The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ERNEST HEMINGWAY

Ernest Hemingway was born in Oak Park, a suburb outside of Chicago, where he was raised in a wealthy, educated family and harbored dreams of becoming a journalist. In 1918, shortly after the start of World War I, Hemingway traveled to Italy to become a volunteer ambulance driver, joining a cohort of American artists—including E. E. Cummings, John Dos Passos, and Gertrude Stein—who identified with the Allied Powers' cause but, for reasons of gender or age, could not participate in combat. Hemingway was wounded by mortar fire after bringing goods to Italian soldiers at the front line and returned home to Michigan thereafter, using his experiences with shell shock as a basis for one of his most famous characters, the soldier Nick Adams—a wounded soldier who finds solitude in the Michigan countryside after war in the short story "Big Two-Hearted River." Hemingway returned to Europe and settled in Paris with his first wife Hadley in 1921, eager to start over in a city famous for its communities of expatriate artists. After years in Paris, where he enjoyed celebrity among the expatriates, and the publication of his first novel, *The Sun Also Rises*, Hemingway went on to Key West, Wyoming, and the Caribbean. An avid boxer and hunter, Hemingway also spent time in East Africa, where he undertook a 10-week safari—one that inspired both "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," which he published in 1936, and his 1935 nonfiction work *Green Hills of Africa*. Hemingway visited Kenya and hunted in the Serengeti, eventually contracting dysentery. (His subsequent evacuation by plane featured in his 1936 story "The Snows of Kilimanjaro," also about a couple on safari in Africa.) After stints in Spain, where he was a journalist during the Spanish Civil War, and Paris, where he witnessed the city's liberation from Nazi control, Hemingway took up residence in Cuba. He won the Pulitzer Prize in 1952 for his novel *The Sun Also Rises*, then returned to Africa, where he nearly died in two plane crashes near Uganda. Injuries he sustained from these accidents, coupled with rampant alcoholism, exacerbated the depression he had suffered from for much of his life. Hemingway received the Noble Prize in Literature in 1954 and retired to Idaho, where he died in 1961 by suicide.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Between 1870 and 1900, in a period known as the "Scramble for Africa," Africa was divvied up among several European countries: Belgium, Italy, Portugal, Spain, Germany, France, and Great Britain. As colonialization reached its peak in the early twentieth century, so did Europe's economic exploitation of the continent's resources and its people's valuable labor. "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," written in 1936, represents an empire close to collapse. After two world wars and the formation of the Atlantic Charter in 1941, in which U.S. President Franklin Roosevelt called for self-determination for the British colonies, decolonization began to take shape. Influential national leaders demanded an end to imperial control, at times turning Western ideals of Enlightenment and self-governance against the colonialists. Big-game hunting and safaris in Africa, which Hemingway explores in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," developed concurrently with and because of colonialism. In the late 1850s, Richard Francis Burton, a British explorer and writer, popularized the Swahili term "safari," meaning "journey," kickstarting a tourism craze. Prompted by writers like Burton, European travelers voyaged to Africa for a taste of the "exotic" (a term later criticized in the discourse of post-colonial theory, which studies the lasting effects of colonial exploitation and imperialism). The safari and hunting industries reaped profit for European empire at the expense of both the African landscape and its people, manipulated for cheap labor—essential servitude—to serve the white hunters and tourists. To this day, traditional safari garb remains a symbol of colonial power and subjugation, especially pith helmets (usually white, cloth-covered helmets worn by European travelers and imperial military).

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Both Hemingway's 1935 memoir *Green Hills of Africa* and his 1936 short story "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" use Africa, and African safari expeditions, as a backdrop for narrative action. Like "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," *Green Hills of Africa* probes relationships between white and native hunters, while much of the action of "The Snows of Kilimanjaro" takes place away from the safari—where the protagonist Harry, Hemingway's alter-ego, is dying of gangrene and dreaming of his life before the expedition. Later, Hemingway returned to the African safari genre with *True at First Light*, published posthumously in 1999, a blend of memoir and fiction that describes Hemingway and his fourth wife Mary's experiences in the Kenyan highlands in the mid-twentieth century. Yet Hemingway was far from the only modern Anglophone author to consider Africa and big-game hunting (as in the hunting of Africa's largest animals, including lions, elephants, buffalo, leopards, and rhinoceroses). British writer Evelyn Waugh described travels in Tanzania and present-day Zimbabwe and Zambia in his 1960 travelogue *A Tourist in Africa*. The English novelist Graham Greene published *In Search of a Character: Two African Journals* in 1961, recounting events on his journey to the Belgian Congo and Sierra Leone. Even before the twentieth

century, French author Jules Verne used African exploration as the main conceit for his adventure novel *Five Weeks in a Balloon* (1863). The first English adventure novel set in Africa was *King Solomon's Mines*, by H. Rider Haggard, best remembered for his contributions to the Lost World genre, a literary subgenre referring to works in which forgotten, ancient worlds are rediscovered and explored. *King Solomon's Mines* foregrounds the experiences of a white hunter and explorer, Allan Quatermain. Haggard's novel was criticized for its colonialist—and highly offensive—depictions of African characters, who are portrayed as primitive and uncivilized (not unlike the silent African figures in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber").

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber"
- **When Written:** 1933
- **Where Written:** East Africa/Key West
- **When Published:** 1936
- **Literary Period:** Modernism
- **Genre:** Short story
- **Setting:** Generalized Africa, 1930s
- **Climax:** Francis Macomber encounters and attempts to kill the buffalo
- **Antagonist:** Margot Macomber
- **Point of View:** The story's focalizing presence is a third person omniscient narrator. Hemingway also includes internal monologue from both Francis Macomber and the hunter Robert Wilson. Little to no internal monologue is provided for either Margot Macomber or the Swahili-speaking servants and guides.

EXTRA CREDIT

A family affair. In the early 1950s, Patrick Hemingway, Hemingway's son with his second wife Pauline Pfeiffer, moved to Tanganyika, Tanzania, to run a safari expedition company, where he—like Robert Wilson—worked as a white hunter.

Hollywood connection. The short story served as the basis for a 1947 movie called *The Macomber Affair*, starring Gregory Peck as Wilson, silent movie star Joan Bennett as Margot Macomber, and Robert Preston as Francis Macomber. *The Macomber Affair* (later retitled *The Great White Hunter*) combined aspects of both "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" and the true story of John Henry Patterson, a writer and superintendent of game reserves in the East Africa Protectorate whose male hunting partner died during an expedition (though Patterson was never charged for his murder, and the death may have been a suicide).

PLOT SUMMARY

In a safari camp somewhere in generalized Africa, the wealthy American Francis Macomber, his wife Margot Macomber, and their hired white hunter, a British man named Robert Wilson, have gathered to celebrate the hunt from which they have just returned. Though at first it seems as if Macomber has successfully killed a **lion**, it gradually becomes clear that he in fact "bolted like a rabbit" when the moment to shoot arrived, too cowardly to face the creature head on. All three characters are roundly embarrassed and bicker while they drink; eventually, Margot stalks off, seemingly humiliated and upset. When Margot later returns to the men, they discuss a second hunt—this time for buffalo, and an opportunity for Macomber to redeem himself.

Flashing back to the night before the original hunt, Macomber hears the lion's roar, which he deems "frightful"; upon confronting the lion on the hunt the next day, he hits it twice but fails to kill it. When Macomber, Wilson, and the African natives assisting them subsequently seek out the wounded creature to finish the job, Macomber panics, running away "wildly" and leaving Wilson to kill the lion on his own.

That night, Margot—impressed by Wilson's skills, especially contrasted with her husband's cowardice—visits Wilson's tent and the two sleep together. Hours later she returns to her own tent with Macomber, who has been awake for some time; she does not bother to deny her tryst.

The following morning, Wilson, Macomber, and Margot again bicker about the hunt, their vitriol exacerbated by the previous day's events. In an internal monologue, Wilson explains that he sleeps with clients' wives as a service—and that he treats his affairs as "windfalls." The buffalo hunt proceeds nonetheless.

Macomber, suddenly emboldened and feeling "wholly without fear," kills two of them. Similar to the first hunt, one of the buffalo is only wounded. This time, however, Macomber goes after it eagerly. Wilson observes that his client has undergone a transformation, "more of a change than any loss of virginity": though he was once an "American boy-man," he has suddenly become a true man. Margot is alarmed by Macomber's transformation and by his newfound comradery with Wilson, who is suitably impressed by his client.

Macomber, Wilson, and the native guides approach the wounded buffalo and begin to shoot at it. They still fail to kill it, and Macomber stands his ground as the angry animal charges toward him until he suddenly feels a blinding pain in his head. Margot has shot "at the buffalo" with a rifle from the **car**, where she has been watching the hunt, but she has hit her husband instead.

Both the buffalo and Macomber lie dead on the ground. Wilson observes Macomber impassively, while calling the buffalo a "hell of a good bull." He then mocks a traumatized Margot, who

he seems to believe has killed her husband purposefully. He asks her why she didn't "poison him" instead, simultaneously suggesting that he will help her to cover up the crime. Margot, miserable, entreats him to "please, stop it." Wilson, sinister and scathing, acquiesces: "Please is much better. Now I'll stop."

