

ANALYSIS

“The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” (1938)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“The happy life of Francis Macomber begins on the plains of East Africa and lasts about thirty minutes. The tall young man has previously disgraced himself before his wife, his British white hunter, and his gunbearers, by ignominious flight from a wounded and charging lion. Besides the loss of his self-respect, such as it was, the extreme mental tortures of the experience include the barbed and vicious scorn of his wife, the lifted eyebrows and unspoken insults of the white hunter Wilson, and the visible disapproval of the native boys in his entourage. After a night of torment, during which he is obliged to watch his wife sleepily returning from the Englishman’s tent, the party goes after buffalo. Since the wife knows her husband for a coward, she seems to have him where she wants him, which is under her thumb.

Easily the most unscrupulous of Hemingway’s fictional females, Margot covets her husband’s money but values even more her power over him. To Wilson, the Macombers’ paid white hunter, who is drawn very reluctantly into the emotional mess of a wrecked marriage, Margot exemplifies most of the American wives he has met in the course of his professional life. Although his perspectives are limited to the international sporting set, the indictment is severe. These women, he reflects, are ‘the hardest in the world; the hardest, the cruelest, the most predatory, and the most attractive, and their men have softened or gone to pieces nervously as they have hardened’....

Suddenly, in the midst of the second day’s shooting and with the white hunter as an aid, Macomber loses his fear. His wife at once senses and hates this change because it undermines her power. But Wilson silently welcomes Macomber into manhood, and together they enter the tall grass after one of the wounded buffalo, leaving the wife behind them in the open car. Almost immediately the buffalo charges. Fearless and happy in its path stands Macomber, a coward no longer, reveling in his new-found self-trust, firing repeatedly until the buffalo is practically upon him. Then a bullet from his wife’s Mannlicher plows through his skull from back to front and the short happy life is over.

The great technical virtue of this story—and it is one of Hemingway’s favorites possibly for this reason—is the development of an emotional intensity to a degree seldom approached in modern literature. The ragged feelings generated by the lion-incident and verbalized in a kind of noonday nightmare during the conversations in the dining-tent, are just short of unendurable to any who have entered into the spirit of the situation. Yet the tension actually mounts when, during the next day’s shooting, we watch the Macombers in their contest for the possession of a soul.

Hemingway silently points up this contest by the varying positions of the central trio in their boxlike open car. On the way to the lion, Macomber sits in front, with Margot and Wilson in the back. After that day’s debacle, Macomber slumps in the back seat beside his frozen wife, Wilson staring straight ahead in the front. When Macomber has proved himself with the three buffalo, it is Margot who retreats into the far corner of the back seat, while the two men happily converse *vis-a-vis* before her. And finally, as Macomber kneels in the path of the buffalo, it is his wife from her commanding position in the back seat of the car who closes the contest.

Of equal interest is the skill with which Hemingway balances off the two days of hunting against each other. Part of the balance is achieved by the repetition of first effect: the buffalo, like the lion of the preceding day, is wounded, takes cover, and charges without warning. This time, however, the charge moves into a reversed moral situation. Between times, by various devices, the reader has been fully awakened to the degree of physical courage needed in facing wounded and dangerous animals. But where the lion was an instrument for the establishment and build-up of emotional tension, the oncoming horns of

the buffalo are the pronged forceps for Macomber's moral birth. Two different worlds fill the two adjacent days.

The yardstick figure, Wilson, a fine characterization, is the man free of woman and of fear. He is the standard of manhood towards which Macomber rises, the cynical referee in the nasty war of man and wife, and the judge who presides, after the murder, over the further fortunes of Margot Macomber. His dominance over the lady is apparent from the moment she sees him blast the lion from which Macomber ran. But he accepts that dominance only because it is thrust upon him. The kind of dominance he really believes in, and would gladly transfer to the suffering husband, is well summarized in a passage from Shakespeare's *Henry IV* which he quotes as a kind of tribute to Macomber's own loss of fear on the second day: 'By my troth, I care not; a man can die but once; we owe God a death...and let it go which way it will, he that dies this year is quit for the next....' Having brought out, almost by accident, this attitude he has lived by, Wilson is much embarrassed. 'But he had seen men come of age before and it always moved him. It was not a matter of their twenty-first birthday.'

