mouth it up too much." (page 33).

Once they become aware that the first buffalo had gotten up and gone into the bush, they know that they need to go in after him. This time Macomber is not afraid. They give the animal some time to get stiff and lose energy before following the trail of blood into the trees. The initial mistaken impression that the animal was dead knocks the men off their guard and as the animal charges them with its horns flailing, they shoot wildly. Macomber stands strong and shoots well, facing the buffalo head on. Wilson takes a side angle and brings the bull down just before it gores Macomber. However, at that moment, Mrs. Macomber also shoots. It is unclear whether she was trying to shoot the buffalo that was apparently about to shred her husband, or whether she took that opportunity for a clever accident to end their marriage in good standing and inherit his wealth. Wilson is keenly aware of every angle of the situation and is not gentle with her. He does not threaten her with the legality of his death, but rather lists the practical things that need to be addressed. He says, "Why didn't you poison him? That's what they do in England" (page 37). Wilson's statement not only indicates to Mrs. Macomber that he understands the complexity of the situation and the variety of motives at her disposal, but also criticizes her bad American form. He does not stop until she finally speaks politely to him.

Characters

Francis Macomber

Francis Macomber is a man of enough wealth that he can afford a private, guided hunting trip in Africa. He is a man of questionable courage who is more comfortable shooting from the car than stalking his prey on foot. His humiliation at being cuckolded prompts him to an act of foolish bravery that reveals in its outcome his wife's lack of faith in him. His marriage to Margot is not a happy one, but Hemingway tells us that "Macomber had too much money for Margot ever to leave him." After he flees from a lion that he has wounded, his wife sleeps with their guide, Robert Wilson. Hemingway's statement that Macomber "was dressed in the same sort of safari clothes that Wilson wore except that his were new" illustrates the essential difference between these two men. Wilson is what Macomber pretends to be-a hunter and, at least in the eyes of Margot Macomber, a man. Macomber tries to rectify this by standing his ground before a charging buffalo. Just as he takes aim, however, he is felled by a gunshot from his wife.

Margaret Macomber

Margaret Macomber's love for her husband is debatable at best. She seems much more interested in flirting with their guide, Robert Wilson, than in encouraging her husband. In fact, she is brazen and unabashed about her sexual dalliance with Wilson and taunts her husband with it. Hemingway writes that she is "an extremely handsome and well-kept woman." The phrase "well-kept" is particularly revealing in its multiple meanings. On one hand, Margot is fashionable and presents herself well. Furthermore, she is "kept" by her husband in a state of luxurious affluence. Ironically, she is not "well-kept" by her husband at all, as she freely and unapologetically commits adultery. Her marriage to Francis Macomber is obviously not a happy one, but, as Hemingway writes, "Margot was too beautiful for Macomber to divorce her." She is critical, abrasive and petulant. She shoots and kills her husband Just as he is standing his ground In a moment of danger, but the reader is left to consider whether this final act is one of concern that arises from love or pity, or of convenience that arises from hate and disdain. That Margot is spoiled is certain. Whether she is a cold-blooded murderer has been the subject of critical debate for decades.

Margot

See Margaret Macomber

Robert Wilson

Robert Wilson is the Macombers' guide during their hunting expedition, a man Hemingway refers to as "the white hunter." His two most striking character traits are symbolized by his "very red face and extremely cold blue eyes." His red face indicates that he is sanguine and bold, his skin sunburned by his constant exposure to the elements of nature. He is also focused, cool, and analytical, even while facing the extreme danger of the hunt. When Macomber wounds a lion but does not kill it, Wilson insists that they go into the brush to find and kill it, in spite of the dangers presented by tracking a wounded, and therefore crazed, lion. He is the epitome of a manhood that Francis Macomber lacks but Margaret Macomber desires. After Wilson sleeps With her and realizes that Mr. Macomber is aware of this transgression, he thinks to himself, "Let him keep her where she belongs. It's his own fault." His contempt for his employer does not keep him from accepting his money, however. His purpose is to provide Macomber with the illusion of being a great sportsman himself, a master over nature like Wilson. Nevertheless, it is Wilson who remains in control of the hunt, a fact demonstrated when it is revealed that Wilson is the only one who can speak to the Macombers in their own language.

Themes

Courage and Cowardice

It is perhaps misleading to characterize two of the important themes of this work as "courage" and "cowardice." Certainly, these are both major themes of the story, but Hemingway invites the reader to consider whether courage is confused with bravado, and reasonable fear with cowardice. Depending upon one's point of view, Francis Macomber's fear of the lion makes him a coward or it makes him a reasonable man. The story inspires an examination of whether it takes more courage to face down the lion or to walk away.

Fate and Chance

If Margot Macomber's shooting of her husband is an accident, then a central theme of the work becomes fate or chance. The question becomes one of how accidental an accident of this kind can be. In other words, the story asks whether it is really fate or chance-considering that Margot Macomber is inexperienced with a gun and an unskilled shot.

Guilt and Innocence

Intimately connected with the theme of fate and chance is guilt and innocence. The reader must decide if Margaret Macomber shot her husband on purpose or if it was indeed an accident. If she has not shot him on purpose, then the act becomes a matter of chance or fate. If her action was intentional, however, then she is guilty of murder. The end of the story dramatizes this ambiguity; Wilson teases her about the "accident," implying that, though she protests her innocence, he himself does not believe her.

Survival in the Wilderness

A lesser theme in the work is that of survival In the wilderness. The Macombers, wealthy urban people, would not be able to survive alone in the wilderness, so they hire a guide to help them with their hunt. Ironically, the presence of a guide does not protect Francis Macomber but compels him to assume a persona of bravado that leads him to his death. Macomber struggles with his position within the wilderness, wondering if it is more honorable to be like Wilson or to heed his instinct for self-preservation by fleeing from wounded animals.