CHARACTERS

Francis Macomber – The protagonist of the story, Francis Macomber is a wealthy, thirty-five-year-old American man on safari in Africa. The story begins with Macomber's crucial failure to hunt down and kill an African **lion**, which terrifies him and causes him to panic and flee. Though, at a glance, the fit, handsome Macomber is in the prime of his life, he is clearly also a man who lacks conviction and power. He can afford to organize a safari and hire hunters and guides, and to keep a beautiful wife (who, it is suggested, remains with him only because of his wealth), but Macomber does not have the courage to follow through with the task at hand—to dominate the beasts he encounters on the safari. Meanwhile, Macomber's wife Margot has likely cheated on him on multiple occasions, suggesting that Macomber is neither a rugged man of action like his rival, the "white hunter" Robert Wilson, nor an adequately authoritative husband. (Keep in mind that this story is set in the 1930s, a period characterized by pervasive, conservative notions of gender dynamics.) Macomber's seemingly miraculously transformation—from cuckold and coward to a "true man"—forms the story's center, connecting two mirrored threads of narrative: the lion hunt and the buffalo hunt. Embarrassed by his apparent defeat at the hands of Margot, the lion, and Wilson, each of whom seem to draw attention to his own inadequacy, Macomber resolves to try again. At the buffalo hunt, he gains courage and fierceness, resisting Margot's domination and proving himself as adept a hunter—and thus, as powerful a man—as Wilson. Yet Macomber dies at the end of the story (due to Margot's perhaps accidental, perhaps purposeful gunshot), suggesting that his achievement of "true" masculinity is ultimately for naught.

Margot Macomber – Margot Macomber is Francis Macomber's "extremely handsome and well-kept" wife, a socialite and former model (she once commanded five thousand dollars" to endorse "a beauty product which she had never used)" who clearly understands her power over men. Though she has been married to Francis Macomber for eleven years, she flirts persistently and eventually sleeps with Robert Wilson, and it is suggested that she has had affairs with other men as well. She and Francis seem to have an unspoken agreement: Margot can have affairs, but she will never leave her husband, since she is "not a great enough beauty any more" to do better. Margot grows increasingly nervous throughout the story as her husband gains confidence in himself as a man and a hunter, and, subsequently, begins to treat her more coldly; and as Wilson, who regards her scornfully in his inner monologues as a woman "enameled in that American female cruelty," turns his attention toward the "reborn," newly courageous Macomber. Critics have pointed to Margot as an archetypal "female predator," a dangerous, promiscuous woman who defies standards of passive femininity by boldly asserting her own sexuality and pursuing wealth instead of love. Yet the ambiguous ending of the short story unsettles this portrait of Margot. Though Wilson is convinced that she has murdered Macomber by shooting at him from the **car** from which she witnesses the hunt, it is also possible that she intended to shoot the buffalo he and Wilson had been hunting. Margot's potential motivations are numerous. She may have wished to dominate Macomber, threatened by his transformation to "man of action"—but she also may have wished to defend him from the advancing buffalo, either out of respect for his newfound masculine courage or to protect the wealth he provides her. In the end, however, Margot is rendered pathetic, and her fate without Macomber, who sustains her lifestyle and well-being, seems dismal. The reader is reminded that for all her charm and "female cruelty," Margot's role in society is ultimately limited, and she is thus more fallible than dangerous.

Robert Wilson – A British hunter hired by Francis Macomber to facilitate the safari, Robert Wilson is often described as Hemingway's alter-ego in the story, or at least an alter-ego for Hemingway's own image of himself. Hemingway, himself a hunter and explorer, was a strong proponent of virile masculinity, and he frequently held himself to high standards for traditional masculine conduct that Wilson reflects. Throughout the story, he appears stoic and emotionless in the face of potential danger and violence (perhaps because he is a World War I veteran and has experienced worse). Moreover, he indulges hedonistically in sex with his clients' wives (including Margot), all the while remaining detached from the affairs, which he justifies as mere financial gains. Yet Wilson's breezy conduct has consequences. His moral judgment seems innately flawed, since he is willing to ruin other individuals' relationships for his own benefit. Additionally, his commentary on Macomber and his wife reflect a severely limited, reductive understanding of gender: to Wilson, Macomber's weakness and Margot's cruelty are traits connected directly to masculinity and femininity. Perhaps most importantly, at the end of the story, Macomber suggests to Margot that he will help conceal Macomber's death—which he believes to be a murder. Thus, Wilson's masculine heroism conflicts constantly with his deeply imperfect view of the world, morality, and other individuals.

Kongoni and the Swahili guides, gun-bearers, and servants – Lurking discontentedly in the background of the text are the Swahili-speaking men who assist with the safari and preparation for the hunt: cooks, gun-bearers, guides, and other

servants, some only young boys. (Only one, "Kongoni," is directly named, perhaps because he is the most senior of the servants.) But none of these characters, including Kongoni, receive any dialogue, internal or external. These figures are subject to violent punishment from their superiors, the white hunters, and general scorn and disgust. Both Robert Wilson and Francis Macomber demonstrate indifference and even downright cruelty toward the natives. "The hell with him," Macomber says, referring to a boy who "understands a little English," after complaining about the "filthy food" the servants have offered. Wilson, for his own part, discusses beating the servants—showing no remorse for these violent actions—and notes that "you don't want to spoil" the servants by giving them large tips. As a result, the Swahili servants are often described as bearing sullen or downtrodden expressions. These brief expressional details are the only characterization of the servants available to readers. It could be suggested that by diminishing these figures, Hemingway is pointing to the way in which the British empire treated African natives: as mere bodies or objects. However, it is also possible that their silence within the text reflects Hemingway's own colonialist views. Their voices and struggles, it seems, are not as valuable to Hemingway as the perspectives and problems of the spotlighted white characters—even in the context of the natives' own country and hunting traditions.

THEMES

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MASCULINITY, DOMINANCE, AND COURAGE

A hotly-pursued African **lion** in "The Short Life of Francis Macomber," one of Hemingway's most famous and controversial works, roars "in a deep-chested moaning, suddenly guttural," unsettling his would-be hunter, Francis Macomber. Macomber's subsequent, panicked flight from the animal causes his hunting party—which includes his bitter wife Margot and leader Robert Wilson—to deem him a coward. Only upon later successfully standing his ground against a charging buffalo is Macomber able to reassert his manhood—to transform himself, in Wilson's words, from one of the "great American boy-men" into "a man." In specifically linking masculinity to courage and dominance, Hemingway suggests that only by exerting power over both the natural world and women does one truly become a man. However, even as the story presents this stereotypical (and what modern readers would certainly deem sexist) vision of gender—a common trope in Hemingway's works—the tale's tragic ending undermines the validity of such a narrow conception of manhood.

Hemingway initially presents Francis Macomber as a sort of man-child, evidenced by both his failure to prove himself in the African savannah and to stand up to his apparently domineering wife. After fleeing from the charging lion, Macomber must be carried back to his tent—further underscoring his lack of "manly" self-reliance. Macomber's boyishness is made all the more pathetic for its contrast with Wilson's stoic masculinity. Wilson is the archetypal self-made man, rugged and disinterested. He is repeatedly referred to as "the white hunter," a moniker that suggests dominance over the world around him. His cool demeanor and expertise contrasts with the nervous Macomber, whose inelegant, panicked shooting leads to his fateful encounter with the lion in the first place by wounding rather than killing it. In the purview of the story, Macomber comes across as a pathetic figure, at fault for his own misfortune because he fails to boldly assert his dominance.

Francis's lack of masculine virality is further reflected by his wife Margot, who displays distinct disdain for her husband following—and, it's implied, before—his "cowardly" retreat from the lion. Real men, at least in the confines of Hemingway's story, control the women in their lives—making Margot's taunting behavior all the more emasculating. Though seemingly hypersexual and cruel, however, it's important to note that Margot may not be as villainous and domineering as Wilson and Macomber believe her to be—not least because she receives far less dimension and description as a character than do Wilson and Macomber, both of whose internal monologues dominate the story. For all of Margot's lurid and unabashed flirtations with Wilson, Macomber knows that his wife is "not a great enough beauty any more [...] to be able to leave him and better herself." Without Macomber, Margot is powerless, possibly destitute. Yet she persistently flirts with the notion of leaving—and thereby emasculating—him, and he provides her with a degree of sexual freedom by tacitly permitting her affairs. Of course, this "permission" is also reflective of his inability to assert himself as the man—and thus, in the world of the story, the leader—of their marriage.

Yet Macomber is given a crucial opportunity to confront fear—in the form of the menacing buffalo at the story's end—and prove himself as strong and virile as his rival Wilson. By standing his ground against the buffalo, Macomber earns the latter's respect, and Macomber's transformation is notably defined by both courage and dominance: upon observing the change, Wilson thinks to himself, "Fear gone like an operation. Something else grew in its place. Main thing a man had. Made him into a man [...] No bloody fear." Wilson notably believes this means "the end of cuckholdry too." Indeed, Margot suddenly becomes "very afraid," something Wilson attributes to her

awareness that she can no longer exert independence from and control over her husband. It is left up to the reader to decide if Margot, threatened by Macomber's apparent transformation from cuckold to man of action, kills her husband in order to demonstrate her ultimate power over him (and, symbolically, over masculinity). It is also possible that Margot intended to kill the buffalo charging at Macomber, either because she hoped to protect her husband—whom she may have come to recognize as a "true man"—or to prove to the men around her that she, too, can wield violent force.

Regardless, Macomber's pivotal transformation to "true manhood" is fleeting. Though Wilson sees Macomber's sudden acquisition of courage and confidence as a belated "coming to age," a rebirth, Hemingway's title reminds us, crucially, that this new life is both "happy" and "short." Macomber does not live long enough to experience much more than a few of moments of euphoria, and Margot (quiet and "bitter" at the scene of the hunt) refuses to openly acknowledge the change, never validating his newfound masculine prowess. Additionally, in the shootout that ensues at the narrative's climax, the buffalo's killer is left ambiguous. In spite of his development, then, Macomber may not have accomplished, or conquered, anything. His death might therefore be seen as tragic and meaningless, not freeing or glorious. The story, then, implicitly questions the same masculinity its characters value. Perhaps standing in the path of a wild animal is folly, rather than courage; and perhaps attempting to dominate the world leads only to bitterness and destruction.