Those who object that true manhood is not necessarily proved by one's ability to face a charging beast may be doing Hemingway an injustice. Dramatically speaking, physical courage is often a convenient and economical way of symbolizing moral courage. We are glad, for example, at Hamlet's skill and bravery with the foils. In this African story Hemingway is obviously dealing with both kinds of courage, though, as the situation naturally requires, it is the physical aspect which is stressed.

It would be possible to argue that Francis and Margot Macomber are more nearly caricatures than people. The probability is that the line-drawing in their portraits is the natural consequence of an approach to material chosen for its intrinsic emotional intensity rather than to provide opportunity for depth of characterization. One rightly concludes that they are as fully developed as they need to be for the purposes of the narrative. Further development might well impede the quick march of the short, happy life.

Still it is true that Hemingway's satirical steam, never far below the surface, tends to erupt whenever he deals with leisure-class wastrels. The tendency is visible, for example, in the accounts of Cohn and Campbell in *The Sun Also Rises*. In *Death in the Afternoon*, the author scornfully watches the bored, sportshod, ex-collegians who leave the *corrida* early. The same reaction appears in his sketches of the wealthy yachtsmen in Key West harbor in *To Have and Have Not*, part of which was written at the same time as the Francis Macomber story. It is almost as if, throughout the Depression, Hemingway had resolutely set himself to oppose F. Scott Fitzgerald's temperamental conviction that the rich are glamorous. As Hemingway's scorn rises, the satirical steam-pressure rises with it, and the result is often close to caricature. If the story of the Macombers is judged, as it probably should be judged, in terms of an experiment in the development of emotional intensity, it is hard to match. As an instance of tragic irony, exemplified in overt action, it has its faults. But dullness is not one of them, and formally speaking the story is very nearly perfect."

Carlos Baker
"Two African Stories"
Hemingway: The Writer as Artist
(Princeton 1952)

"The Short Happy Life' is, among other things, a detailed description of the process of learning the code and its value. Macomber, a frightened man, is seen in the story learning the code from Wilson, his professional hunting guide. He is presented as being very ignorant at first, but he painfully learns and becomes a man in the process. Before that happens, however, it is apparent that Hemingway was using this plot of instruction in courage and honor to comment, as he had not done to this extent before, on many other things. The story is, for example, an analysis of the relationship between the sexes in America, and the relationship is in the nature of declared warfare.

D. H. Lawrence, in an essay on *The Scarlet Letter*, launches an assault on the American male who, he says, has lost his 'ithyphallic authority' over the American woman, who therefore dominates and then destroys what is left. 'The Short Happy Life' develops and intensifies Lawrence's notion with enormous skill. Francis Macomber, when under the tutelage of the hunter Wilson, learns courage and honor and to

embrace the code; he attains his manhood, which is not the same thing as losing his virginity or reaching his twenty-first birthday, as the characters point out. When he 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. Before he became a man she had committed adultery almost in his presence, knowing him helpless to stop her. 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.

Obviously Macomber is something different from a grown Nick Adams. What he represents instead is an extreme projection of the hero's problem of fear... In the course of this story Macomber completely disgraces himself in the presence of his wife and his hunting guide before he learns the code and wins their respect. [Shooting him does not seem respectful.] He has already committed the unpardonable sin when the story opens: he ran away from a charging lion, and, as Wilson says, this is just not done—'no white ever bolts.' Not only that, but he goes right on committing errors: he asks Wilson not to talk about his cowardice to other people, which for the professional hunter and possessor of the code's book of etiquette is 'supposed to be bad form,' and after Wilson insults him he spinelessly apologizes. In addition he cannot control his wife, who hounds him without mercy.

It had all happened when it came time to track a lion, which he had wounded badly, into the long grass where it lay in wait for those who had shot it. But he had completely failed. First he wanted to send the inadequately armed African 'boys' in after the animal; when Wilson refuses to be party to this type of slaughter he suggests that they leave the beast hidden in the grass. He could not have stumbled on a more wretched violation: someone else might meet him unawares and be killed; even if this doesn't happen it is certain that the lion is in considerable pain and it is their responsibility to do for him what cannot be done for human beings. And then when they finally search out the lion Macomber bolts, running wildly away in panic. When the three hunters are reassembled in their car after Wilson has killed the charging, wounded animal, Margot Macomber celebrates the complete loss of her husband's authority by leaning in front of him and kissing Wilson on the mouth.

