

# THE DEATH OF FRANCIS MACOMBER

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Francis Macomber, the principal character of Ernest Hemingway's short story, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" (1936), is to some extent Hemingway's self-portrait and his death—he is shot to death—seems to prefigure the author's own death in 1961. The main object of this paper is to consider the meaning that the death of Macomber has in the whole works of Hemingway as well as in the story of Macomber, and to examine the strange coincidence between the death of Macomber and that of the author.

"The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" is one of the best stories of Hemingway, and tells of how Francis Macomber learns, in the pure excitement of hunting, the code or philosophy Robert Wilson, his professional hunting guide, has lived by, attains his manhood and becomes, for a short lifetime, a happy man.

Macomber, one of those "American boy-men" who "stay little boys so long," is on a safari with Margaret, his wife, in Africa. During the safari, they face another crisis in their marriage life, because the wife, having found that her husband is a coward who runs away from a lion, has become disgusted with him and has fallen in love with Robert Wilson, their hunting guide.

Confronted with his wife's infidelity and consumed with hatred to Robert Wilson, Macomber chases a buffalo in a car "going a wild forty-five miles an hour across the open," as if he were trying to make up for his failure of courage at the time of the lion hunting on the previous day, and during the wild chase something takes place in Macomber.

Immediately after the chase, Macomber, feeling "a wild unreasonable happiness" that he has never known before, says to Wilson, "You know I don't think I'd ever be afraid of anything again.... Something happened in me after we first saw the buff and started after him. Like a dam bursting. It was pure excitement."<sup>1</sup>

This something is a sudden attainment of manhood. The pure excitement of hunting has helped Macomber, who is thirty-five years old, to come of age and to learn the code Robert Wilson has lived by. And it has liberated him from the fear of death and has given him "a wild unreasonable happiness." Hemingway has Robert Wilson reflect on the change in Francis Macomber.

It had taken a strange chance of hunting, a sudden precipitation into action without opportunity for worrying beforehand, to bring this about with Macomber, but regardless of how it had happened it had most certainly happened. Look at the beggar now, Wilson thought. It's that some of them stay little boys so long, Wilson thought. Some-

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<sup>1</sup> *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway* (Modern Library), p. 131.

times all their lives. 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. That and being angry too. Motor car too. Motor cars made it familiar. Be a damn fire eater now. He'd seen it in the war work the same way. More of a change than any loss of virginity. Fear gone like an operation. Something else grew in its place. Main thing a man had. Made him into a man. Women knew it too. No bloody fear.<sup>2</sup>

Margaret, Macomber's wife, becomes "afraid of something" when she discovers that her husband has gotten "awfully brave, awfully suddenly." It may be that she has recognized that she will not be able to rule her husband any longer. Anyway, she is afraid and fluttered, and the next moment she shoots Macomber to death, which puts an end to his happiness. Whether she had an intention to kill her husband or whether she has killed him accidentally, trying to save him from the danger of the buffalo "coming in a charge," remains a mystery, although Hemingway has Robert Wilson say to Margaret, "Why didn't you poison him? That's what they do in England." This mystery seems to have some connection with the one hanging over the death of Hemingway himself, for his suicide has been called "the incredible accident."

Francis Macomber, then, is killed at the height of his happiness. He is the man who has died a happy man; therefore, he is a happy man indeed. This is Hemingway's characteristic idea of human happiness. And this idea is carefully incorporated into the plot and structure of the story of Macomber, which makes it an excellent work of art.

The code Macomber has learned from Wilson is the philosophy of death expressed in the lines that this professional hunter used to quote to himself from Shakespeare: "By my troth, I care not; a man can die but once: we owe God a death...and let it go which way it will, he that dies this year is quit for the next."<sup>3</sup> And the "wild unreasonable happiness" this philosophy has given to Macomber who was afraid of death can be traced back to the "sudden happiness" Hemingway himself felt when he first got acquainted with those lines of Shakespeare. Hemingway tells of this experience of his in his "Introduction" to *Men at War* (1942), an anthology of war stories he compiled.