Gender Roles

Linked to Macomber's Idea of survival is the notion of manhood. What kind of men are Macomber and Wilson, and why does one survive while the other dies? The story examines whether masculinity is a function of courage or of appearance. If Margot favors Wilson, does that make him more masculine than Macomber? Complicating this question is the fact that Margot becomes uneasy when her husband becomes aggressive during the hunt. Macomber's assertion of traditional bravado on the safari does not result in Margot's increased admiration for him, though she is attracted to Wilson's show of courage. Something else, then, must influence masculinity if Margot's Interest is seen as a barometer for that trait. Margot herself represents some conflicting ideas about femininity. Though she is described in typically feminine terms, the act of violence she commits which ends her husband's life can be construed as a "masculine" trait.

Conflict

In the characters of Robert Wilson and Francis Macomber, Hemingway presents two different versions of the conflict of man against nature. Wilson has learned to live with and even conquer nature, while Macomber has difficulty doing either and is, in the end, conquered by nature in the form of a charging buffalo whose ferocity provokes Margot's fatal gunshot. This difference leads to another conflict, that of man against man, or Macomber versus Wilson. Macomber wants to be more like Wilson to gain Margot's respect and admiration. Wilson, though he is hired by Macomber, is Macomber's antagonist, ready and willing to use his virility to entice Macomber's wife into bed. Another essential conflict in this story is exemplified by the imperfect marriage of the Macombers, in which Margot seems perpetually dissatisfied and Francis unable to live up to her expectations of him.

Style

Symbolism

A great deal of symbolism contributes to the meaning of this story. The dichotomy of camp and savanna serves as a symbol of the differences that exist between Macomber and Robert Wilson. To leave the camp is to leave the world of comfort and luxury that the Macombers normally enjoy. The savanna represents Wilson's world, the wild, savage force of nature. The lion and the buffalo, representations of nature itself in all its brutal force, also come to symbolize the differences in courage and manhood that exist between Macomber and Wilson. Similarly, the guns themselves operate as symbols of manhood.

Point of View

The story is told in third-person point of view, meaning that it is related by a narrator who is not a part of the action of the story. This point of view allows the author to describe events in an objective manner. For example, Hemingway can simultaneously present Margot's insistence on her innocence and Wilson's belief that she is not innocent. It is the author's third-person narrative point of view, where the narrator does not always know what is going on in the minds of the characters he presents, that allows this ambiguity. No one but Margot Macomber can be certain of her guilt or innocence, and the narrator, who does not have access to this information, does not settle the debate.

Irony

Irony is an essential element of this story. The most obvious and striking example of irony is the title itself. Certainly, Macomber's life is "short," but is it "happy"? It is also ironic that his wife, the very person who should protect him, is the cause of his death. Furthermore, the fact that it may have been her impulse to protect Macomber which destroys him makes the climax of the story ironic. Hemingway uses irony to provide enough ambiguity in the narrative for the outcome of the story to be unclear.

Historical Context

Though Hemingway does not specify when "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" takes place, it can be assumed to be contemporary of the era in which the story was written, the mid

1930s. In the midst of the Great Depression, the fact that the Macombers can afford to take a luxury vacation takes on great significance. It hints that they are far removed from the realities of their day, which include poverty, economic instability, and general misery. In a time in which one quarter of all men were unemployed, gender roles took on great significance. A man without a job often questioned his masculinity, particularly if he was not able to care for his wife and children. Though the Macombers are childless and need not worry about where their next meal is coming from, this fixation on masculinity is still evident in Macomber's character. In an era before modern feminism took hold, the ideas of what constituted a real man or a real woman were often those based on tradition. Men were brave, courageous, and chivalric. Women, in turn, were feminine, refined, and deferential to men.

One notable exception to this stereotype of feminity in the 1930s is the idea of the "femme fatale," a woman who schemes her way to riches and fame no matter what it takes. Her dangerousness stems from the fact that though her appearance is outwardly feminine, her instincts are often very masculine. Often romanticized, this woman can be found in many books and films of the era, especially the pulp fiction novels of Cornell Woolrich, Dashiell Hammett, and Raymond Chandler, whose detective novels often featured beautiful and conniving women who tempted the likes of detectives Sam Spade and Philip Marlow. Writing more mainstream literature, Hemingway also utilized this feminine stereotype, particularly in the character of Margot Macomber. She does not love her husband and has been unfaithful. Nevertheless, he is too rich for her to leave him. One then can interpret her scheme to kill him, becoming a rich widow in the process, as the action of a femme fatale. Hemingway, whose works frequently comment on the notion of masculinity, saw himself as a paragon of manliness through his propensity for hunting, fishing, and bull fighting. By creating characters in this image, Hemingway transfers to the page his own gender stereotypes, which many have come to view in recent years as archetypal and not very realistic.

Critical Overview

"The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" is widely regarded as one of Hemingway's finest pieces of short fiction. Not only has it been admired for its artistry, but it has also been praised for the insights it gives into the mind of its author. For instance, Kathleen Morgan and Luis A. Losada write in "Tracking the Wounded Buffalo: Authorial Knowledge and the Shooting of Francis Macomber" in *The Hemingway Review* that the story contains evidence of Hemingway's hunting acumen. They point to his use of hunting jargon and his understanding of the logistics of a charging buffalo to theorize that the narrative's ambiguities stem from a highly realistic and ballistically accurate situation. Critics more concerned with the literary aspects of the story often choose to focus on the characters of Wilson and Margot rather than Macomber Margot, particularly, has been branded a murderer by many critics. Edmund Wilson, for example, in his 1941 essay, "Hemingway: Gauge of Morale," writes that Macomber "saves his soul at the last minute, and then is actually shot down by his woman, who does not want him to have a soul." However, Nina Baym, in her essay "Actually, I Felt Sorry For the Lion," argues that readers should shift the blame for the story's tragic events from Margot to Wilson. Baym does not think that Margot meant to kill her husband, stating instead that "Wilson killed them all . . . . [he] has hunted on behalf of his clients, and he has also hunted them, that is, they have been his prey." In Baym's opinion, Wilson feeds on men's machismo and women's vanity.