That night Macomber wakes to discover that she is not in her cot in the tent with him. 'He lay awake with that knowledge for two hours.' This activity does not go against Wilson's code, it is explained; as a matter of fact he 'carried a double size cot on safari to accommodate any windfalls he might receive.' The standards of the people who hired him were his standards: 'They were his standards in all except the shooting.' It is these shooting standards which Macomber eventually learns and which, although they bring his death, make him for a short happy lifetime a man. Quite suddenly when shooting a buffalo he loses his fear. The lessons Wilson has been teaching him are now his own. A wounded buffalo gets away, as the lion did, and he can hardly wait to go in after the beast. In 1942 Hemingway, writing from his own experience...had this to say: 'Cowardice...is almost always simply a lack of ability to suspend the functioning of the imagination.' In 'the Macomber affair' he explains it the same way: 'It has taken a strange chance of hunting, a sudden precipitation into action without opportunity for worrying beforehand, to bring this about with Macomber....' Fear was 'gone like an operation. Something else grew in its place.... Made him into a man.'

Putting the bad things into words may rid one of them, but it is necessary for the earlier-initiated Wilson to make clear to the hero that the same principle applies to so good a thing as the transformation into manhood, which he has just undergone: 'You're not supposed to mention it.... Doesn't do to talk too much about all this. Talk the whole thing away.' Wilson, warming now to Macomber, also confides to him the 'thing he had lived by'—a quotation from Shakespeare.... 'By my troth, I care not; a man can die but once; we owe God a death and let it go which way it will he that dies this year is quit for the next'.... 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; he prepares to exonerate her with explanatory photographs, and the story ends.

Wilson is like the prizefighter Jack and the gambler Cayetano: he kills—as a profession—animals who have insufficient chance of protecting themselves; he consorts with rich decadents and adopts their moral

standards; he lives a lonely, compromised life. But out of this he builds what he lives by; he has his courage and his honor: he would not 'squeal' on his employer; he will not leave the animals he has pitilessly shot to suffer. He bristles with 'won't do,' 'isn't done,' 'bad form,' and 'not supposed to.' Macomber—not the hero, but like the heroes in this—admires all this code and tries to attain it. He makes the grade, but it costs him his life.”

Philip Young
Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration
(Penn State 1952,1966) 69-74

“In this compact, suspenseful story, the Macomers, an American couple, are on a safari in Africa with the Englishman Wilson as their guide. When confronted with a mad wounded lion, Macomber proves himself a coward, is saved by Wilson, and earns his wife's utter contempt. On the next hunting expedition, Macomber feels a gathering strength and his wife, who has always found gratification in his weakness, is suddenly frightened by this new Macomber. His second chance comes with a wild buffalo. Cowardice vanishes and as he heroically tries to fell the onrushing beast, a bullet fired by his wife misses the buffalo and kills Macomber. The story infuses Hemingway's favorite theme, cowardice as opposed to courage, with tragic overtones, and is perhaps one of Hemingway's best shorter pieces of writing.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
The Reader's Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 1026

“He had not yet exhausted the material left over from his safari in Tanganyika. On April 19th he completed a story, tentatively called 'The Happy Ending,' which Harry Burton promptly bought for \$5,000. It was a brilliant fusion of personal observation, hearsay, and invention. Ernest drew heavily upon his own experiences in shooting buffalo and lion. He also asserted, many years later, that he had drawn his portrait of Francis Macomber from a wealthy young international sportsman—a 'nice jerk' whom he had known very well in real life.... 'He is just how he really was,' said Ernest ambiguously, 'only he is invented.' Macomber's wife Margot was also invented from a living prototype. Handsome, well-kept, a society beauty with a nearly perfect oval face and a wealth of dark hair, she embodied all the internal qualities that Ernest detested among the wives of his wealthier friends.... With some small show of gallantry, he added that this was as close as he could come to describing his earlier association with the lady.

Robert Wilson, white hunter to the Macomers, was based on Philip Percival, with his ruficund face, cool blue eyes, laconic speech habits, and his enviable combination of courage and judgment. Ernest later said that all he contributed to the invention of Wilson was to disguise Philip slightly for family and business reasons, and in order to keep him out of trouble with the Tanganyika Game Department. What he did not disclose was that the Macomber story was a much embroidered and wholly reconstructed version of a tale Philip had told him one night beside their safari campfire. Percival himself thought Ernest's yarn 'devilishly clever.' He had some fear that the people he had described to Ernest, including their white hunter, might recognize themselves in fictional disguise. Luckily, his own high standards of professional etiquette had prevented him from naming names, even to Ernest in private conversation. He took some comfort from the fact that Ernest had armed Wilson with a .505 Gibbs, a rifle never used by the white hunter in question.