In "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," Hemingway suggests that masculinity is intimately tied to power, using the safari as a site where this connection is explored and borne out. Yet because Macomber's "new life" is tragically cut short, Hemingway seems to conclude that masculine fortitude may not lead to triumph or freedom. Even though the narrative initially upholds patriarchal conventions about relationships between men and women—and between masculinity, dominance, and violence—its shocking, deadly ending upsets these conventions by intimating that male power and "courage" can have dangerous, undesirable ends.

RACE, VIOLENCE, AND EMPIRE

Written in 1936, a time when much of the African continent remained under European colonial rule, the specters of capitalism and empire move quietly through "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." The native Africans assisting the safari excursions remain nameless, personality-less characters, subject to orders and punishments from white game hunters. Though only briefly mentioned—for the narrative focuses mainly on the love triangle implicating its three white main characters—the maltreatment of the Swahili guides suggests that racial violence, subjugation, and colonialism are inextricably linked. To the white settlers in Africa, native people seem to be no better than the animals they hunt, targeted and oppressed for profit.

Early in the narrative, Wilson threatens Francis Macomber's "personal boy" for "looking curiously at his master" (who has just fled from the **lion**) with "fifteen lashes," presumably to punish the Swahili boy for his supposed insolence toward Macomber. The detached and flippant way in which Wilson explains this violence to Macomber suggests that brutal punishment, inflicted on members of a "lower" racial caste, is standard behavior in the colonized world. Threatened with "lashes," the boy turns away "with his face blank." Violence seems to instill passivity in the natives, shaping them into effective tools for exploitation.

Indeed, in Wilson's view—as a white colonizer and a representative of the British empire—racial violence is economically advantageous for imperialism. A loosely-structured system of compensation for servitude facilitates the safaris. The natives are paid for the physical labor they perform and the services they provide: their knowledge of the African landscape and its animals is vital information for the white hunters and their clients, who are not native to this land. The natives' (presumably low) pay is similarly invaluable in that it allows them to live somewhat comfortably—and with some independence—in their fractured, colonized home country, where their own sovereignty is heavily contested. "It's their *shauri*," Wilson tells Macomber, explaining why the gunbearers must help kill the wounded lion, though the animal's injury poses a threat to the hunters (and indeed, frightens them: "[Macomber] looked at the gun-bearer and he could see the gun-bearer was suffering too with fear"). Adds Wilson, "You see, they signed on for it." Because they have agreed to compensated work, the natives are beholden to the hunt (which Wilson describes as a "*shauri*," or a problem to be solved), its regulations, and its officiators—the white hunters. Wilson explains that the only alternative to "lashes" are "fines," docked from the natives' pay. By maintaining the Swahili guides' salaries—and using violence to enforce obedience instead—white hunters guarantee the natives' service, which facilitates successful safari tours and draws a steady stream of white tourists to colonized Africa.

Despite the natives' crucial contributions to imperial economy, they are silent, unobtrusive, and ultimately oppressed figures who hover in the background of Hemingway's story. Though the hunted lion receives a personality and emotional depth, the gun-bearers, guides, and servant boys—who assist in the lion's killing—are mute and somber. (Only one character is named, and this name is given once: "Kongoni," "the old gun-bearer.") These figures are present merely to prepare the hunt by cooking, helping to shoot and dispose of animal bodies, and providing valet services for the hunters and their clients. Moreover, the violence Macomber and Wilson exact on the lions and buffalo they pursue is careful and tempered. Wilson

cautions Macomber against acting "murderous" toward the wounded lion by sending "beaters" to him. It is clear, though, that the white hunters afford no such respect to the natives, whom they beat and threaten publicly. Even during the hunt, where the natives are most valuable, Wilson treats them cavalierly. "We lost a gun-bearer. Did you notice it?" he remarks casually to Macomber about a gun-bearer who "fell off" the convoy during the buffalo hunt and returns, "gloomy-faced and disgusted looking," to the hunting party—as if resigned, hopelessly, to the "*shauri*" at hand. Thus, within the colonial sphere, the natives are not only dehumanized—for as characters, they are far less complex than the white male characters who give the story psychological shape—but also made to seem less significant (and more disposable) than animals.

Hemingway's failure to flesh out the Swahili characters might indicate that race is a secondary narrative concern in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber." Yet it also seems possible that Hemingway is pointing to the ways in which empire violently subjugates its colonized subjects on the basis of race, simultaneously turning a profit from their labor.

GUILT AND MORALITY

Different sorts of moral codes conflict and create tension in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," specifically visible in the character of Wilson. Though Wilson emphasizes the importance of limiting the hunted animals' suffering, this firm esteem for the natural world counters his own lack of respect for other human beings within the world of the hunt—and for the social and legal regulations that organize human life. Wilson's ambiguous and often outright contradictory morality demonstrates that man is often in conflict with his own world and misled by his own faulty inner reasoning. It also suggests that a moral code constantly shifted to accommodate the situation is not really morality at all.

First, Wilson feels no remorse about sleeping with Margot (or with the wives of past clients), despite the conflicts and tensions that follow from his indiscretions. Wilson's attitude toward adultery is solely self-centered. He keeps a "double size cot on safari to accommodate any windfalls he might receive," or to cater to women attracted to the glamor of sleeping with "the white hunter," thus earning their respect and money. Wilson "made his living by [women], and their standards were his standards as long as they were hiring him": motivated by his own economic interests and disregarding societal boundaries, Wilson replicates his clients' own immoral behavior without guilt—only viewing the women as a "nuisance" and wondering vaguely about Macomber's desire for revenge ("'Hope the silly beggar doesn't take a notion to blow the back of my head off,' Wilson thought to himself").

This emotionless behavior contrasts significantly with the high standards he upholds about killing animals and disrupting the natural world they inhabit: "he had his own standards about the killing," Hemingway writes, adding that Wilson's clients "could live up to them or get some one else to hunt them." Wilson repeatedly refers to animals as "fine," admirable creatures ("Hell of a fine **lion**," "hell of a good bull") who must be hunted according to careful rules and rituals. "Don't shoot unless it's close enough so you can make sure," Wilson instructs Macomber as he faces the lion, encouraging his client to shoot the animal only if he can kill it instantly. To shoot merely to injure would be "murderous," cruel, and would prolong the creature's suffering. Furthermore, though Macomber cannot comprehend the lion's courage—which drives the animal forward toward his hunters, even after Macomber's first shot—Wilson knows "something about it," suggesting that Wilson identifies with and highly values the natural world.

Wilson's feelings toward the human world, however, are hardly similar. He openly and guiltlessly admits to having the Swahili servants whipped, though this is illegal and ethically wrong. As with his participation in adultery, which he justifies as economically advantageous, Wilson justifies his violence by claiming that the natives "prefer" lashes to being fined. "Which would you rather do? Take a good birching or lose your pay?" he asks Macomber, adding, "We all take a beating every day, you know, one way or another." Wilson's confused moral compass—at odds with social and legal regulations, and weakly justified—leads him to equate the brutality that colonized people face to the brutality of the white man's "every day" life. This flawed comparison only serves to emphasize the fact that Wilson cannot understand humans and human suffering in the same way that he understands animals and their suffering.

Even Wilson's notion of sportsmanship, part of his "high standards" for hunting, is subject to equivocation, as when he informs the Macombers that he is not supposed to be using a **car** during the buffalo hunt. According to Wilson, chasing animals from cars is illegal, but he quickly explains to the Macombers that it is both "sporting" and more dangerous—and thus more courageous and admirable—to pursue prey from their vehicle; "Seemed sporting enough to me," he says, "Taking more chance driving that way across the plain full of holes and one thing and another than hunting on foot." Once again, Wilson's hurried self-defense draws attention to the fact that he does not value the law in the same way that he values the hunt and the animals he stalks. Wilson is playing fast and loose with his own reputation. He knows that he could lose his license for using cars while hunting, and that Margot, who disapproves of the act, could run him out of business by reporting him to the other hunters. Yet once more his own self-interest and perverse logic overruns social and legal pressures. Man, Hemingway suggests, is always in thrall to his own stubborn beliefs, however wrong they may be. Wilson's breezy justifications for his immoral, unethical, and illegal actions, then,

suggest a fundamental discord between man's moral reasoning and social and legal regulations—a discord made brutally clear by the suspect politics of the safari.

MEN AND NATURE

Equipped with potent technology—guns, **cars**, and the like—the hunters in this story are capable of exercising control over nature. Yet Wilson, Francis Macomber, and the Swahili guides regard the natural world with awe and veneration. They seem to recognize that despite their own forceful, dangerous weapons, the beasts they target are similarly powerful and dangerous, and thus are worthy of respect. Furthermore, since Hemingway highlights the perspectives of both the male hunters (Wilson and Macomber) and the hunted (the **lion**)—and because Macomber is himself shot and killed like a hunted animal—Hemingway suggests an ultimate equivalence between human beings and the animals they hunt.

The hunters approach their task with excitement and fervent nervousness. Macomber trembles while loading his rifle to approach the lion, whose "impressive" roar is a source of both trepidation and wonderment. This suggests that, to Macomber and the others, the hunt is equal parts ritual and mystical encounter, since the animals they target are wholly majestic beasts, not entirely powerless to human technology. "The lion looked huge," Hemingway writes, "silhouetted on the rise of bank in the gray morning light, his shoulders heavy, his barrel of a body bulking smoothly." The author's descriptive language here evokes both traditional masculinity ("heavy," "bulking") and weaponry ("barrel of a body"), suggesting that the lion is a powerful rival to both man and his technology.

Moreover, guns on their own are not enough to kill the creatures the hunters encounter. Wilson instructs Macomber to shoot the buffalo "straight into the nose," or "into his chest, or, if you're to one side, into the neck or the shoulders." This reveals that it takes focused precision to dominate nature, not blind force, since animals are innately strong and can resist even the most powerful of hunting weapons. (The lion, though severely wounded, is able to tighten "into an absolute concentration for a rush," Hemingway writes, "all of him, pain, sickness, hatred, and all of his remaining strength.")

