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# Marriage, Masculinity, and The Memsahib

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Paper 1

### Marriage, Masculinity, and The Memsahib

In his work “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber,” author Ernest Hemingway tells the tale of Francis and Margot Macomber, an affluent couple from America who often make headlines in the society column, on their safari in Africa. They are accompanied by Robert Wilson, an Englishman, who is their guide in the African savanna. The savanna is home to some of the most ferocious species on the planet, and these species are in constant competition with each other over such things as mates and status within their packs and prides. Just as competition is a prevalent force in the wild, it is also one in Hemingway’s story. Two main power struggles can be seen: one between Francis and Margot, who are engaged in a fight to gain and maintain dominance over the other within their marriage, and one between Francis and Wilson, who are both working to prove their own masculinity and exceed the other’s. Both of these conflicts are ignited when Francis fails to kill a lion in the proper way, choosing instead to flee rather than to finish what he has started.

Throughout the story there is conflict in the Macomber’s marriage, and Margot, a “five-letter woman” (30), clearly holds the dominant position over her husband, which she is able to maintain through her manipulative nature, using her words and actions to constantly belittle her husband, preying on his cowardice and thriving on his low self-esteem, knowing he would never leave her because she “was too beautiful” and “she knew too much about him to worry.” Every chance she gets, Margot sneaks a jab at her husband. When discussing Wilson’s red face, for example, Francis jokes that his is red that day as well, to which Margot replies “No. It’s mine that’s red today” (5), referring to the embarrassment she felt at her husband’s cowardice and

failure with the lion. When Wilson tells Francis to order Margot to stay at camp, Margot chimes in by saying that Francis attempting to order her to do anything would be “silliness” (24). Again, she chisels away at his sense of masculinity by letting him know he has no power over her.

She also uses her actions to maintain control. After Francis’s failure to properly kill the lion, Margot refuses to look at her husband, and she does not allow him to hold her hand (20). This shows Francis that she is, again, embarrassed by him. She also begins to actively flirt with Wilson, and kisses him on the mouth in front of her husband. She ends up sleeping with Wilson, and then, upon her return to her own tent, she shuts down all of Francis’s attempts to talk to her about it (22-23), choosing to go to sleep instead of listening to him, which prevents him from having his own voice and being able to stand up to her.

At the end of the story, however, there is a shift, and the dynamic between the Macomers changes when Francis suddenly “feels absolutely different” (32). For the first time, Francis Macomber no longer has any fear. In contrast, Margot, for the first time, “[is] very afraid” (34). This is because she knows she is losing her power over him. He could leave her and be able to remarry, but she, on the other hand, “[is] not a great enough beauty any more at home to be able to leave him and better herself ” (21). If Francis gains courage and confidence, Margot loses her power, her money, and her social status, the things that are most important to her. Rather than fall victim, Margot decides to *play* victim. She shoots her husband, deciding she would rather return home a widow than risk returning a pauper. Just as animals in the African savanna fight over alpha status in their packs and prides, so do Mr. and Mrs. Macomber, and it is Mrs. Macomber who emerges from this fight victorious.

The second competition in “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” is the one between Francis and Wilson. It starts when they are out hunting the lion and Wilson “suddenly

[feels] as though he [has] opened the wrong door in a hotel and seen something shameful” (17). Wilson is appalled at Francis’s cowardly suggestion to just leave the wounded lion rather than face it, and, when they do come upon the wounded lion, rather than staying and helping to finish what he had started, Francis instead runs away, leaving Wilson to finish the task (20). Up until now, Wilson has been patient with Francis, knowing Francis has no experience in hunting, but it is at this point where he loses respect for Francis. For Wilson, masculinity is defined by the willingness to follow through with one’s actions and to step up, even if scared, and Francis met neither of these criteria.

For these men, masculinity is also defined by the ability to tame the greatest beast of all, “the Memsahib” (8). Wilson and Francis refer to Margot by this term, and sometimes simply as “the wife” (26-27), consistently throughout the story. Rather than calling her by her name, Wilson and Francis instead dehumanize her, referring to her as they would the lion or the buffalo, as nothing other than a thing to be conquered. In Wilson’s words, women like Margot are “the hardest,” “the cruelest,” and “the most predatory” (8). To the men, Margot is just another ferocious animal to hunt. Again, Francis fails to meet the standard for manliness. The two men fight over who can actually control the woman: “Why not order her to stay in camp?” asks Wilson. “You order her,” Macomber replies (24). Francis knows Margot will not listen to him, and Wilson takes the opportunity to mock him for it. After the lion incident, Margot begins to dismiss her husband and instead focus all of her attention and affection on “the beautiful, red-faced Mr. Robert Wilson” (21), sparking the battle for her respect. After Margot and Wilson spend the night together, Francis truly begins to hate Wilson (23). Wilson, on the other hand, blames Francis for the affair, saying that Francis should have kept his wife “where she belongs” (23). Again, Wilson believes he is more of a man than Francis is because Francis is not able to

control Margot, and because Margot chose the better, more respectable man to spend the night with.

Once held back by his cowardice, Francis finally gains a burst of courage, becoming like the lion he hunted. Francis is weakened by his wife's harsh words and actions toward him, just as the lion is weakened by the bullets that "[rip]...through his stomach" (15). Despite all these blows, however, Francis suddenly overcomes his weakness. Now, "he [has] no fear, only hatred of Wilson" (28), and he finally begins to prove himself. Even Wilson admits he "shot damn well" (29). The lion, too, is not held back by his wounds, and his eyes are now "narrowed with hate" (19). Hemingway describes the lion's emotions at this point: "All of him, pain, sickness, hatred and all of his remaining strength, was tightening into an absolute concentration for a rush" (19). Just like the lion, Francis has built up all of his pain, embarrassment, anger, and hatred into a newfound courage, and he is ready to pounce. With this new strength, Francis begins to gain more control over his wife when it comes time for him to hunt buffalo. Sensing this change in him, Margot scrambles to get back on top, discounting his achievements with such comments as "it seemed very unfair to me, chasing those big helpless things in a motor car" (30). But Francis dismisses her. He gains another step over Margot when he tells her it is not too late for him to be gaining this courage (34), and thus it is not too late for him to leave her and better himself. But Margot would not allow this. When she feels herself beginning to decline in status, she kills him. Just like the lion, Francis still perishes despite the rush he comes to feel. Between Margot and her husband, she is still the more skilled predator. However, though Margot is not able to be tamed by Francis, she *can* be by Wilson. Wilson does not stop taunting her about her fatal shot until she offers him a meek "please" (37). This desperate plea shows Margot's final fall into submission to Wilson, concluding with Wilson victorious in his conflict with Francis.

Francis holds the upper hand in his marriage for only a brief moment, and thus his life of happiness, as the story's title suggests, is a short one. Ultimately, he lost both of the competitions he is involved in during his time in the African wilderness. Margot remains the alpha in her marriage, and Wilson becomes the great hunter who is finally able to tame her.

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