Another topic of campfire talk was the fact that some white hunters had been known to sleep with their female clients. Unlike Wilson, who was said to carry a double-sized cot to accommodate such 'windfalls,' Percival himself drew the line at all such activities. But he had mentioned several cases in which one or another of his clients had lost their heads through fear. Ernest picked up this clue and exploited it by causing Francis Macomber to flee before a wounded and charging lion. The denouement of his story, in which Margot Macomber killed her husband while ostensibly trying to keep him from being gored by a wounded buffalo, was likewise one of Ernest's inventions. 'As far as I know,' said Philip Percival, 'no client has ever succeeded in shooting her husband as EH describes'...

[Hemingway was] disgusted when he read the critical studies of his work by John Atkins and Philip Young. The first struck him as a well-intentioned hodgepodge, and the second as excessively confused. He

rejected Young's assertion that 'he had been portraying *himself* in the account of Francis Macomber. The academic critics, he now concluded, were all trying to fit his works 'to the procrustean bed of their isms and dialectics,' and, what was worse, behaving like gossip columnists rather than scholars."

Carlos Baker
Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story
(Scribner's 1969) 284, 509

"Now there is another story called 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber.' Jack, I get a bang even yet from just writing the titles. That's why you write, no matter what they tell you.... This is a simple story in a way, 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. You'll probably never meet the type because you haven't got the money. I haven't either but I get around. Now this woman doesn't change. She has been better, but she will never be any better anymore. I invented her complete with handles from the worst bitch I knew (then) and when I first knew her she'd been lovely. Not my dish, not my pigeon, not my cup of tea, but lovely for what she was and I was her all of the above which is whatever you make of it. This is as close as I can put it and keep it clean.

This information is what you call the background of a story. You throw it all away and invent from what you know. I should have said that sooner. That's all there is to writing. That, a perfect ear—call it selective—absolute pitch, the devotion to your work and respect for it that a priest of God has for his, and then have the guts of a burglar, no conscience except as to writing, and you're in, gentlemen.... But to return to the story. The woman called Margot Macomber is no good to anybody now except for trouble. You can band her but that's about all. The man is a nice jerk. I knew him very well in real life, so invent him too from everything I know. So he is just how he really was, only he is invented.

The White Hunter is my best friend and he does not care what I write as long as it is readable, so I don't invent him at all. I just disguise him for family and business reasons, and to keep him out of trouble with the Game Department. He is the furthest thing from a square since they invented the circle, so I just have to take care of him with an adequate disguise and he is as proud as though we both wrote it, which actually you always do in anything if you go back far enough. So it is a secret between us. That's all there is to that story except maybe the lion when he is hit and I am thinking inside of him really, not faked. I can think inside of a lion, really. It's hard to believe and it is perfectly okay with me if you don't believe it. Perfectly. Plenty of people have used it since, though...

No, I don't know whether she shot him on purpose any more than you do. I could find out if I asked myself because I invented it and I could go right on inventing. But you have to know where to stop. That is what makes a short story. Makes it short at least. The only hint I could give you is that it is my belief that the incidence of husbands shot accidentally by wives who are bitches and really work at is very low."

Ernest Hemingway
"The Art of the Short Story" (1959)
first published in *Paris Review* 79 (1981)

"In 1980 William White compiled a "'Macomber" Bibliography' that included thirty-seven entries since 1973, and from 1980 on there have been some twenty more. As with 'A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,' much of the critical interest in 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber' had arisen from a crucial ambiguity in the text. And that interest was largely inspired by two fine critics in a two-handed game that went on into the evening hours—Warren Beck (1955,1975) and Mark Spilka (1960,1976,1984). Their initial articles, rejoinders, and later rebuttals were models of the best critical play, with most of the theoretical cards on the table. At stake was the character of Margot Macomber and the validity of Robert Wilson's sense of her motives.

In brief, Warren Beck argued that Margot shot her husband accidentally and was stricken with grief, while Robert Wilson consistently misunderstood her character and a good deal else. This revisionist reading challenged two stereotypes associated with Hemingway—the irredeemable bitch and the infallible white hunter (1955). Mark Spilka's response challenged this with a persuasive phrase—a 'necessary style,'

the mark of an 'author's working vision of experience [that] persists throughout [his] whole production'—to support the more traditional view of Margot with, at least, a subconscious motive for murder, one correctly perceived by Wilson (1960).