Additionally, Hemingway moves smoothly between the lion's perspective and that of the hunters, giving voice and interior life to both humans and animals—imbuing the animals with a sense of personhood and further suggesting man's innate connection to the natural world. During the lion hunt and within the space of a few sentences, Hemingway transitions into third-person omniscient narration and plunges into the lion's mind: "Macomber stepped out of the curved opening at the side of the front seat […] The lion still stood looking majestically and coolly toward this object that his eyes only showed in silhouette, bulking like some super-rhino." Here, the animal is again posited as an equal to both technology (the car appears like a "super-rhino," animal-like) and man, whose psychological depth the lion shares. Like man, the lion feels pain ("he heard a cracking crash and felt the slam of a .30-06 220-grain solid bullet that bit his flank and ripped in sudden hot scalding nausea through is stomach") and experiences fear and hatred—emotions Macomber himself experiences in the story, even as he claims to lack an understanding of animals and the natural world. Though "Macomber did not know how the lion had felt before he started his rush, nor during it when the unbelievable smash of the .505 […] had hit him in the mouth," Macomber *has* felt both terror and anger already in the story (toward Wilson, his wife Margot, and his own apparent cowardice), and he is thus on some level the lion's counterpart.

Perhaps most significantly, Macomber and the buffalo he hoped to kill die in the same way, and both are registered by Wilson as equivalent in death. Macomber and the buffalo die by shots to the head, described by Hemingway with the same kind of precision: "Macomber had stood solid and shot for the nose, shooting a touch high each time and hitting the heavy horns […] and Mrs. Macomber, in the car […] had hit her husband about two inches up a little to one side of the base of the skull." Though earlier in the narrative, the hunters only directed precise force toward animals—they seem to beat the Swahili guides indiscriminately—this concluding moment indicates that man and beast are similarly fallible.

Furthermore, Wilson regards the dead buffalo as a "hell of a good bull […] a good fifty inches, or better," and then calls for a driver to "spread a blanket over the body." This "body" is in reference to Macomber's, but Hemingway's ambiguity in language suggests that it could be the buffalo's—especially given Wilson's self-avowed reverence for nature. The story's concluding image is of two lifeless bodies, both utterly passive and physically similar. Macomber's head is "crew-cropped," while the buffalo's belly is "thinly-haired," suggesting that both creatures are in some way close to earth and nature, unprotected by layers of hair. In death, as in life, man and animal are united.

Though Hemingway in "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" initially seems to create a strict dichotomy between man and nature, framing each as foe to the other—locked in a struggle to the death, symbolized by the hunt—this dichotomy quickly collapses, replaced by a more cohesive understanding of humans and animals. Despite their immediate differences, men and beasts are intimately connected, both to the natural world and to each other.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

THE LION

The lion, a symbol of courage and masculine prowess, is the first animal Francis Macomber encounters on his safari, and it is the animal that most terrifies him. Its roar, a powerful, unnerving, "deep-chested moaning," shocks Macomber awake while he lies in his tent at night early on in the expedition. Macomber is a stereotypically weak, emasculated man; he is a cuckold, constantly undermined by his unfaithful wife and constrained by his upbringing to mannered meekness. The lion, then, throws Macomber's inadequacy into stark relief. It is the animal's disturbing roar that plunges Macomber into a state of paralyzing fear, which ultimately prevents him from killing the lion and leads to his embarrassment in front of his scornful wife, Margot, and the white hunter Robert Wilson. Wilson both seduces Margot and demonstrates temerity and aggressiveness while hunting the lion—becoming a paragon of staunch masculinity in the story, the "alpha male" and Macomber's foil. Additionally, Hemingway specifically genders the lion, referring to it as a "he," and describes in painstaking detail his muscular build and resistance to the hunters. Yet even as the lion makes Macomber's cowardice all the more apparent, the animal also prompts Macomber to undergo a transformation. Humiliated by his own actions—contrasted with the lion's boldness, bodily strength, and its majesty even in death—Macomber seeks out another opportunity to hunt, determined to prove himself a true man of courage. However, his attempts to refashion himself into a figure like Wilson, or the lion, lead to his death. Ultimately, as a symbol the lion helps readers to understand the tensions and contradictions that characterize masculinity. His fatal wounding, in spite of his courage, mirrors Macomber's own, suggesting that power and bravery—though deemed fundamental to masculine character—can be futile.

THE CAR

The car that Wilson and the Macombers use to hunt is notable because it is forbidden. At once a symbol of innovation, masculinity, and humanity's—often futile—attempt to dominate the natural world, it appears throughout the narrative, facilitating the two parallel hunts and shuttling characters between the campsite and the hunting ground—that is, between safety and danger. The hunters are not supposed to use cars to track and shoot animals, since this provides them with a definite advantage and as such is unsportsmanlike. The car is itself a space of safety that separates humans from potentially vicious animals. In Wilson's view, though, cars are "sporting" enough. He believes that chasing buffalo by car is itself dangerous, given the rough African terrain, and thus, a more courageous task. However, he also deems shooting from the car a cowardly act. For Wilson, then, the car represents the risk, thrill, and domination to be found in hunting. He even connects the car to Macomber's transformation from "boy-man" to "man," suggesting that cars are a source of male power: "Motor cars made it familiar. Be a damn fire eater now." Indeed, to the **lion** who witnesses the car's approach, it resembles a "super-rhino," threatening brute force and strength. Yet for Margot, who is confined to the car while her husband and Wilson hunt, the vehicle is a kind of prison, a site of confinement. It is "doorless and box-bodied," allowing her to witness the safari but preventing her from exiting and engaging in the hunt herself. Her femininity, it seems, excludes her from the space of the hunt, where masculinity reigns. Nonetheless, Margot shoots her husband from the car, directly contradicting Wilson's imperative and asserting her own dominance—and her participation in the male-centric hunt. Thus, the car represents a crucial struggle between power, risk, and safety, both in terms of the hunt and in terms of gendered relationships between characters.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *The Complete Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* published in 1987.

The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber Quotes

❝ One, Wilson, the white hunter, she knew she had never truly seen before. He was about middle height with sandy hair, a stubby mustache, a very red face and extremely cold blue eyes with faint white wrinkles at the comers that grooved merrily when he smiled. He smiled at her now and she looked away from his face at the way his shoulders sloped in the loose tunic he wore with the four big cartridges held in loops where the left breast pocket should have been, at his big brown hands, his old slacks, his very dirty boots and back to his red face again.

Related Characters: Francis Macomber , Robert Wilson , Margot Macomber

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

Though the "white hunter" Robert Wilson is a stranger to her, Margot sees him as the ultimate man. On the exterior, he is rugged and charming, and his very attire suggests his own strength. Wilson carries "four big cartridges" in his jacket, and his "old slacks" and "dirty boots" imply that he is an experienced hunter who works tirelessly in the field.

Indeed, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" is a story deeply concerned with appearances. Though intelligent and well-bred, Francis Macomber is mocked for how he behaves during an encounter with a lion he hunts, and this incident becomes integral to his status as a "coward"—which destroys his reputation. Yet the story also suggests that surface appearances are deceiving. Wilson appears rugged and impressive on the surface, but he is fundamentally flawed: he lacks a moral compass. Though he smiles "merrily" at Margot, seemingly jovial and personable, it is later revealed that he feels cold and indifferent toward the Macombers, and toward his clients on safaris more generally. Only his "extremely cold blue eyes" betray this indifference. Ultimately, Wilson is not the ideal, archetypal man that Margot believes him to be, but a morally deficient individual.

> They are, he thought, 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. Or is it that they pick men they can handle? They can't know that much at the age they marry, he thought. He was grateful that he had gone through his education on American women before now because this was a very attractive one.

Related Characters: Margot Macomber , Robert Wilson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

After Margot returns from her tent and compliments Wilson's skill as a hunter, Wilson reflects on American women. His comments are in fact also dismissive of American men, whom he views as equally dishonorable. To Wilson, American women are cruel, and only become crueler with time—perhaps because they seek out men they can subjugate and control—and American men are pathetic, too weak to handle their imposing wives. Wilson is a strikingly misanthropic character, infatuated with the natural world but frustrated by humanity. He perceives the people around him (namely, white men and women, and black male servants) as mere cultural stereotypes: to Wilson, all humans are heavily flawed.

Ironically, Wilson himself lives by masculine stereotype, since he is determined to demonstrate stoicism and brash courage at every turn, both during and away from the hunt. And in the end, he cannot deny his attraction to Margot, though she is a "cruel," "predatory" woman. Though Wilson continually insists that he detached is from the human world, he cannot suppress his own impulses and desires.

> But that night after dinner and a whisky and soda by the fire before going to bed, as Francis Macomber lay on his cot with the mosquito bar over him and listened to the night noises it was not all over. It was neither all over nor was it beginning. It was there exactly as it happened with some parts of it indelibly emphasized and he was miserably ashamed at it. But more than shame he felt cold, hollow fear in him. The fear was still there like a cold slimy hollow in all the emptiness where once his confidence had been and it made him feel sick. It was still there with him now.

Related Characters: Kongoni and the Swahili guides, gun-bearers, and servants , Francis Macomber

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 10-11

Explanation and Analysis

As Francis Macomber lies in his tent and reflects on his cowardly actions during the lion hunt, he realizes that he is "miserably ashamed" of his own behavior—and that he is still fearful, even though the lion is dead. Fear, it seems, is insidious and all-consuming, capable of effacing man's personality (replacing his "confidence") and even prompting physical illness. In the world of the narrative, fear is man's most challenging restriction, and it is not easily avoided.