H. H. Bell, Jr. in his essay for *The Explicator* makes the observation that "Hemingway is inclined to view Margot Macomber throughout the entire story as something akin to a lioness. In speaking of her, he employs such words as 'hard, "cruel,' and 'predatory.'" For Bell, It seems, Wilson's presence and role in the story are highly symbolic. He writes that "the reader is permitted to see Robert Wilson as the complete hunter, as a man who lives by one code and one code only, and who applies this code to both animals and people simply because he knows no other way to live and be honest with himself and with his moral philosophy. Moreover, it is Wilson who thus adds the hunter's code to the Hemingway code in the story and finally blends the action and the theme of the work in a way that Hemingway rarely does." Warren Beck, in his essay "The Shorter Happy Life of Mrs. Macomber-1955," writes that readers too frequently see Margot from Wilson's perspective. He writes that "Wilson's assumption that Mrs. Macomber murdered her husband has been rather generally accepted by readers." He optimistically characterizes Margot's final act as one in which "she wished and tried to save her husband, with that access of recognition and penitence and hope in which love can renew itself."

Finally, K. G. Johnston of *The Hemingway Review* provides a reasoned argument for Margot's innocence in the death of her husband, though she is, Johnson admits, "no angel." Johnson comments; "Mrs. Macomber, the narrator tell us, 'had shot at the buffalo.'. . Commentaries have generally ignored or minimized the importance of this vital information and its source." Whether or not Margot intended to kill her husband or acted to protect him, it is Francis Macomber who is dead and whose failure or triumph is of primary importance in the story. As Frank O'Connor ironically notes in his 1963 essay

"A Clean, Well Lighted Place," "The title leaves us with the comforting assurance that the triumph is still Macomber's, for, in spite of his sticky end, he had at last learned the only way of keeping his wIfe out of other men's beds."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
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Critical Essay #1

Ring is an editor, journalist, and frequent writer on literary subjects. In the following essay, she discusses how the interpretation of "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" hinges on one's interpretation of Wilson.

"The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," first published in 1936, remains noteworthy for several reasons. It is particularly well known for the debate It has generated concerning its characters and their motivations. It also is significant as an exploration of themes that appear frequently in Ernest Hemingway's fiction and as a superior example of the art of short-story writing.

Many critics and readers have debated whether Margot Macomber kills her husband intentionally or accidentally. How one answers this question depends largely on how negatively or positively one views the story's three primary characters. Numerous scholars have held up Margot Macomber as an example of one of Hemingway's most hateful female characters-as a dominating woman who undermines her husband's masculinity, and who is so threatened when he starts to become a real man that she kills him. These critics commonly hold that the change in Francis after he kills the buffalo is a positive one and that Robert Wilson is the story's voice of morality, the person who exemplifies Hemingway's "code" of proper conduct. Some others, however, have put forth a more sympathetic, even feminist, view of Margot, a more complicated view of Francis, and a highly negative view of Wilson.

These critics usually consider Margot's killing of her husband an obvious accident.

That "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" has generated such debate is due in great part to its complexity. On the surface, the story appears to be simple. Its action takes place over just twenty-four hours, and its pace is swift. Macomber first fails and then succeeds in hunting, grows in self-respect, but has his life ended Just when It begins to be happy. But the story's omniscient narrator reveals the thoughts and feelings of Wilson, Francis, Margot (to a lesser extent), and even the lion, and Hemingway's carefully crafted dialogue offers further insights into each character. The sum of this is that the story is not as simple as it seems.

How one interprets the story depends greatly on one's opinion of Wilson. The narrator discloses Wilson's thoughts more often than those of the other characters, and many readers take Wilson to be the spokesman for Hemingway. Wilson lives an active, outdoor life in which physical courage is important-and this way of life, and this type of courage, were much admired by Hemingway, a big game hunter himself. Wilson believes in a code of conduct in which one must not shrink from danger and must bear one's sufferings or disappointments without complaint; this is Hemingway's code, which comes up often in his writings. Wilson disdains the soft life lived by wealthy Americans such as Francis Macomber and dislikes women who dominate men; these factors, he thinks, have made Macomber less than a whole man. Hemingway, although he certainly counted strong, independent women among his lovers, friends, and fictional characters,

appears to have believed that the proper relationship between the sexes is one in which the man has the upper hand.

Another view of Wilson, though, is either that his standards are faulty or that he does not live up to them. He and Macomber chase after the buffalo in the car rather than on foot even though it gives them an unfair advantage over the animals, and Wilson could lose his license if this infraction of hunting rules became known; but Wilson rationalizes this by saying that riding in a car over the rough terrain is more dangerous than walking or running over it. Furthermore, Wilson punishes his African aides by illegal whippings; he bullies the Macombers; and he is not troubled by the morality of affairs with married women-he sees no reason to turn down Margot's overtures, as he believes she sleeps with him because Francis is not man enough to "keep her where she belongs." Critic Virgil Hutton asserts in *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway: Critical Essays* that Hemingway does not intend for Wilson to be considered a hero. Instead. Hutton says, Wilson is an object of satire-a symbol of British imperialism, with its arrogant assumption of the right to rule the world, and "an unwitting hypocrite who harshly judges others on the basis of various strict and false codes that he himself does not follow."