Nearly every article since then has been drawn into that critical vortex—proving, of course, its centrality. Robert Stephens' review of the earlier accounts of African hunting...supports the traditional view of the murderous Margot (1977). Joseph Harkey's research in Swahili reveals that the word *mkubwa*, phonically close to *Macomber*, has both the honorific sense of "'sir" with a high degree of respect,' and also its sneering opposite (1980). Then Bernard Oldsey's study of a variety of manuscripts concludes with an analysis of the story's early drafts and lists of titles to demonstrate that, from the first, Hemingway kept 'the case moot—in between involuntary manslaughter and second-degree murder'—even though the suspect comment in 'The Art of the Short Story' (then unpublished) upheld the latter verdict (1980)...

In 'Margot Macomber's Gimlet,' Bert Bender uses the sexual allusions in the story's opening dialogue—the phallic gimlet against the lemon squash—to argue that Margot needs 'to be dominated sexually, physically, and the quashed Francis; is not the man to do it.'

Paul Smith

"A Partial Review: Critical Essays on the Short Stories, 1976-1989"

New Critical Approaches to the Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway

ed. Jackson J. Benson

(Duke 1990) 385-87

"By January 1936 he confessed: 'Thought I was facing impotence, inability to write, insomnia and was going to blow my lousy head off' (cited in Meyers 252). At this low point in his career—a comparatively brief period, when he gave vent to his most misogynist feelings—he was increasingly inclined to blame his problems as a writer on his corruption by wealthy women in his life: both through the financial support he received from his wife Pauline, and through his adulterous affair, intermittently between 1931 and 1936, with Jane Mason, a wealthy married woman fourteen years his junior.

These feelings were vented in a series of safari writings, which put on trial both castrating 'bitches' and their cowardly men. *Green Hills of Africa* [1935] already introduced as a minor, veiled theme the conflicts between powerful women and their impotent, bitter men, conflicts that Hemingway depicted more fully in two short stories, 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber' and 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro.' In both stories the husband perceives the woman to be in charge and resents her for it. In "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,' Margot Macomber openly cuckolds her wealthy but ineffectual husband Francis. During the hunt, however, he rids himself of his fears and becomes a brave man. But before he can act out his newly gained courage and leave his wife, she shoots him dead, *either by accident or by intention*. [emphasis added] Although Margot Macomber is one of the best known examples of a Hemingway bitch, the story implies that the woman's behavior is inseparable from the failure of her husband... Ultimately, both stories find fault with the man rather than with the woman."

Rena Sanderson

"Hemingway and Gender History"

The Cambridge Companion to Hemingway

(Cambridge U 1996) 184-85

"When Margot sees the buffalo rushing at her husband, the narrator states that she 'shot at the buffalo with the 6.5 Mannlicher as it seemed about to gore Macomber and...hit her husband about two inches up and a little to one side of the base of his skull.' In spite of this clear narration critics argue over whether Margot deliberately shot Macomber. Others suggest that the shooting may have been precipitated by a subconscious wish for his death. Wilson, who had begun to like Macomber, calls it an accident but can't help getting in one final jab at Margot: 'He would have left you too.' But they are merely even, because Margot reminds Wilson that he had shot from a moving car, which is illegal."

Charles M. Oliver

Ernest Hemingway A to Z

(Facts on File/Checkmark Books 1999) 301

The reasons to infer that Margot is to blame for killing her husband, whether deliberately or with subconscious intent--“accidentally on purpose,” the shooting equivalent of a Freudian slip--include: (1) the *guide*, Wilson the code hero, clearly blames her; (2) she does not deny it; (3) she has the motives of retaining her security, money, and power; (4) this interpretation confirms the theme of bitter conflict between the genders; (5) the story would become pointless if it were merely an accident; (6) she hit Macomber with precision from a distance; (7) she hit him near the base of his skull execution style; (8) she precluded her loss of power over her husband with a Mannlicher (*Man*-licker); (9) Hemingway himself said he believed “that the incidence of husbands shot accidentally by wives who are bitches and really work at it is very low.” Although Margot is the social type of a “rich bitch,” she has become a metaphor of the Feminist literary critics who demonized Hemingway and took shots at him from behind his back. Unlike them, Hemingway is egalitarian, saying of Margot and Francis, “she had done the best she could for many years back and the way they were together now was no one person’s fault.”

Michael Hollister (2012)