



Text "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," Hemingway

Ernest Hemingway writes his short story, "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," in the third person omniscient point of view. Throughout the story, Hemingway shifts the perspective of the point of view--the thoughts and feelings reported by the narrator--from character to character. Readers do not have access to what every character is thinking and feeling at the same time. That access shifts for each episode in the story's action. The flashback of the lion hunt is told mainly from Francis Macomber's perspective, which gives his experience of the hunt primary significance. At key points, however, Hemingway shifts the perspective to the thoughts and feelings of the lion--relating the exact same action from the perspectives of both Macomber and the lion. Alternating between their perspectives provides strong comparisons between Macomber and the lion. The contrasts shown between their perspectives serves to highlight and emphasize Macomber's fear and display of a cowardly character.

The comparison starts with the different ways the lion and Macomber begin their encounter. As Macomber got out of the car "the lion still stood looking majestically and coolly toward this object that his eyes only showed in silhouette, bulking like some super-rhino" (pg 15). This majestic coolness is contrasted with what the heavily armed Macomber was feeling at the time: "He only knew his hands were shaking and as he walked away from the car it was almost impossible for him to make his legs move. They were stiff in the thighs, but he could feel the muscles fluttering" (pg 15). Standing fearfully atop his "fluttering" thighs, Macomber manages to wound the lion with a few "gut-shot(s)" (pg 16).

The next sequence of shifting perspective sets up another contrast of character. The lion, now facing an enemy who has just shot and wounded him unprovoked, prepares bravely and calmly for their next encounter: "He galloped toward the high grass where he could crouch and not be seen and make them bring the crashing thing close enough so he could make a rush and get the man that held it" (pg 15). In contrast, Macomber does everything he can to avoid going into the grass after the lion. "Can't we set the grass on fire?...Can't we send beaters?...What about the gun-bearers?...Why not just leave him?" (pg 17-18). He will put other men's lives in danger to avoid confronting the lion. At one point, he even blurts out uncontrollably, "I don't want to go in there" (pg 17).

While Macomber struggles in fear to avoid the second encounter, the reader learns that the lion's "ears were back and his only movement was a slight twitching up and down of his long, black-tufted tail...All of him, pain, sickness, hatred and all of his remaining strength, was tightening into an absolute concentration for a rush" (pg 19). Access to Macomber's thoughts show that the only thing he fears more than the lion is APPEARING to be afraid in front of Wilson and his wife: "He sat there, sweating under his arms, his mouth dry, his stomach hollow feeling, wanting to find courage to tell Wilson to go on and finish off the lion without him" (pg 18).

Eventually, Macomber's ego wins out and he heads into the grass flanked by Wilson and several other hunters. The final encounter develops the full contrast of character between Macomber and Wilson. As the lion "heard their voices his tail stiffened to twitch up and down, and, as they came into the edge of the grass, he made a coughing grunt and charged" (pg 19). Macomber, on the other hand, went "running wildly, in panic in the open, running toward the stream" (pg 20).

Hemingway could have easily just told the story using Macomber's perspective--giving the reader access to Macomber's terrified thoughts and feelings. By telling the same moments from the lion's perspective as well, however, Macomber's cowardice is further emphasized. The lion was minding his own business in his own habitat. And when he is senselessly attacked by a man who doesn't really want to kill him and doesn't have the strength of character to finish the job, the lion maintains his composure, concentrates, and defends himself. This perspective provides an additional natural and subtle judgment of Macomber's character.