Whatever one thinks of Wilson, the change in Francis Macomber comes when he becomes like Wilson. The question is whether this is, as Carlos Baker puts it in *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist.* rising toward a standard of manhood, or adopting a not very admirable set of values that depend on breaking the rules of hunting and lording it over his wife and other people. Yet another interpretation of Macomber's metamorphosis, though, comes from scholar Warren Beck, who suggests in "The Shorter, Happy Life of Mrs. Macomber," that Macomber is emulating what *is* admirable in Wilson, such as physical courage, but will reject what is not admirable, such as emotional detachment. Macomber, Beck asserts, will not try to suppress his wife, but will try to build a stronger partnership with her-something that will create a challenge to her as well. The view of Margot Macomber also depends on the extent to which one sees Wilson's opinion of her as valid. Wilson hates her outspokenness and sarcasm, and blames her for Francis's weakness. Perhaps, though, Wilson resents the degree to which she sees through him. Snatches of dialogue can be read as Margot's questioning of Wilson's values. She tells him he is "lovely" at hunting, "That is, if blowing things' heads off is lovely." She chides Wilson and Francis for their car-chase of the buffalo: "It seemed very unfair to me." Her virulent verbal attacks on her husband are hard to justify, but the omniscient narrator points out that neither she nor Francis is wholly to blame for their troubled marriage: "She had done the best she could for many years back and the way they were together now was no one person's fault." Feminist scholar Nina Baym offers the opinion in *New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* that Margot exercises no real power over Francis; like the lion, she is thought of as dangerous, but is in fact helpless because men hold the power in the world. The story's narrator tells us that Margot is "very afraid of something" after Francis gains such confidence from killing the first buffalo; perhaps she is not afraid of Francis becoming a so-called "real man," but afraid of him becoming the kind of man who will find it easy to oppress her. Or, if one accepts Beck's opinion of the change in Francis, perhaps what Margot really fears is the emotional evolution necessary to maintain a solid relationship.

Those who see Wilson as a heroic figure judge Margot guilty of her husband's murder. Hemingway biographer Jeffrey Meyers, who calls Margot "the real villain" of the story, points out that Hemingway once gave an interview in which he endorsed the Margot-as-murderer interpretation. Others note that Hemingway made varied statements about the story, and that his all-knowing narrator says explicitly that Margot "had shot at the buffalo." They also argue that if Margot wanted her husband to die, she merely could have let the buffalo kill him. Beck, who definitely considers Margot's gunshot an attempt to save Francis, sees her as trying to raise herself morally and to atone for her infidelities and other cruelties toward him. Wilson, Beck asserts, is unable to understand Margot's complexity-to see that she does sometimes try to be supportive of her husband, that her cruelty is a defense mechanism, or that she has been frustrated in her efforts to improve their marriage. Wilson also cannot believe, Beck says, that Margot is capable of trying to become a better person than she is.

The story also is useful for its delineation of the Hemingway code-or, in the alternate view, a satire of the code-and for its portrait of an individual going through a life-changing experience. Many of Hemingway's stories deal with such experiences. However, even though there is much physical action in his stories, the life-changing events usually do not take the form of such action; Francis Macomber's story is exceptional in this regard. Tills situation, though, also lends itself to debate. Macomber is a man from an industrialized society, accustomed to the comforts of wealth; he is placed in a situation where he must deal with the natural-some would say "primitive"-world. Does Macomber's becoming a brave and accomplished hunter show him learning to deal with this natural world where physical courage is all that matters? Would he have been able to translate his physical courage into moral courage, and is the real tragedy of the story the fact that he was denied this opportunity? Or did he merely figure out how to use technology and wealth to destroy nature? After all, he would not be able to kill animals without his advanced weapons and the expert guidance of Wilson, who commands a large fee for his services. The peek into the lion's thoughts gives rise to a consideration of the morality of hunting, as does the narrator's comment that Macomber "had not thought how the lion felt." This appears to be a call, at the very least, for the hunter to show some respect for the hunted, and perhaps Macomber's subsequent nightmare of "the bloody-headed lion standing over him" shows him beginning to feel such respect. A hunter who respects and understands his prey could become a more skillful hunter; on the other hand, he could become a more humane individual and give up shooting animals.

The fact that one can find all these points for discussion is evidence that "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" is, quite simply, a wonderfully well-written story. It is evident that Hemingway chose each word carefully, even though the same words can be interpreted in various ways. For instance, the description of Wilson's eyes as "cold" and "flat" indicates that he is not an emotional person. Is this lack of emotion something positive, showing that Wilson has the strength to withstand life's pains and sorrows, as one who lives up to the Hemingway code? Or is it something negative, showing that Wilson has taken the code too far and lost all compassion for his fellow human beings? Hemingway's craft also shows in his delineation of the story's action. The lion hunt and the buffalo hunt proceed in similar fashion; because something shocking-Francis's act of

cowardice-happens at the end of the lion hunt, the reader expects something shocking to happen at the end of the buffalo hunt. The suspense generated by this expectation keeps the reader turning pages, and even after many readings, it's still possible to be shocked by Francis Macomber's death, which is, memorably, shown from Francis's point of view: "He felt a sudden white-hot, blinding flash explode inside his head and that was all he ever felt." The story's use of flashback is another technique that holds the reader's interest. The opening, with the Macombers and Wilson at lunch and discussing the morning's lion hunt, makes the reader want to know more about the hunt, as does the portrait of Macomber becoming fearful at the lion's roar the night before. Noteworthy, too, is the vivid portrayal of each hunt; during the pursuit of the buffalo, one can almost feel the motion as Hemingway describes the Macomber car "rocking swayingly over the uneven ground, drawing up on the steady, plunging, heavy-necked, straight-moving gallop of the bull" This also underlines the advantage the car gives the hunters over the buffalo.

All told, the story's many nuances and complications make it subject to a variety of interpretations, which are likely to cause debate for many years to come. Moreover, It is still highly entertaining. "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" is one of those stories that becomes richer with each reading.

