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Odyssey:

Hemingway's Last Word About The Ending of "Macomber"

By James M. Cahalan

There is no doubt that "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" is a remarkable story, one which deserves the considerable attention it has already received. It is unfortunate, however, that much of the criticism of "Macomber" to date has tended to suffer from "barrel vision": one critic after another has been obsessed with looking down the sights of Margot Macomber's gun, trying to decide whether or not the shooting of her husband was intentional. Murder or accident? Should we take literally that Margot shot "at the buffalo," or must we accept the hunter Wilson's damning judgment of her as a cold-blooded murderess? I believe that Hemingway is deliberately and deliciously *ambiguous* about the shooting, and about the ending of the story, that he gives us no clear murder evidence in his text, yet establishes a conscious parallel between the courageous lion of the first day of the hunt and the rejuvenated Macomber of the second day. Both are victims; both face death courageously. This is the core of the story.

But Hemingway himself makes some

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interesting comments about the ambiguity. In an unpublished piece entitled "The Art of the Short Story—and Nine Stories to Prove It"—written in June, 1959, and intended as an introduction for a collection of stories which was never published—Hemingway opened up a bit about "Macomber," its characters, and its ending. It is a humorous, lucid, and revealing piece. In his biography Carlos Baker quoted part of its comment on "Macomber": that Margot was a "bitch" and Francis a "jerk."¹ However, if Hemingway's complete statement had been quoted, a lot of misdirected critical energy might have been saved; "barrel vision" might have been cured. The author's most complete statement about his story confirms the ambiguity: it also shows his concern for both Macomber and the lion as victims.

Here is Hemingway's last word:

The woman called Margot Macomber is no good to anybody now except for trouble... The man is a nice jerk. I knew him very well in real life... So he is just how he really was, only he is invented. The White Hunter is my best friend and he does not care what I write as long as it is readable, so I don't invent him at all. I just disguise him for family and business reasons, and to keep him out of trouble with the Game Department. He is the furthest thing from a square since they invented the circle, so I just have to take care of him with an adequate disguise and he is as proud as though we both wrote it, which actually you

¹Baker, *Ernest Hemingway: a Life Story* (New York: Scribner's, 1969), p. 284. Philip Young has quoted a second short fragment from the piece; see Young, "Hemingway's Manuscripts: the Vault Reconsidered," *Studies in American Fiction*, 2, no. 1 (1974), p. 7.

always do in anything if you go back far enough. So it is a secret between us. That's all there is to that story except maybe the lion when he is hit and I am thinking inside of him really, not faked...

That about handles that story. Any questions? No. I don't know whether she shot him on purpose any more than you do. I could find out if I asked myself because I invented it and I could go right on inventing. But you have to know where to stop. That is what makes a short story.... The only hint I could give you is that it is my belief that the incidence of husbands shot accidentally by wives who are bitches and really work at it is very low.²

²Ernest Hemingway, "The Art of the Short Story," photocopy of a typescript, MS. No. 251c, p. 6, Hemingway Collection of the John F. Kennedy Library, National Archives and Records Service, Waltham, Massachusetts. I am grateful to Mrs. Mary Hemingway for her permission to use this quotation; and to Jo August, Hemingway Archivist, for her assistance.