Indeed, Hemingway seems to suggest that fear might be necessary in life, since pure recklessness and nerve seem to produce undesirable consequences. Macomber overcomes fear, but only briefly, and his fearlessness leads directly to his own ignominious death. Even the gun-bearers, though experienced hunters, are fearful of the enormous, imposing lion: Macomber notes their expressions as they prepare to hunt the creature. Fear, then, is natural, but it is also "cold," "slimy," and "hollow"—and it is these unpleasant qualities that inspire men to act recklessly.

> The lion still stood looking majestically and coolly toward this object that his eyes only showed in silhouette, bulking like some super-rhino. There was no man smell carried toward him and he watched the object, moving his great head a little from side to side. Then watching the object, not afraid, but hesitating before going down the bank to drink with such a thing opposite him, he saw a man figure detach itself from it and he turned his heavy head and swung away toward the cover of the trees as he heard a cracking crash and felt the slam of a .30-06 220-grain solid bullet that bit his flank and ripped in sudden hot scalding nausea through his stomach.

Related Characters: Francis Macomber

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

Hemingway portrays Macomber's encounter with the lion twice: once through Macomber's perspective, and once through the lion's perspective. While it isn't unusual for short stories in the modernist genre to shift perspectives—fluctuating quickly between speakers and thinkers, and between the narrator and characters' interior monologues—it is unusual for modernist authors to inhabit the minds of animals, as Hemingway does here. Hemingway's usually pared-down style becomes even more bare as the lion looks at the "super-rhino," the car, and the "man figure," Macomber: Hemingway is imagining the way a lion might think and observe an encounter with a hunter, given its own limited vocabulary and knowledge of the human world.

Like Macomber, who feels a "white-hot, blinding flash" inside his head when he is fatally shot at the end of the story, the lion experiences pain viscerally, feeling "sudden hot scalding nausea," and it has emotions, too: it is "not afraid" when it watches the "object," the car. By providing the lion with a distinctive voice, Hemingway seems to be suggesting that animals are just as self-conscious and emotional as humans—though this conclusion is somewhat undermined by the fact that Hemingway does not provide distinctive voices for women and native people in the story.

> All in all they were known as a comparatively happily married couple, one of those whose disruption is often rumored but never occurs, and as the society columnist put it, they were adding more than a spice of *adventure* to their much envied and ever-enduring *Romance* by a *Safari* in what was known as *Darkest Africa* until the Martin Johnsons lighted it on so many silver screens where they were pursuing *Old Simba* the lion, the buffalo, *Tembo* the elephant and as well collecting specimens for the Museum of Natural History.

Related Characters: Margot Macomber , Francis Macomber

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

The Macombers are quasi-celebrities back in the United States, where their rocky marriage regularly makes headlines. By mimicking a "society columnist," who compares the Macombers' exploits abroad to movies about safaris and exploration in Africa (as well as to Martin Johnson, an explorer and filmmaker who worked on safaris), Hemingway draws attention to the very genre in which he is working: the adventure story, which often draws on the tropes of hunting and safaris. Ironically, though, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" unsettles the adventure story genre by ending in Macomber's death. Such an inglorious conclusion is rarely found in epics about adventure and discovery in Africa, which typically end in triumph.

Hemingway's allusion to movies also suggests that the Macombers have learned about Africa through popular media, and that their initial ideas about the safari may have been colored by fantasy and fiction. No "Romance by a Safari" is to be found on the safari that the Macombers have joined. Instead, in Africa, their marriage becomes unhinged. Furthermore, it is possible that Macomber believed that shooting a lion would be as simple as it seems in movies—only to have this assumption unsettled by the terrifying reality of confronting the animal.

"If you make a scene I'll leave you, darling," Margot said quietly.

"No, you won't."

"You can try it and see."

"You won't leave me."

"No," she said. "I won't leave you and you'll behave yourself."

"Behave myself? That's a way to talk. Behave myself."

"Yes. Behave yourself."

"Why don't you try behaving?"

"I've tried it so long. So very long."

Related Characters: Margot Macomber , Francis Macomber (speaker), Robert Wilson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Margot and Francis's heated argument—which takes place behind Wilson's back, after Francis has learned that he and Margot slept together—reveals the uncomfortable dynamics at play in their marriage. Though both Wilson and Francis Macomber regard Margot as controlling and manipulative, all three characters understand that Macomber ultimately holds power over Margot, since Margot cannot leave Macomber without forfeiting her own financial security. Without Macomber, Margot would be a ruined woman—a fact she admits here. At the same time, Macomber cannot leave Margot, since she is his trophy wife, a status symbol that affords him access to the upper echelons of society. While Margot finds Macomber's behavior during the hunt embarrassing, even abhorrent, Macomber finds Margot's behavior (namely, her extramarital affairs) equally repugnant. Hemingway seems to be suggesting that marriage is purely transactional, based on mutual exchange rather than love, and that as long as marriages appear functional from the outside (Margot insists that Macomber refrain from "making a scene"), society will accept them.

He, Robert Wilson, carried a double size cot on safari to accommodate any windfalls he might receive. He had hunted for a certain clientele, the international, fast, sporting set, where the women did not feel they were getting their money's worth unless they had shared that cot with the white hunter. He despised them when he was away from them although he liked some of them well enough at the time, but he made his living by them; and their standards were his standards as long as they were hiring him.

Related Characters: Francis Macomber , Margot Macomber , Robert Wilson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

Wilson feels no guilt the morning after sleeping with Margot, instead believing that it's Francis Macomber's fault for not having more control over his wife. Here, he goes on to reflects on the fact that he's slept with other clients' wives as well. Wilson understands that as the "white hunter," he carries a certain cachet. He is mysterious, self-sufficient, stoic, and powerful, and these qualities make him desirable to the wives of the men who hire him to lead their hunts. Throughout the narrative, Wilson repeatedly declares his disinterest in other individuals, failing to express empathy for or emotion about the Macombers, whom he regards as a means to an end—that is, a means to a living. Wilson lives by his own rules, which means that he eschews laws and common moral practices. By sleeping with his clients' wives, he is able to guarantee successful, lucrative hunts, and he does not seem concerned by moral repercussions. Nor does he feel particularly drawn to the woman he seduces, some of whom he likes "well enough." Wilson's nonchalant attitude toward sex contrasts significantly with Margot's passionate, exaggerated seductions, while his unemotional attitude contrasts with Macomber's emotiveness.

Their figures stay boyish when they're fifty. The great American boy-men. Damned strange people. But he liked this Macomber now. Damned strange fellow, probably meant the end of cuckoldry too. Well, that would be a damned good thing. Damned good thing. Beggar had probably been afraid all his life. Don't know what started it. But over now. Hadn't had time to be afraid with the buff.

Related Characters: Margot Macomber , Francis Macomber , Robert Wilson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Wilson reflects on Macomber's transformation from an "American boy-man" to a true man—and from a cuckold to a fearless, warrior-like hunter. Wilson, who rarely expresses positive feelings toward other individuals, only seems to like Macomber now because Macomber has begun to act like him. Macomber has suddenly become fearless and brash, dismissive of Margot's mockery and assured of his own hunting skills. Additionally, Wilson reflects that he doesn't "know what started it," meaning Macomber's transformation, yet the answer seems clear: Macomber sees Wilson as both a rival and a model, and he realizes that he will only be able to regain the respect of his wife by modeling himself after Wilson, whom she has selected as the more desirable sexual partner. Wilson sees Macomber as a stereotype, an American man-child, and yet Wilson is himself a type; the "white hunter" is a formula for masculinity that Macomber seeks to learn and apply to himself.

Wilson had ducked to one side to get in a shoulder shot. Macomber had stood solid and shot for the nose, shooting a touch high each time and hitting the heavy horns, splintering and chipping them like hitting a slate roof, and Mrs. Macomber, in the car, 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 his skull.

Related Characters: Margot Macomber , Francis Macomber , Robert Wilson

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

The end of "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" contains its most shocking, ambiguous scene. Hemingway does not reveal whether Margot purposefully shot her husband—noting instead that she "shot at the buffalo," hitting Macomber on his skull—leaving it up to readers to decide whether Margot is a murderess or just a bad shooter. By affording the reader multiple paths of interpretations for Macomber's death, Hemingway points to the complicated, ambivalent nature of relationships between men and women. Did Margot wish to reclaim the power that Macomber took away from her by becoming a "man of action?" Did Margot want to protect Macomber, who, after all, provided her with wealth and stability—and would this constitute Margot's own submission to patriarchy? It's impossible to know what Margot is thinking when she fires at the buffalo from the car, though critics have offered many guesses. Ultimately, though, it is clear that Macomber's "short happy life"—the brief period of time he spent as a transformed man—is futile and unsatisfactory, since the happiness he gains from achieving fearlessness hardly lasts longer than a few minutes.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

THE SHORT HAPPY LIFE OF FRANCIS MACOMBER

At lunch in a dining tent, Francis Macomber, Robert Wilson, and Macomber's wife, Margot, are pretending that nothing has happened. They decide to have gimlets, which they order from a "mess boy." Macomber wonders what he should give the boy for payment, and Wilson tells him to only give him a quid (one pound), since the boys should not be spoiled; the headman, the servants' leader, will distribute the money among the servants.

It's immediately clear who holds the most power in this setting, a safari camp in colonized Africa. White men control the lives and financial status of African servants, whom they treat with indifference and even cruelty, refusing to compensate them properly for their labor.

In a flashback, Macomber is carried to his tent from the hunting ground by some African servants and hunting assistants in a celebratory parade. After the parade, they congratulate him. He shakes their hands, then sits on the bed in his tent. Margot enters the tent but does not speak to her husband, and Macomber abruptly leaves the tent.

It's clear that something has gone wrong on the hunt, though Hemingway does not yet reveal what transpired. The Macombers' relationship is also clearly troubled. Margot, who doesn't speak to her husband when he enters their tent (prompting him to leave, as if embarrassed by her silence), seems to hold a great deal of authority over Francis.