Source: Trudy Ring, for *Short Stories for Students,* Gale Research, 1997.

Critical Essay #2

In the following essay, the authors outline Hemingway's knowledge of big game hunting and how he applied those principals to develop the plot of "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber. "

While "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" has long been acclaimed as one of Hemingway's most successful artistic achievements, criticism about the actual shooting of Macomber has focused primarily on whether or not it was an accident, and the implications of this for the understanding of the story and characters, especially Wilson and Mrs. Macomber. Emphasis on this question has diverted attention from the technical merits of the sequence of events Hemingway devised for Macomber's death. This sequence not only exhibits the vivid realism, sensory evocation and viewpoint manipulation characteristic of the rest of the story, but also depends heavily for Its success on Hemingway's practicing his credo of "writing what I know about," in this case big game hunting and shooting.

As they begin the final tracking of the wounded buffalo, Wilson asks Macomber, "Have you any solids left?" After the gun bearer produces the cartridges, Wilson gives instructions concerning the disposal of the various rifles within the party and then advises Macomber what to expect:

"When a buff comes he comes with his head high and thrust straight out. The boss of the horns covers any sort of brain shot. The only shot is straight into the nose. The only other shot is into his chest or, if you're to one side, into the neck or shoulders. After they've been hit once they take a lot of killing Don't try anything fancy. Take the easiest shot there is".

On several occasions Wilson is called a "professional," and delivers instructions on one or another point about hunting. But here it is the wealth of particulars that reinforces our apprehension of Wilson. This is a favorite device of Hemingway: it may be Nick instructing Marjorie on the proper preparation of a bait fish, Santiago butchering a tuna or dolphin fish, or Nick making a pancake. In each case it is the accumulation of details pertinent to the task or action that convinces the reader of the character's expertise. Thus the specific information about the type of ammunition, the disposition of the guns, the anatomy and posture of a charging buffalo, and the effective shots fixes the figure of Wilson In our minds as one who knows his craft well.

Such a presentation of a character requires a well informed author. Hemingway's knowledge of tracking a wounded cape buffalo came partly from his own experience which he had already recorded when he wrote Wilson's remarks. In addition, Hemingway throughout his life read a great deal about hunting in Africa, and this interest is clearly reflected in the books he owned. Particularly relevant here is a passage about the cape buffalo from a 1929 work of Denis D. Lyell that Hemingway owned in duplicate at Key West and later took to Cuba:

The story-books which show pictures of him charging with his head dipped are incorrect as he nearly always holds his nose straight out when advancing, so the brain shot is almost impossible, unless one can get the bullet up the nasal orifice, which I advise tyros not to attempt The best spot is at the base of the throat, and solid bullets are best, as one needs ample penetration in such a solid-bodied animal.

The verbal parallels with Wilson's advice about ammunition, posture of the buffalo, and possible targets are obvious and suggest that the hunter's words may well have their origins in Lyell's text as much as in Hemingway's own experience.

In the subsequent description of the charge of the buffalo we read:

. . . the bull coming, nose out . . . head straight out, coming in a charge boss of the horns. shot again at the wide nostrils.. the horns. . . on-coming head, nose out. . . .

Hemingway echoes the words and phrases he had Wilson use in the preceding passage. Repetition is, of course, a ubiquitous feature of Hemingway's style that often serves, as in this case, to reinforce a vivid description; here, however, it also contributes verisimilitude. The reader readily accepts the truth of the omniscient narrator's description because it recalls in detail what the expert has just said about how a buffalo charges.

At the same time the reader's view of the action is that of the amateur hunter, Macomber. This is accomplished by the narrator's shifting from Wilson and Macomber ("they saw") to Macomber alone ("and Macomber. . .saw"), and then providing a succession of parts of the buffalo's head that Macomber "could see." This focus on progressively smaller details, "huge boss of horns. . . wide nostrils. . .little wicked eyes," as they become seen by the shooter reifies the motion of the approaching target for the reader. Hemingway uses much the same technique, although with greater detail, in El Sordo's shooting of the captain. Both passages end with characteristics of the approaching targets' eyes ("little wicked" and "pale blue. . .that don't focus ") only visible up close; however, in contrast to the deliberate pace of El Sordo's noting a variety of things about the captain's appearance as he walks toward him, here the rapidity of the oncoming buffalo is vivified by the few features of the head concentrated on by the hunter.

Such concentration is an authentic hunter's view. Some fifteen years after writing his Macomber story, Hemingway contributed the Foreword to Francois Sommer's book about African game hunting. In it he stressed the importance of anatomy and underscored this by likening the hunter to "a surgeon except that he will be armed with the lightning rapier of the long reaching solid instead of a scalpel."

So Wilson specifies the "chest, neck... shoulders" as possible targets, but It is the nose shot he emphasizes. During the shooting at the charging buffalo three separate references focus attention on the physical feature most significant for both hunters, the nose, their target. Then the narrator says Wilson "ducked to one side to get in a shoulder shot," while Macomber "shot for the nose" to the end. Thus by repeatedly

describing their targets anatomically, Hemingway creates an account that accurately depicts the way the big game hunter, the "surgeon" with the "solid instead of a scalpel," attacks his quarry.

Macomber also meets a hunter's death. A contemporary professional notes that all too many hunters have succumbed to bystanders shooting at animals attacking them. One famous incident provides a partial parallel to Macomber's death. In 1920 two amateur hunters named Colquhoun and Hunter were following a couple of cape buffalo they had wounded.

As Hunter melted from sight into the bush beyond the clearing, Colquhoun realized that somehow they had walked almost smack into the middle of the herd As It dawned on him, he saw a charging bull bearing down on Hunter through the patches of bush Before he could react there was the tearing crash of a shot. The native carrying Hunter's extra rifle fired, missing the buffalo but driving a bullet through Hunter's lower back, breaking the farmer's spine.

