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Ernest Hemingway's Bonds through Narrative Styles

“The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” by Ernest Hemingway, a writer in the early twentieth century known for his short stories, is a fictional piece that follows the unfortunate circumstances that lead up to the death of Francis Macomber. Through the lens of multiple characters, Hemingway writes with an open-ended finale that leaves readers trying to connect the dots about if the death of Mr. Macomber is an accident or not during his safari excursion. By using a limited omniscient narration in his story, Hemingway is able to effectively create an emotional bond, or lack thereof, between the readers and particular characters that leads to increasing biases and beliefs about the story.

Readers form a connection to the main characters of stories because of the narrative choices an author makes. “The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber” is no exception. Francis Macomber is the main protagonist of this story, and through the third-person narration, readers understand his thoughts and feelings and can grow an emotional bond with him. When described as a cowardly man, rather than feeling displeased or irritated, the audience feels pity and remorse for Francis as he remains fearful of the lion and is humiliated about it by his wife. Hemingway writes, “It was there exactly as it happened with some parts of it indelibly emphasized and he [Mr. Macomber] 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” (11). His fear being described in these vivid details gives readers a sympathetic connotation about Francis; he is so ashamed of his fear that a blatant emptiness has bottled inside him, and the audience knows it is not something he wishes to deal with. Francis’s fear being described to readers is what allows the connection between reader and character to form; emotions towards Francis, such as sympathy and care, are put in place that would not be there otherwise had readers not known the extent of the fear Francis felt.

Along with feeling pity for Francis, readers also feel pity for the lion himself. Hemingway makes a bold decision to show readers the lion’s thoughts and feelings just like he does with Francis and other characters, which allows the audience access to a bond with the creature; the lion is described on page 19 in “All of him [the lion], pain, sickness, hatred and all of his remaining strength, was tightening into an absolute concentration for a rush. He could hear the men talking as he waited, gathering all of himself into this preparation for a charge as soon as the men would come into the grass.” The fear and tension in the lion is met with a brutal end from Wilson’s rifle, and the description of the lion’s thoughts and actions gives way to more pity and sorrow for him, just like it did for Mr. Macomber. The parallel put in place with the lion’s and Macomber’s fear can only be shown through the narrative style Hemingway chose to use.

Robert Wilson, the safari hunter and guide, while not the main protagonist himself, is also given an almost all-knowing narration from Hemingway. Readers can form an understanding of Wilson’s feelings toward Francis and his wife through this narrative choice. He is written as a very proud character but is good at what he does. Hemingway gives Wilson ethos when he speaks of how he wears old, worn-down safari clothing (4) and has seen many men “come of age” during previous hunting excursions (32). But he is also written as very sexist, which both adds to the character Wilson himself as well as the time period this story was written

in. The morning after Mrs. Macomber sleeps with Wilson, she comes to breakfast table and Wilson thinks, “Well, why doesn’t he [Mr. Macomber] keep his wife where she belongs? What does he think I am, a bloody plaster saint? Let him keep her where she belongs. It’s his own fault” (23). While his thoughts show that the time period was during a much more patriarchal time than today and that Wilson is not as innocent and worthy of pity as Francis is, they also prove that Wilson displays honesty, a characteristic only the audience can understand. He may not have spoken of his thoughts to Francis, but he did not attempt to deny the obvious tension growing between the two. Later in the story, when Francis is shot, the dialogue between Wilson and Mrs. Macomber expresses the man’s thoughts without needing explanation. Some of his phrases, such as ““That was a pretty thing to do... he [Mr. Macomber] would have left you too”” (36) and ““Why didn’t you poison him [Mr. Macomber]? That’s what they [women] do in England”” (37), prove that Wilson thoroughly believed that the shot Mrs. Macomber made was intended to kill her husband. Based on the narrations previously in the story, a trusting relationship was already established between the reader and Wilson. Even though he may be sexist, the audience understands that Wilson is good at his job and that he seems to have very honest remarks. Because of the narrative choices Hemingway makes regarding Wilson, the connection readers have with the character makes Mrs. Macomber seem increasingly guilty about her husband’s death.

The lack of a narrative choice can also form its own negative emotional connection with the readers. When it comes to Mrs. Macomber, or Margaret, she is the only main character that the audience does not have access to when it comes to her thoughts and feelings. Throughout the story, descriptions of Mrs. Macomber are given through the minds of Wilson and Francis, but the woman’s personal thoughts and feelings are never displayed due to Hemingway’s limited

omniscient narration. She is often described as a very beautiful woman who does not enjoy the company of her husband, but she stays solely for the money. After the lion incident, when Mr. Macomber had run from the creature, Margaret cried about her husband's cowardliness. She displayed affection for Wilson in turn, while completely ignoring her husband. Hemingway writes, "Macomber's wife had not looked at him [Mr. Macomber] nor he at her and he had sat by her in the back seat with Wilson sitting in the front seat... While they sat there his wife had reached forward and put her hand on Wilson's shoulder. He turned and she had leaned forward over the low seat and kissed him on the mouth" (20). Without the knowledge of Mrs. Macomber's thoughts, readers can only associate the wife with her hateful actions, which causes a negative connotation when she is in the picture. When Mr. Macomber dies, with only the basis of evidence from her actions rather than her thoughts, readers are more inclined to believe Margaret is the murderer. Directly before he is shot, Francis gains confidence in the safari hunt, and his wife is said to have been very pale and seemed to notice her husband's new confidence in a fearful manner. Her realization is stated on page 33 in "...Margaret Macomber looked at the two of them [Mr. Macomber and Wilson]. There was no change in Wilson... But she saw the change in Francis Macomber now." Understanding that Margaret was only remaining in the hateful marriage with her husband because of his money, and Francis was only remaining in the marriage because he was too cowardly to try to find another beautiful wife, Mrs. Macomber being suddenly paled and fearful of her husband's newly found bravery does not do well to her alibi in the reader's eyes. After the death of her husband, when Wilson is insinuating that he knows she shot him on purpose, Margaret only repeatedly states "'Stop it'" (36) rather than explaining herself. If readers were given access to her feelings and thoughts, it is possible that she would be viewed as innocent. But, Hemingway purposely chose not to give his audience

access to her thoughts for this sole purpose. Without knowing her intentions, readers are left to their own devices – that being the subtle clues Hemingway gives them throughout the story – to try to figure out if Margaret killed her husband or not.

Hemingway's usage of limited omniscient narration is a purposeful tool that allows readers to form emotional bonds with the characters. Each important character in Hemingway's "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," including the lion himself, is given a specific form of narration to establish trust and understanding. Whether that be the pitying feelings readers associate with Francis and the lion, the trust associated with Wilson, or even the lack of any positive emotions associated with Margaret, it is all based on the narrative style Hemingway chooses to utilize. The open-ended finale of the story is only possible when the audience has a lack of knowledge of Margaret's intentions, which is precisely what Ernest Hemingway wanted to establish when he makes the choice to keep readers uninformed.

Works Cited

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