Back in the present, Wilson tells Macomber that he's got a damned fine **lion**. Margot looks at Wilson. She is beautiful and well-kept, and five years before had been a model in an advertisement for a beauty product she had never used, for which she earned five thousand dollars. She has been married to Francis Macomber for eleven years.

By describing Margot and the lion in succession, Hemingway draws a parallel between the two, and thus, between the human and the natural world. Both the animal and the woman are trophies for Macomber, objects of beauty that he possesses and that give him status and power. Hemingway seems to suggest that to be a man, one must possess and dominate other individuals and one's environment.

Macomber agrees with Wilson; the **lion** was good. Margot looks at both of the men as if she has never seen them before, though only Wilson, the "white hunter," is a stranger to her. He is a somewhat tall man with sandy hair, a mustache, sun-burned skin, cold blue eyes, and a wrinkled, smiling face. He smiles at Margot and she looks at his body, examining his shoulders, the rifle cartridges slung on his jacket, his worn-in slacks and boots, and finally, his red face again.

Wilson and Margot's charged interactions foreshadow their later sexual encounter. Margot's penetrating gaze suggests she is attracted to Wilson, whose worn-in clothes and weather-beaten appearance fit an ideal of rugged masculinity. That Margot regards her husband as a stranger suggests she has grown apart from him—or thinks lesser of him now, after the problem that occurred on the hunt.

Wilson toasts to the **lion**, then smiles at Margot again. She does not smile back, however, and looks at her husband. Thirty-five-year-old Macomber, who is very tall with short hair and thin lips, is considered handsome. His safari clothes are the same as Wilson's but, where Wilson's are weather-torn, Macomber's are clearly new. He is skilled at court games, has big-game fishing records, and has just proven himself to be a coward. Macomber also toasts to the lion and thanks Wilson for what he has done. Margot stops looking at her husband and looks back at Macomber. She says they shouldn't talk about the lion.

In contrast to Wilson, Macomber (though fit and handsome) appears less attractive to Margot. The description of him, filtered through Margot's gaze, is less comprehensive than that of Wilson, suggesting that Margot doesn't find her husband as riveting a subject. Further, Macomber has shown himself to be a "coward," though it's not yet clear why; it has something to do with the lion, whose prolonged absence from the narrative builds intrigue. Already, though, readers understand that to Margot, Wilson is the more desirable, masculine figure, while Francis's "cowardice" makes him uninteresting.

After Margot's comment, Wilson looks at her, not smiling. She smiles back at him, however, saying that it has been a strange day and that he should wear his hat even under the canvas tent, since he told her to do the same, to protect from sunburns. She adds that he has a red face, which he says is from drink. Margot counters that Francis drinks, and his face isn't red. Macomber, joking, says his face is red today. Margot disagrees, saying it's *her* face that is red today, but Wilson's is always red. Wilson tries to get them to stop talking about it. Margot looks as if she is going to cry and decides to leave for her tent.

Tensions continue to build as the three bicker, and Macomber admits to being embarrassed about the situation with the lion. That Margot flirts persistently with Wilson again suggests acute dysfunction in her marriage. In his wife's eyes, Macomber is wholly inadequate, and this inadequacy upsets and embarrasses Margot.

After asserting that upset women are a strain that amounts to nothing, Wilson tells Macomber to forget the whole thing, though Macomber insists again that he won't forgot what Wilson has done for him. Wilson refuses Macomber's compliment, calling it nonsense. They continue to sit in the shade under the trees in the camp, looking at a boulder-filled stream with a forest beyond it, not speaking or looking at each other while they drink.

To Wilson, Macomber's continued apologies make him seem self-conscious and fragile—hardly forceful and masculine like Wilson himself. The men's silence suggests their inability to process emotions and relate to each other. Masculinity proves prohibitive, since both men are too embarrassed by Macomber's failure to live up to its ideals to interact normally.

While the two men sit in silence, Wilson realizes that all the servant boys know about "it" now. Speaking Swahili, he snaps at one, Macomber's personal boy, who is looking strangely at Macomber. The boy turns away. When Macomber asks what Wilson said to the boy, Wilson responds he threatened to lash him if he didn't "look alive." Wilson explains that it's illegal to whip the servants, but they could cause trouble if they complain, and they prefer whippings to fines that limit their pay. Wilson tells Macomber that we all take a beating every day, anyway, and immediately feels embarrassed. Macomber agrees, and then apologizes again for the **lion** business.

Macomber's cowardice continues to prove troubling for the two men and is in fact made all the more apparent—and humiliating—by the "strange" look from the Swahili servant boy. Though inferior in status, the boy seems to understand that Macomber has acted abnormally. Furthermore, Wilson's flippant attitude toward the violence he enacts on the servants underscores the African natives' secondary position in this colonized world. Wilson's breezy justification of racial violence suggests his own flawed moral reasoning.

Macomber says to Wilson that he hopes the **lion** business won't have to go any further, and Wilson asks Macomber if he is suggesting that Wilson will talk about it at the Mathaiga Club. He thinks to himself that Macomber is a "bloody coward" and a "four-letter man," and that though he liked him before, it's hard to judge Americans. He tells Macomber that he will not talk about him, while internally reflecting that they should proceed with the safari on a strictly "formal" basis, without any discussion of emotions. Wilson thinks to himself that, this way, he can have some quiet and read books with his meals, but still drink his clients' whiskey.

Wilson notes his frustration with Macomber's anxieties about the "lion business" in a series of internal monologues. Macomber's own weakness and timidity juxtaposes with Wilson's view of the world. Wilson seems to privilege stoicism and temerity above all else, and he feels little sympathy for the obviously distressed Macomber.

Still embarrassed, Macomber apologizes again, and Wilson looks at Macomber's seemingly adolescent face. Wilson tries one more time to respond to Macomber's apology and tells him that in Africa, "no woman ever misses her **lion** and no white man ever bolts." Macomber says that he bolted like a rabbit, and Wilson wonders what he can do about a man who talks like this. Wilson looks again at Macomber, who has a pleasant smile even as his eyes show when he is hurt. Macomber suggests that they can try a second hunt, for buffalo. Wilson thinks he might have been wrong about Macomber, but he can't forget the morning, which was very bad.

At last, Hemingway reveals a few of the details involved in the "lion business." Macomber "bolted" from the lion during an earlier hunt, thus failing to live up to the stereotype of the bold "white man" who never runs from a lion. Macomber's repeated apologies seem to make Wilson feel less frustrated with his client. Macomber, hapless and remorseful, seems somewhat pathetic to Wilson. Yet ultimately, Wilson can only remember Macomber's cowardice, suggesting that Macomber's identity is inextricably tied to his panicked actions during the hunt.

Margot returns from her tent, and Wilson looks at her perfect oval face, musing that it is so perfect, you might expect her to be stupid—but she isn't stupid, he thinks. Margot asks how he and Francis are doing, and says she has dropped the whole thing, since Francis's trade isn't killing **lions**. Rather, Mr. Wilson's is, and he's impressive at it.

Margot's flirtations with Wilson highlight Macomber's position as an undesirable, cowardly man by contrast. At the same time, Wilson's reflections on Margot help to further diminish Macomber. Margot, though inferior according to the gender politics of the early twentieth century in which this story is set, is clearly capable of wielding influence over her husband.

Wilson believes American women are the hardest, cruelest, most predatory, and most attractive women in the world. He is glad to have known and been educated about American women before meeting Margot, because the latter is very attractive. Margot says that she wouldn't miss the buffalo hunt for anything. Wilson thinks that when she went off to cry, she was a hell of a fine woman—who seemed to know how things really stood. Margot returned after twenty minutes. To Wilson, American women are the damnedest.

Wilson's misogynistic musings both uphold a common stereotype and affirm Macomber's diminished status as a man. To Wilson, Margot is a "femme fatale" (a common stereotype for women who present as hyper-sexual and confident) who makes a mockery of her husband. She is "predatory" in a way that Macomber—the failed hunter—will never be. Additionally, Wilson again signals to his own off-kilter moral compass by implying that he has slept with his clients' wives in the past (and that he will do so with Margot, too). He also calls Margot a "hell of a fine woman," reminiscent of the compliment he earlier directed toward the lion ("a damned fine lion"). Clearly, for Wilson, women and animals are no more than objects of desire to be pursued and hunted down.

In the dining tent, Margot mocks Macomber and says that she wants to see Wilson perform again, since he was lovely in the morning "blowing things' heads off." Macomber offers Margot some eland meat, then asks her to "let up on the bitchery." Margot says she supposes she could, since Macomber put it "so nicely."

Margot relentlessly mocks her husband, while he only responds tepidly and maintains politeness by offering her meat to eat. Margot, sarcastic and biting, has the last word, demonstrating her influence over Macomber, who seems helpless and meek—especially in comparison to Wilson, who is capable of "blowing things' heads off."

Wilson reminds them of the **lion**, which Margot says she has forgotten about. Wilson wonders how a woman should act when she discovers that her husband is a coward. Though she is cruel, he reflects, all women are cruel: they govern, and he is tired of their terrorism.

Though Margot claims to have forgotten about the "lion business," it's clear that Macomber is forever changed in her eyes. Wilson's declaration that all women are tyrannical further confirms his own moral shortcomings. Wilson sees people as mere categories, not as individuals with distinct personalities. Just as Wilson is unable to see Macomber as anything more than an emasculated coward, he is also unable to see Margot as anything more than a cruel "femme fatale."


Later in the afternoon, Wilson and Macomber go off alone to hunt some impala, leaving Margot behind. Wilson compliments Macomber's shooting and says that he will have no trouble with the buffalo tomorrow. When Macomber admits that it's not pleasant to have had his wife see him do something like that (referring to the **lion** business), Wilson says that Macomber shouldn't think about that any more.