Thus although Philip Percival said that he did not know of any client who had shot her husband as Mrs. Macomber did, there is nothing uncommon about the general contour of events that Hemingway invented; moreover, It is the informed details meticulously provided that render the shooting of Macomber especially credible.

One such particular is that Mrs. Macomber shot her husband with a 6.5 Mannlicher. As Davidson notes, this is a light gun not suited for shooting buffalo. It is appropriate, therefore, that the Mannlicher is ordered left behind in the car "with the Memsahib" by Wilson. Thus its presence there for the denouement is in accord with standard hunting practice.

Another particular is the surgical precision of the narrator's description of where Macomber was shot: "about two inches up and a little to one side of the base of his skull." Such graphic description is a hallmark of Hemingway's pictorial prose, but here it also rivets the reader's attention on Macomber'! head, and his head is the detail most significant for the shooting.

One of Hemingway's most perceptive critics Carlos Baker, observes that Macomber was kneeling when he was shot. This is not stated in the text nor does Baker explain his observation. Wilson is described as "kneeling," and one might assume that Macomber, the amateur, would be likely to imitate the professional; however, Hemingway has not left Macomber's position to conjecture.

As the buffalo closed in, the narrator says Macomber was "aiming carefully" and "his rifle" was "almost level with the on-coming head." (Because one aims a rifle carefully by sighting along the barrel, it becomes apparent that Macomber's head is at about the same height as the buffalo's. A mature bull cape buffalo stands up to five feet at its apogee, the shoulder, and the center of its large head is approximately four feet above the ground. That the buffalo is a mature bull is stated by Wilson, and also indicated by his noting the spread of the horns: "A good fifty inches or better. Better." Most important

here is that Macomber's great physical stature has been emphasized in the story. The narrator calls our attention to it three times, beginning with "very tall." Thus the detail about the level of his rifle makes it clear that Macomber was not standing. In addition, as Hemingway had described in *Green Hills of Africa,* there are three positions other than standing that a big game hunter may assume, kneeling, sitting and prone. The latter two obviously will not be assumed by a hunter facing a charging buffalo. Thus the writer who knew what he was writing about succeeds in letting the reader know, without saying so, that Macomber was kneeling.

The final important detail the narrator supplies concerns the distance of Macomber from the buffalo when he was shot. We are told that Mrs. Macomber shot when the buffalo "seemed about to gore Macomber," and then we learn:

Francis Macomber lay now, face down, not two yards from where the buffalo lay on his side. .

Macomber's head, then, was not only level with the buffalo's, but also not very far from it. Thus that Macomber was shot in the head when his wife "shot at the buffalo" is realistic. This applies whether one believes that the shooting was an accident, or that Mrs. Macomber's aim was deflected by a subconscious motive. In the former case, the margin for error is small; in the latter, the deflection need only be slight. In either case, it is Hemingway's detailed and informed narrative reflecting his own knowledge that establishes the credibility of the death he invented for Macomber. As he himself said:

Invention is the finest thing but you cannot invent anything that would not actually happen.

Source: Kathleen Morgan and Luis A Losada, "Tracking the Wounded Buffalo Authorial Knowledge and the Shooting of Francis Macomber," in *The Hemingway Review,* Vol XI, No I, Fall, 1991, pp. 25-8.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Johnston analyzes the character of Margot Macomber in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," pointing out evidence that paints her as more complicated than a one-dimensional villain.

Margot Macomber deserves her day in court of appeals. She so aroused the emotions and prejudices of her critics that, in a manner of speaking, they rushed her to trial, before the smoke and dust had settled, in a "drumhead court" on the field of battle. Without a thorough examination of the evidence, or of the motives of her chief accuser, they found her guilty as charged-guilty, or, at the very least, not innocent, of the murder of her husband, Francis Macomber.

Margot, of course, is no angel. And she is guilty--of infidelity; and of accepting the adolescent touchstone of manhood-standing firm before an onrushing wounded lion or buffalo-so heartily embraced by the white hunter, her husband, and Hemingway himself. She is attracted to men of courage and command.

Francis Macomber's lack of command and, thus, of manliness is revealed in the opening scene of "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." The inglorious lion hunt is over. It is lunch time now, and Macomber offers his wife and the white hunter, Robert Wilson, a choice of lime Juice or lemon squash (lemonade). But both, first Wilson, and then Margot, reject his drink suggestions and choose gimlets instead. "'I suppose it's the thing to do,' Macomber agreed. 'Tell him to make three gimlets.'" However, even before Macomber's capitulation, "the mess boy had started them already."

Clearly, Wilson's is the commanding voice.

Macomber will achieve both courage and command by story's end. But in the early and middle stages of the story, he literally takes a back seat to Wilson. On the morning of the lion hunt, Macomber sits in the front seat of the car beside the driver. On the return trip, however, after his public display of cowardice, he sits in the back, while Wilson, who stood his ground before the charge of the wounded lion, sits in the front, in the seat of authority. Later, en route to the buffalo hunt, Macomber is again seen sitting in the back. But after his "coming of age," he and Wilson are pictured as hanging onto the sides of the car, like equals. Macomber even commands his wife to shut up during the interlude in the buffalo hunt.

The narrator is omniscient, a point of view rarely employed by Hemingway in his short fiction. The all-seeing, all-knowing narrator even shares with us the thoughts and the vision of the wounded lion. An awareness of the omniscience of the narrator is crucial to the discussion of Margot Macomber's intentions and motivations in the fatal scene. Mrs. Macomber, the narrator tells us, *"had shot at the buffalo* with the 6.5 Mannlicher as it seemed about to gore Macomber and had hit her husband about two inches up and a little to one side of the base of the skull" (italics mine). Yet commentaries have generally ignored or minimized the importance of this vital information and its source. Mrs.