I was very ignorant at nineteen and had read little and I remember the *sudden happiness* and the feeling of having a permanent protecting talisman when a young British officer I met when in the hospital first wrote out for me, so that I could remember them, these lines:

"By my troth, I care not; a man can die but once: we owe God a death...and let it go which way it will, he that dies this year is quit for the next."<sup>4</sup> (Italics mine)

This is, so to speak, the story of Hemingway's coming-of-age. The theme of Macomber's story has its origin in Hemingway's own experience.

As Philip Young has clarified, there appear all through the works of Hemingway the

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *The Second Part of King Henry IV*, III. ii. 250-255.

<sup>4</sup> "Introduction" to *Men at War*, pp. x-xi. (Avon Reprint Edition)

“Hemingway hero” who is to some hard-to-measure extent Hemingway himself in disguise and the “code hero” who “represents a code according to which the (Hemingway) hero, if he could attain it, would be able to live properly in the world of violence, disorder, and misery to which he has been introduced and which he inhabits. The code hero “offers up and exemplifies certain principles of honor, courage, and endurance which in a life of tension and pain make a man a man, as we say, and enable him to conduct himself well in the losing battle that is life.”<sup>5</sup>

The Hemingway hero is Nick Adams, a boy who appears in the short stories. He is Jake Barnes, the narrator of *The Sun Also Rises* (1926). And he is Frederic Henry, the protagonist of *A Farewell to Arms* (1929).

The code hero makes his appearance in the short stories as Manuel Garcia, the bull-fighter of “The Undefeated” (1925) and as Jack Brennan, the prizefighter of “Fifty Grand” (1927). He is, then, Pedro Romero, the young matador of *The Sun Also Rises*. And he is Cayetano Ruiz, the gambler of “The Gambler, the Nun, and the Radio” (1933).

Now Francis Macomber is a variant of the Hemingway hero, while Robert Wilson is undoubtedly the code hero. To be sure, it is quite hard to think that the cowardly Macomber who runs away when the lion charges is Hemingway the man of courage in disguise, but there are some resemblances between Macomber and the author. Like Hemingway, Macomber is tall, very well built, is good at court games, and has a number of big-game fishing records. He is about the same age as Hemingway was when he wrote the story of Macomber. His crises in his married life—the Macombers have been on the verge of divorce at least three times in the past—are to some extent Hemingway’s. (It was in 1926 that Hemingway divorced his first wife.) And the story of Macomber itself is, as we have already pointed out, a fictionization of Hemingway’s own experience.

If, therefore, Macomber can be identified as the Hemingway hero, we can say that the story of Macomber is a description of the process of the Hemingway hero’s being reborn into the code hero. The death of Macomber, then, is among other things a sign that the Hemingway hero and the code hero have become one. The Hemingway hero has come of age in the story of Macomber and lives on as the code hero in the later works of Hemingway.

The code hero into whom the Hemingway hero has been reborn is Harry Morgan of *To Have and Have Not* (1937). He is Robert Jordan of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940). And he is Santiago of *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). The only exception is Richard Cantwell of *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950). He is again the Hemingway hero, whose death is meant to confirm the Hemingway hero’s death we have already seen in the story of Macomber. This is one of the reasons why *Across the River and into the Trees* is a failure as a novel.

The code hero now teaches a lesson: alone, a man has no chance. He is able to die for the causes he believes in. And he shows “what stature a man may have,”<sup>6</sup> as Santiago does in his three-day heroic struggle.

Thus the later works of Hemingway in which the code hero appears as a protagonist are written to praise and glorify the hero’s code and its values, such as honor, courage and endurance, which vitiates them as works of art. It seems as if Hemingway the artist had died with the death of the Hemingway hero.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Philip Young, *Ernest Hemingway*, pp. 7-8. (The University of Minnesota Pamphlets)

<sup>6</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 20.