Macomber's cowardice again becomes an affirmation of his failure to act with the authority befitting a husband and patriarch. Masculinity, it seems, is directly related to the power a man is capable of exerting over his wife. Macomber, humiliated, can no longer claim power over Margot, who is repelled by him and his cowardly actions—which were "not pleasant" for her to witness.

Later, at night, Macomber lies on his cot, ashamed. His fear has replaced his confidence and makes him feel sick, as he remembers the night before when he heard the **lion** roar for the first time. In a flashback to that night, Macomber awakens to the roar and finds himself in a state of total panic. With Margot beside him asleep, there is no one to see that he is afraid, nor to be afraid with him.

The fear that the lion's roar provokes in Macomber makes him feel weak, passive, and alone. The lion reminds him how tenuous his masculine identity is; beasts bigger and more powerful than he exist, spotlighting his own insignificance and fragility. Here, Hemingway also shifts backward in time to the previous night. This is the starting point for the story of the lion hunt, which will put the first part of the story into context. By shifting backward and forward in time, and by revealing few details at the start of the story, Hemingway demonstrates literary techniques common to modernist short stories: namely, narrative fragmentation and temporal shifts.

The morning after, the **lion** roars again during breakfast, and Macomber frets that the animal is close to their camp. Wilson says that he hopes it's a shootable cat, and instructs Macomber to hit it in the shoulders, aiming for bone. The first shot is very important, he continues, since it is the one that counts. Wilson says you shouldn't shoot a lion unless it's close enough that you can make sure to kill it.

Wilson emphasizes to Macomber that lions must be shot carefully: brute force alone cannot quell a powerful lion. Human technology, it seems, is only effective against nature if used properly and strategically. Wilson's comments suggest that the natural world is just as powerful as human weaponry, and that it is thus worthy of respect and care.

Margot enters to have breakfast, and the **lion** roars again. Margot asks Macomber if something's wrong, and Macomber admits that it's the "damned roaring," which has been going on all night. Margot wishes he had woken her up so she could have heard it too. When Macomber admits that he's nervous to kill the animal, Margot asks him if he's afraid; he says that he isn't—just nervous. The lion roars one more time, more powerfully now, and Macomber says he hates the noise. To Margot, however, it's impressive.

That Margot finds the lion's roar impressive demonstrates the lion's status as a symbol of fearless masculinity. Whereas the lion is powerful and desirable, Macomber is "nervous" and frightened. However, Macomber tells Margot that he isn't afraid, determined to show his wife he isn't the emasculated wreck she believes him to be.

Wilson gathers Margot and Macomber for the hunt, and they climb into their **motor car** and move up the river. Macomber's hand trembles as he opens his rifle and sees his metal-cased bullets. He looks at Wilson next to his wife in the rear seat of the car, grinning with excitement. Wilson points out that vultures are circling in the distance, indicating that the **lion** has just left beyond his prey, and that it should be appearing soon. The group spots the lion, standing in the morning breeze, huge and silhouetted on the rise of a bank. Macomber steps out of the car to approach it.

Though Macomber insists he isn't afraid to hunt the lion, his trembling hands give him away. He feels anxious about confronting the animal, while Wilson—the epitome of rugged masculinity—grins with excitement. Additionally, the lion's initial appearance confirms its impressive power: "huge and silhouetted," it rivals the motor car in size and force.

The **lion**, looking majestic, watches an object approaching but is not afraid. He sees a "man figure" emerge from the object, then feels the slam of a bullet in his flank, and another in his lower ribs. He runs toward the high grass in front of him to crouch there and hide so that he can "make a rush" and get the man that is holding the "crashing thing" that is injuring him.

Hemingway switches to the lion's perspective, describing Macomber's approach as the lion would observe it, given his own limited knowledge of the human world. (He views Macomber as a "man figure" and Macomber's rifle as a "crashing thing.") By depicting the lion's consciousness—and moving smoothly from Macomber's perspective to the lion's—Hemingway seems to suggest that both men and animals are capable of complex thought and emotion, and that therefore, men and nature are intrinsically connected.

At the same time that the **lion** is watching him approach, Macomber is walking toward the beast. Macomber's hands are shaking, and his legs are stiff in the thighs. He raises his rifle toward the lion and fires, then fires again, and sees the lion head into the grass. He feels sick and finds Wilson, Margot, and the gun-bearers, who look very grave. Macomber, Wilson, and the assistants head out to find the injured lion, and when Macomber asks why they can't send beaters instead, Wilson tells him that it's a "touch murderous"—attacking a wounded lion might cause him to charge. Wilson offers to go to the lion himself, and Macomber says he would like to come with him—though he wonders why they can't just leave the lion behind. Wilson explains that the lion is suffering, and that someone else might run into him.

Wilson argues that it is necessary to treat the lion with respect. Beating it to death would be "murderous" and unnecessarily cruel (and would put the hunters in the danger by provoking the lion's anger). Though Wilson regards the Macombers as mere stereotypes, unworthy of his empathy, he displays clear empathy for the lion, suggesting that he finds the natural world more honorable than the human world. Wilson feels remorse and guilt for nature, but not toward other people.

Macomber and Wilson sit under a tree smoking and prepare to find the **lion**. Macomber does not know that Wilson is furious with himself because he failed to notice how fearful Macomber was earlier, and because he wishes he had sent Macomber back to Margot. Macomber takes his big rifle from Wilson, who orders him to stay five yards behind him to the right as they approach the lion. Macomber takes a drink of water from the canteen of an older gun-bearer, whom he notices is afraid too.

Macomber's fearfulness continues to exacerbate tensions on the hunt, since Wilson begins to think of Macomber's anxiety as a liability. Yet the "older gun-bearer" assisting with the hunt is also fearful of the lion. Clearly, Macomber's "cowardice" is not a personal failure but a common side effect of hunting, and a common experience for men on safari. Masculine "courage" is only an ideal, or a construct; even experienced hunters feel fear.

The **lion** is thirty-five yards ahead of them into the grass. He is sick because of the wound in his lungs, and in a lot of pain, which comes as he breathes. He is concentrating all of his pain, sickness, and hatred into a rush, preparing to charge at the men who are entering the grass. He hears their voices, makes a coughing grunt, and charges.

Hemingway shifts back to the lion's perspective, depicting with painstaking detail the courage and power the lion demonstrates in the last few moments of his life. Again, Hemingway humanizes animals— showing that they, too, can experience emotions and use reason and observation to act.

Wilson, Macomber, and the gun-bearers enter the grass, listening closely, rifles cocked. Macomber hears the **lion**'s grunt, sees its body swishing in the grass, and begins to run wildly toward the stream, away from the lion. He hears Wilson shooting, and sees the lion wounded behind him, crawling toward Wilson in the grass. Its head, mutilated, slides forward, and Macomber finds himself standing alone in a clearing, with Wilson and the guides looking back at him scornfully. The lion is dead. Wilson asks him if he wants to take any pictures, and Macomber says he doesn't. Wilson says that it's a hell of fine a lion.

Hemingway finally reveals the event that triggers the entire narrative: Macomber's panicked flight from the lion, which proves his cowardice, confirmed by the "scornful" expressions of Wilson and the guides.

Later, when Wilson and Macomber return to the **car**, Margot does not look at her husband as he sits beside her in the back seat. When he reaches over to take her hand, she moves it away. She has been able to witness the entire event from the car, and while they are sitting there, she reaches forward and kisses Wilson on the mouth. Wilson blushes. Margot calls him "the beautiful red-faced Robert Wilson" and looks away across the stream to where the **lion** lies, the guides skinning his body. The guides bring the lion carcass into the car, and no one says anything as they head back to the camp.

Margot's passionate response to Wilson contrasts with the coldness she demonstrates toward Macomber. Whereas Wilson is desirable, a "true man"—a hero of the hunt, able to exercise force over nature—Macomber is fearful, passive, and an embarrassment to his wife.

Macomber does not know what the **lion** felt as it started heading toward them, nor what kept him coming despite the bullets in his body. Wilson seems to understand something about it, though, which he expresses by saying, "Damned fine lion."

Wilson is connected to the natural world in a way that Macomber is not. While Macomber finds nature bizarre and terrifying, Wilson, seems to identify with the lion, whose power and temerity impress him.

Nor does Macomber know how Margot feels about him now—but he does know that she is through with him. Margot has been through with Macomber before, but because he is so wealthy, he knows she won't leave him—it is one of the few things he really knows about, apart from motorcycles, cars, books, games, dogs, and hanging onto his money. He knows that Margot is not as beautiful as she had once been, and, as such, she has missed the chance to leave him. He, however, is also not good enough with women to get another new, beautiful wife. Their marriage is comparatively happy, though tabloids in the U.S. often report that they are "on the verge" of divorce. But they always make up, because Margot is too beautiful for Macomber to leave, and Macomber too rich for Margot to leave.

In the patriarchal world that the Macombers inhabit, Margot is ultimately powerless. Though Wilson refers to her as a "predator," cruel and domineering, she cannot leave her husband, who provides her with wealth, stability, and status. Thus, even as Hemingway upholds conventions of patriarchy and traditional masculinity in the story—namely, by focusing on Macomber's cowardice as an emasculating trait—he also suggests that these standards are intensely limiting for women.

Later that night after the **lion** hunt, Macomber wakes up suddenly, realizing that he has been dreaming about a bloody-headed lion. He also realizes that Margot is not next to him in their tent, and he sees her crawl back into bed two hours later. When he asks her where she's been, she says she was out for a breath of air. Macomber doesn't believe her and calls her a bitch. She calls him a coward and asks if they can stop talking. He angrily reminds her that she promised there wasn't "going to be any of that" on the trip, but she says that the trip was spoiled yesterday anyway.