Macomber's action is seldom seen as an attempt to save her husband's life. Rather, the prevailing critical view is that she deliberately-or at best, "accidentally on purpose"-murdered him.

Carlos Baker refers to Margot Macomber as "easily the most unscrupulous of Hemingway's fictional females," and he characterizes her as "the horrible example" of the deadly female, someone "who is really and literally deadly." He speaks of Wilson as "the judge who presides, after the murder, over the further fortunes of Margot Macomber." Joseph DeFalco stops short of accusing Margot of cold-blooded murder: "When Macomber finally achieves his manhood by demonstrating his courage, his wife recognizes the change as an omen of her own demise and 'accidentally' shoots him." Philip Young both acknowledges and circumvents the story's omniscient narrator with his Freudian view of the situation:

When [Macomber] attains this manhood he regains the ithyphallic authority he had lost and his wife, now panicky herself in her new role, must destroy him literally. . When he becomes a man, and she can no longer rule him in the Lawrencian sense, she sends a bullet to the base of his skull.
. . The climax of the story has come, and Macomber's wife, recognizing the hero's new life as a man, cannot tolerate a long denouement when her husband goes in after the wounded buffalo she-ostensibly and "intentionally" aiming for the beast in order to save Francis-kills him. Aiming at the buffalo, as Hemingway specified, she shot her husband "by mistake on purpose," as wise children put it-or, for adults, in a monumental "Freudian slip." When Wilson accuses her of murder she does not deny it ..

Leslie A. Fiedler, however, does not pull his Freudian punches; he accuses Mrs. Macomber of murder and sheds new light on her motivation-and on Hemingway's as well:

When Hemingway's bitches are Americans, they are hopeless and unmitigated bitches; symbols of Home and Mother as remembered by the boy who could never forgive Mama for having wantonly destroyed Papa's Indian collection! Mrs. Macomber, who, in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," kills her husband for having alienated the affections of the guide with whom she is having one of her spiteful little affairs, is a prime example of the type.

Wilson's role in shaping our response to the fatal scene should not be overlooked. It is Wilson who firmly plants the murder motive in the reader's mind. His own motivation for doing so warrants examination. At first Wilson appears to accept the fact that Macomber's death is accidental: he orders one of the gun bearers to fetch the other "that he may witness the manner of the accident." And, apparently without irony, he tells the tearful widow, "Of course it was an accident. .. .I know that." But moments later, immediately after he mentions Nairobi, he accuses her of murder: "Why didn't you poison him? That's what they do in England." Nairobi, it appears, is the trigger word that reminds him of his own need for a defense, and for some leverage on this woman, who soon will be called upon to testify at the inquest there. By word and action, Wilson has

left himself vulnerable. He had confessed to Mrs. Macomber earlier that their car chase of the buffalo was Illegal and had asked her not to mention it to anyone.

"What would happen if they heard about it in Nairobi?"
"I'd lose my license for one thing other unpleasantnesses," Wilson said, taking a drink from the flask. "I'd be out of business."
"Really?"
"Yes, really."
"Well," said Macomber, and he smiled for the first time all day "Now she has something on you."

Wilson has much to gain by making Mrs. Macomber believe that the death of her husband could be construed as murder. He is counting on this woman, whom he earlier characterized as "not stupid," to recognize that each could put the other "out of business" by his or her testimony at the inquest. The murder accusation may be seen as his bid for their mutual silence on certain incriminating matters.

The cross-examination of Wilson's motives and the testimony of the unimpeachable narrator constitute a solid defense of Mrs. Macomber against the charge of murder. But there is a considerable body of circumstantial evidence, too, that strengthens her case She is moved to tears by her husband's cowardly disgrace and by his death. Heretofore, he has not been man enough to command her fidelity; the kiss that she bestows on Wilson after the lion episode and her sharing his double cot that night are her tribute to a man of courage. When her husband comes of age, though she is visibly frightened by the change, she pays him tribute, too, with a small but revealing gesture: she hands the whisky flask to Macomber, not to Wilson, during the lull in the buffalo hunt. (Macomber, one recalls, drank water during the lion-hunt interlude, but now he takes a man's drink.) But Margot's greatest tribute to her husband-and the most telling piece of circumstantial evidence-is her risking the shot at the wounded buffalo. From her vantage point it appears that the charging beast will gore 'her husband to death. As it turns out, the buffalo is felled "not two yards" from Macomber's body. If she wanted Macomber killed, inaction would seem the wisest and safest course. But instead she risks all-marriage, money, reputation, freedom-by firing to save her husband, who has finally become the sort of man she has been desperately seeking all along.

Margot, whose name means "pearl," has paid a great price for her belated show of fidelity. Because of her desperate decision, she stands judged, by many a reader and critic, a murderess. Even her creator feeds the dark suspicions: "This is a simple story in a way," writes Hemingway in his essay "The Art of the Short Story" "because the woman, who I knew very well in real life but then invented out of, to make the woman for this story, is a bitch for the full course and doesn't change." Be that as it may. But a careful examination of the story's evidence leads one to this considered verdict: in the final stages of the buffalo hunt, Margot Macomber is "guilty" only of trying to save her husband's life.

Source: K. G. Johnston, "In Defense of the Unhappy Margot Macomber," IN *The Hemingway Review,* Vol. II, No.2, Spring, 1983, pp 44-7.

Critical Essay #4

In the following brief essay, Bell argues that the character of Wilson in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" is a man who lives by the moral code of the hunter, which explains his actions towards Margot at the end of the story.