When Hemingway shot himself to death in 1961, one had the impression that Hemingway died like the writer of "violent death" that he was. There was something in his life and works that made one suppose that Hemingway would die a "violent death." This is a mere conjecture, but it may be that Hemingway was an actor even in his own death. And the death of Macomber now seems to have been one of the hints Hemingway dropped in his works that would have helped an attentive reader to guess what manner of death the author would die.

Hemingway shot himself to death, while Macomber was shot to death by his own wife, but there is a resemblance between the manner of dying of the author and that of Macomber. Hemingway describes the death of Macomber by writing "...and he (=Macomber) felt a sudden white-hot, blinding flash explode inside his head and that was all he ever felt."<sup>7</sup> By a strange coincidence, what Francis Macomber felt when he was shot to death seems to be what Hemingway himself was to experience some twenty-five years later when he shot himself to death. Is it too wild a conjecture to suppose that Hemingway foresaw his own manner of dying and fictionalized it into the story of Francis Macomber?

It is now almost an established fact that Ernest Hemingway committed suicide. Leicester Hemingway, Ernest's brother, seems to admit that his brother's death was suicide when he says:

The next morning, around seven, he (=Ernest Hemingway) took the final action of his life. Like a samurai who felt dishonored by the word or deed of another, Ernest felt his own body had betrayed him. Rather than allow it to betray him further, he, who had given what he once described the gift of death to so many living creatures in his lifetime, loaded the weapon he had and then leaned forward as he placed the stock of his favorite shotgun on the floor of the foyer, and found a way to trip the cocked hammers of the gun.<sup>8</sup>

Hemingway's suicide now seems to make clear the reason why he exposed himself to so many dangers in his lifetime. It may be argued that all through his life Hemingway suffered from a suicidal impulse or from the haunting fear that he would end his life by killing himself. And this suicidal impulse or fear of suicide in Hemingway, if there were one, must be reflected in one form or another in his works.

"Indian Camp" (1924), one of the earliest short stories of Hemingway, for example, tells of how Nick Adams, the Hemingway hero, having witnessed the suicide of an Indian, resolves never to die, or never to kill himself.

In the early morning on the lake sitting in the stern of the boat with his father rowing, he (=Nick) felt quite sure that he would never die.<sup>9</sup>

This is primarily a pronouncement of Nick's determination to live at the moment of another's suicide, but behind the determination there might be Nick's (or Hemingway's) fear that he, too, will some day commit suicide. The conjecture here is that the stronger one's suicidal impulse is, the harder one tries to persuade oneself to live.

If Hemingway was suffering from a suicidal impulse when he wrote "Indian Camp" in

<sup>7</sup> *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, p. 135.

<sup>8</sup> Leicester Hemingway, *My Brother, Ernest Hemingway*, p. 283.

<sup>9</sup> *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway*, p. 193.

1924, it must have been heightened by his father's suicide four years later. Hemingway was obsessed, as many people have pointed out, with death and, as his suicide now seems to have clarified, with the idea of his own death. It is no wonder, therefore, that Hemingway the writer should have tried to fictionize his own death long before it occurred.

In *Green Hills of Africa* (1935) Hemingway says, "...Then the writer must be intelligent and disinterested and *above all he must survive*. Try to get all these in one person and have him come through all the influences that press on a writer. *The hardest thing*, because time is so short, *is for him to survive* and get his work done."<sup>10</sup> (Italics mine) The hardest thing for Hemingway the writer, then, seems to have been to resist his suicidal impulse, "survive and get his work done."

Hemingway the writer did survive long enough to get his work done. He had enough time to fictionize in the story of Macomber his own death he foresaw which was to take place some twenty-five years later. But when a writer as artist has fictionized his own death his imagination pictures, what is left for him to write about? He has no other choice but to imitate what he has produced.

This is one of the reasons why the later novels of Hemingway add almost nothing to his earlier achievement. His tragedy is that Hemingway the man outlived Hemingway the artist, for the artist in him seems to have died with the death of Macomber.

"The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber" is a monument to the short happy life of Hemingway the artist.

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<sup>10</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *Green Hills of Africa*, p. 27.