Macomber's cowardice is not only emasculating because it proves that he is neither bold nor powerful, like his foil Wilson, but also because it transforms him into a cuckold, or the husband of an adulteress. As a coward, he is sexually undesirable.

The next morning at breakfast, Macomber regards Wilson with hatred. Wilson realizes that Macomber must have seen Margot sneak back into his tent at night, and that he knows they have slept together, but he faults Macomber for not keeping his wife where she belongs.

Wilson's lack of ethics and muddled morals lead him to believe that Macomber is at fault Margot's indiscretions. Yet Wilson routinely sleeps with his clients' wives during hunting expeditions.

Macomber, Margot, and Wilson bicker about having Margot stay in the camp while they hunt buffalo. Margot threatens to leave Macomber, but he tells her that she won't, and expresses hatred for Wilson, whom he calls a "red-faced swine."

Hemingway again signals to Margot's inferiority within the world of the hunt—and the world of the narrative more generally. As a woman, she is forbidden from the safari, where she is seen as a distraction, and though she has humiliated Macomber by sleeping with Wilson, she is still under Macomber's control. Margot cannot leave her husband without sacrificing her own well-being.

Next, Macomber, Margot, and Wilson head off on the hunt together. Macomber and Margot are not speaking, and Wilson reflects that women are a nuisance on safari. Wilson puts the Macombers out of his mind and begins to think about the buffalo instead.

Once again, Wilson displays coldness and indifference to the individuals around him. Wilson seems to find their problems uninteresting and unnecessarily complicated, and he refuses to acknowledge his own culpability in creating these problems. Instead, Wilson prefers to concern himself with the natural world.

Wilson does not want to hunt buffalo with Macomber—or to hunt with him at all anymore—but he pities Macomber and resolves to have nothing more to do with Margot. He uses a double size cot on safari in case any of his clients' wives want to sleep with him, since he views the affairs as financial gains (though he despises the women when they are not having sex). He thinks about Margot, who is smiling at him, and how pleasant it had been to see her the night before.

Wilson feels no remorse about sleeping with Margot, though he does admit that his actions have complicated the hunt. Still, his own attraction to Margot—and his view that his affairs with clients' wives are financial gains—prove more powerful than his feelings of pity for Macomber.

Wilson stops the car and spots the buffalo, moving at a gallop across the prairie in the distance. As the **car** speeds toward them, Macomber watches the animals get bigger and bigger until he can see clearly their huge bodies, the dust in their hides, and their horns and muzzles. He has no fear, only hatred of Wilson, and he stumbles out of the car and shoots at the bulls.

Macomber has reached a turning point. Angry and humiliated, he resolves to become the man of action that Wilson is—and to hunt with courage. His hatred for Wilson, mingled with his jealousy of the "white hunter," compels him to shoot at the buffalo without fear.

Moving quickly, Macomber hits one bull and misses another, which Wilson kills. Wilson tells Macomber that he's shooting well, and they get back onto the **car** and start moving toward the last bull. Both of them shoot at it, and though at first their bullets seem to have no effect, eventually the bull staggers and falls down onto its knees. Wilson compliments Macomber's shooting again, and Macomber quickly finishes off the last bull, which was only injured, not yet dead. Macomber thinks that he has never felt so good in all his life.

Macomber and Wilson are shooting in tandem, taking down bulls both separately and together. They are no longer foils but men united by fearlessness.

When they return to the **car** for a drink, Margot is sitting there white-faced. She says Macomber is marvelous, and all of them drink whiskey from a flask. Margot says she didn't know you could chase buffalo from cars, and Wilson explains that while you wouldn't ordinarily do so (and that it is illegal), it seemed sporting enough to him: he says that you take more chances driving across the rough African terrain than hunting by foot. Margot says that it seems more unfair to the animals to her, and Wilson says that he could lose his license if they heard about in Nairobi. Macomber, smiling, says that Margot has something on Wilson now.

Once again, Wilson's perverse moral reasoning leads him to believe that hunting by car, though illegal, is more righteous and impressive than hunting by foot, since it is more dangerous, and thus, more courageous (and masculine). Wilson is unconcerned with the law: his own beliefs about masculinity and power drive him.

A gun-bearer approaches and informs Macomber and Wilson that the first bull was only wounded: he got up and went into a bush. Margot says that it's going to be like the **lion** again, but Wilson disagrees. Wilson, Macomber, and Margot go look at the second buffalo, dead in the grass, and Macomber asks eagerly if they can go after the wounded bull. Wilson, surprised, thinks that Macomber is a strange one—he's become a "ruddy fire eater."

On this hunt, as on the first hunt, an animal has been injured and must be approached and killed. Yet Macomber's attitude has been completely transformed. Macomber is reborn as a "fire eater": a true man, capable of acting without fear, according to traditional standards for masculinity.

Heading back to the **car**, Macomber feels a happiness he had never known before. He says he thinks he will never be afraid of anything again, and that he feels absolutely different. Margot, though, says she hated the chase. She looks at her husband strangely. Macomber says he wants to try another **lion**, and Wilson reflects that American men stay little boys for a long time—but that he likes Macomber now and thinks that this means "the end of cuckoldry" for him. Wilson thinks Macomber's fear is gone now. He's seen this sort of thing in the war. Macomber is now a man; something else has grown in the place of fear, and women know it, too. Margot sees a change in Macomber, but no change in Wilson.

Margot is threatened by Macomber's transformation, which has restored power to him—power that he can exert over Margot, threatening her independence. Additionally, Wilson once again perceives Macomber as a type, regarding him a typical "American man" who has undergone a delayed adolescence. Even though Macomber has begun to act like Wilson, summoning ferocity and confidence, Wilson still thinks of him as a stereotype, again demonstrating his own apathy toward other individuals.

Macomber asks if Wilson has a feeling of happiness about what's going to happen, and Wilson tells him that it doesn't do to talk much about that. Margot says that the two of them are "talking rot," and mocks Macomber contemptuously, saying that he's gotten "awfully brave, awfully suddenly." Macomber agrees.

Macomber is giddy about his newfound fearlessness, which unsettles the stoic Wilson. Wilson's own vision of fearless masculinity involves an absence of emotion, not effusive "happiness." At the same time, Margot's attempts to mock Macomber fall short. Instead of reacting to her contemptuous remarks with embarrassment, Macomber agrees with her: he is unruffled by her cruelty.

Finally, Macomber and Wilson plan to shoot the final buffalo. Wilson tells Macomber that when the buffalo comes, he should aim for the nose, or the chest, neck, or shoulders. He also tells him not to try anything fancy and to take the easiest shot there is. They decide to get started, and Macomber feels his heart beating fast with excitement, not fear.

Macomber continues to feel fearless, even as Wilson reminds him that killing powerful animals is no easy task. Macomber must aim at them with care and precision, since guns on their own are not powerful enough to dominate creatures of this size and might.

Macomber, Wilson, and a gun-bearer get out of the **car**. The gun-bearer says to Wilson in Swahili that the buffalo is dead in an island of brushy trees in front of them, but as Wilson begins to congratulate Macomber, the bull emerges, charging toward them. Macomber fires once, then shoots again, aiming carefully for the nose. Suddenly, though, he feels a flash explode inside his head.

The bull charges, taking Macomber and the other hunters by surprise. But even as he follows Wilson's suggestions, aiming for the buffalo's nose, Macomber is fatally struck (by a bullet, as will soon be made clear). For all of his fearlessness and careful shooting, Macomber's transformation into a "man of action," a ferocious hunter, has been for naught. Like the bull, he is utterly dominated, rendered powerless.

At the same time that Macomber is shooting the bull, Wilson has ducked to the side to get a shoulder shot, and Margot, from the car, shoots toward the group—hitting her husband "two inches up and a little to one side" at the base of his skull. When he aimed for the bull, Macomber hit the buffalo's horns, chipping them. Now both Macomber and the buffalo are lying dead on the ground, separated by two yards.

It is not clear whether Margot consciously aimed to kill Macomber. If she did, she may have acted to protect her own independence and assert authority over her transformed husband. If not, she may have been attempting to participate in the hunt by killing the buffalo and proving herself as powerful as the men, despite her femininity. In any event, Macomber's body is now as motionless and lifeless as the buffalo's: in death, humans and animals are united.


Margot is crying hysterically over Macomber's body, and Wilson tells her not to turn her husband over. He puts a handkerchief over Macomber's head. Wilson regards the buffalo lying on its side as a "hell of a good bull."

To Wilson, Macomber's lifeless body is not as majestic as the buffalo, which Wilson views as a "hell of a good bull," impressed by its stature even in death. Wilson still sees an inherent value in nature that he does not see in humans. Moreover, Wilson does not feel guilty about Macomber's death, though he may have contributed to it by provoking Macomber's transformation—which may have triggered Margot's violent response.

Wilson returns to Margot and admonishes her. He says that he knows it was an accident, but that he will help with the "unpleasantness" to come by having photographs taken for the inquest and providing testimony from the gun-bearers and the driver: she will be "perfectly all right." Margot tells him to stop, but he continues to admonish her, asking her why she didn't just poison Macomber, since "that's what they do in England." Margot begs Wilson to stop again, and he says that he's through now, though he is a "little angry"; he was beginning to like Macomber. Finally, Margot asks Wilson to "please stop it," and he tells her that "that's better," and he will stop.

Though Macomber's death suggests that masculine courage might ultimately be useless in the face of violence, the end of the story affirms male power. Wilson sees Margot as a murderess who has destroyed a good man, and he realizes that her fate rests in his hands since he is the only one who can testify to her innocence. However, Wilson's fate simultaneously rests in Margot's hands, since she observed him use a car on the hunt, and thus could turn him over to authorities for breaking the law. Hemingway ends the story on an uncomfortable, ambiguous note, leaving it up to readers to decide whether Margot actually killed her husband—and to wonder which of the characters holds the most power over the other.


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