Ernest Hemingway's story "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" is often taught in both high school and college classrooms because it is a good story, one that appeals at one and the same time to the Hemingway scholar as well as to youth in general. As widely read and as widely taught as it is, though, it is often misunderstood and misinterpreted by both teachers and students alike with regard to Robert Wilson's treatment of Margot Macomber at the very end of the story.

As Hemingway sees it, one very important aspect of the code of the professional hunter is that he must be willing to go into any cover, however unpleasant the experience may be, in order to pursue and kill a wounded animal. He must do this for two reasons. First, he must do it in order to put the creature out of his misery; and second, and more important, he must do it in order to prevent an unsuspecting party from stumbling upon him and being mauled or perhaps killed as a result.

With all of the foregoing in mind, the reader's attention is called to the fact that Hemingway is inclined to view Margot Macomber throughout the entire story as something akin to a lioness. In speaking of her, he early employs such words as "hard," "cruel," and "predatory." He even says at one point that she is "simply enamelled with that American female cruelty." The reader must also remind himself that along with the prospect of losing control of her husband-and even of losing him entirely-when he achieves his manhood in the buffalo hunt, Margot receives a deep wound, psychological though it may be. Knowing that Macomber will leave her, and likewise knowing that her looks are no longer good enough to get another husband as rich as he, she, not entirely without malice and not entirely without forethought, shot and killed him while trying to make it appear that she was shooting at the buffalo in order to protect and to save her husband! She is, at this point, if the reader please, a wounded lioness in the brush. She is a lioness who has killed one man, and in her frame of mind is very dangerous to other men. Wilson perceives this, and, professional hunter that he is, he treats her the same way he would treat any other wounded lioness. In other words, he applies the code of the professional hunter on the human level. He approaches her and "kills" her by killing her spirit; by breaking down her overbearing pride; by shattering her unlimited confidence; and by changing her from a woman who is in control of the situation to a woman who is so humbled that she pleads for mercy. She is rendered quite harmless, and the section of the brush which she occupies now and in the future is and will be safe for others to travel through. There will be no more men's lives ruined as Macomber's was-at least not by her.

Wilson accomplishes all this with words alone-with what may be said to be five verbal shots at the very end of the story. As he forces Margot to face the fact that she has done a dastardly thing, she imperiously and repeatedly orders him to stop treating her thus;

however, Wilson continues to bore in on her over and over again until she no longer orders him to stop but pleads with him to stop, saying, "Oh, please stop it. Please, please stop it."

To this the hunter replies, "That's better. Please is much better. Now I'll stop."

Thus the reader is permitted to see Robert Wilson as the complete hunter, as a man who lives by one code and one code only, and who applies this code to both animals and people simply because he knows no other way to live and be honest with himself and with his moral philosophy. Moreover, it is Wilson who thus adds the hunter's code to the Hemingway code in the story and finally blends the action and the theme of the work in a way that Hemingway rarely does.

Source: H. H Bell, Jr., "Hemingway's 'The Short, Happy Life of Francis Macomber,'" in *Explicator,* Vol 32, No.9, May, 1974, item 78.

Adaptations

Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" was adapted as a film in 1947 as *The Macomber Affair.* Produced by Award Productions and directed by Zoltan Korda, it starred Gregory Peck, Joan Bennett and Robert Preston.

Topics for Further Study

Do you think Margot shot her husband on purpose? Could she have meant to do it, yet still done it by accident? Think of a time when you or someone you know did something "accidentally on purpose."

In "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," what does it mean to be "masculine"? What does it mean to be "feminine"? Have these concepts changed since the era in which the story was written?

What kind of people were able to go on hunting expeditions like this in the 1930s? How might some of these factors impacted Wilson's perception of the Macombers?

Compare and Contrast

1930s: Big game hunting is a popular sport for Europeans in Africa.

1990s: Many big game animals are endangered and live in wildlife preserves. Hunting is severely restricted, and harsh penalties are imposed for poaching. .

1930s: Leisure travel, particularly overseas, is available primarily to the very rich, who can afford the cost as well as the time it takes to get there and back.

1990s: Intercontinental travel is common for the middle class. Airplanes have replaced oceanliners, making the trip more affordable and much quicker.

1930s: The United States endures the Great Depression. In 1936,38 percent of families make less than $1,000 per year, when the Bureau of Labor Statistics identifies the poverty level as $1,330.

1997: The United States, after suffering a comparatively mild recession during the late 1980s and early 1990s, enjoys a long period of growth and economic recovery.

What Do I Read Next?

Hemingway's 1926 novel, *The Sun Also Rises,* like "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," provides an examination of male-female relationships.

Hemingway's story "Hills Like White Elephants" also explores a dysfunctional relationship between a man and a woman.

"The Bear" by William Faulkner, written in the 1930s, is another hunting story that deals with the theme of nature. It takes place in the American South and outlines the complicated family roots of hero Ike McCaslin.

The "macho" tradition is given a new and interesting twist in Robert Bly's book *Iron John,* which spawned the men's movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s, encouraging men to bond together and return to their "masculine" roots.

One of Hemingway's predecessors, Stephen Crane, wrote *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), a Civil War novel that has come to be known as a classic representation of the kind of masculine courage that many of Hemingway's works exemplify.

For a gender studies exploration of Hemingway's fiction, see *Hemingway's Gender: Rereading the Hemingway Text,* published by Yale University Press in 1994.

Further Study

Hart, James D, editor. "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,"' in *The Oxford Companion to American Literature,* 5th edition, Oxford University Press, 1983. p. 689.

This volume is an excellent guide to American literature' providing detailed entries on authors, major works, major characters, and aesthetic categories

Howell, John M , editor, *Hemingway's African Stories, The Stones, Their Sources, Their Critics,* Scribner's, 1969.

This volume provides historical and biographical information surrounding the inspiration for Hemingway's African stones, namely "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" and "The Snows of Kilimanjaro".

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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