

SYMBOLISM IN HEMINGWAY'S THE SHORT HAPPY LIFE OF FRANCIS MACOMBER

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Abstract: This paper analysed Ernest Hemingway's *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* using New Criticism framework on symbolism. Comparisons of drinks, clothes, and colours paralleled the difference between Francis, a wealthy yet unconfident man, and Wilson, a man of masculinity. The next was the sitting positions of the characters in the car in which front seat symbolised authority and power whereas back seat inferiority and lack of confidence. Car symbolised protection, segregation, and power for Margot, whereas camp, and savannah foresaw Francis' transformation from a wealthy person of comfort (camp) to a man of manly conviction signified with savannah offering wilderness. This transformation was also attributed to Francis' overcoming obstacles symbolised with a lion and buffalos. Guns and rifles possessed by male characters indicated their dominance with Margot, the only female, practically left-out, except by the end of the story when she wielded a rifle shooting Francis dead.

Keywords: *Ernest Hemingway, short stories, symbolism, New Criticism*

INTRODUCTION

Literature has been an integral component of English as Foreign Language (EFL) as well as English Language Education Programmes (ELEP) in many universities in Indonesia regardless of the proportion (Subekti, 2017). ELEP programmes typically have such courses as Introduction to Literature, Prose, and Poetry (Subekti, 2017). Even non-English department students learn English literature in an EFL context (e.g.: Crumbley & Smith, 2010; Dwiyantri, Yufriyati, & Sukirland, 2013; Fernandes & Alsaeed, 2014; Ruder, 2010). Crumbley and Smith (2010) and Ruder (2010), for examples, even reported the use of English short stories to teach economic students about the economy. Besides, as Allington and Swann (2009) pointed out, there have been numerous literary studies offering an interpretative analysis of various literary texts (e.g.: Alnajm, 2015; Levitt, 2011; Subekti, 2017; Subekti et al., 2020), perhaps suggesting the prominence of literary works in academia. This prominence could be attributed to several advantages of studying literature. Literature enables unique interactions between readers, learners, and literary texts (Gibson, 2012). Studying literature enables learners to learn various interesting characters (Van, 2009) through whom they obtain a broad view of society and human beings' personalities in general (Culler, 1997; Law, 2012); which in turn can facilitate learners to have more empathy, tolerance, and understanding (Gibson, 2012; Law, 2012). For this reason, pre-service teachers, who will likely face a diverse classroom population, will benefit much from studying literary works (Gibson, 2012). Learners can feel the stories narrated in literary works through the experiences of the characters on what these could have been like and this allows them to understand the impacts of certain events on people, further enabling self-growth (Law, 2012).

Besides giving reflections of people and society (Law, 2012; Van, 2009), literature at the same time entertains the uses of literary devices, vivid styles, and language aspects (Crumbley & Smith, 2010; Sandamali, 2015). To achieve beauty as well as depth in their creations, authors often use symbolism in their works (Sandamali, 2015). Symbolism refers to a technique used by authors in the literature to convey certain messages through the uses of symbols (Bai, 2015), in the forms of words, images, objects, or actions representing something more than the literal meaning (Yoanna, 2018). For example, depending on the context in the literary texts, 'mountain' could signify power, nature, or obstacles, whereas the sea could signify peace or destructive force (Yoanna, 2018). Symbolism in the world of literary studies may be one of the most popular fields of interest seen from various studies of symbolism in various literary works, for examples in poetry (e.g.: Bai, 2015; Buana, 2017; Hidayat, 2009), in novels (Alnajm, 2015; Fadaee, 2011; Levitt, 2011), and in short stories (e.g.: Arianto, 2018; Ilgo, 2010; Yoanna, 2018).

Among authors often using symbolism in their works, Ernest Hemingway, despite having long gone, has been a prominent figure in American literature for his mastery of using symbols in his works (Sandamali, 2015). There have been many literary studies investigating his works from various perspectives and frameworks from as early as the 1970s to recently (e.g.: Brandt & Renfoe, 2015; Gaillard, 1971; S. K. Harris, 2016; Kawentar, 2013; Peirce, 2016) and even there is a journal, the *Hemingway Review*, dedicated to analyse his works, strongly suggesting his prominent role in the literature field to this day.

Hemingway (1899-1961) had published numerous works in the form of novels and short stories. Winning the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1953 for his novel *The Old Man and the Sea* and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954 for his art of narrative mastery and for his influence on contemporary style (*The Nobel Prize*, 2019), he further strengthened his position in field of American literature, a fame lingering to the present day. One of Hemingway's most notable shorter pieces of writing is *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*, first published in 1936. It tells a story about Francis Macomber, a wealthy American, Margot Macomber, his wife, and Wilson, an English hunting guide, during a two-day animal hunt in Kenya Africa, ending with Francis' death in the hands of Margot, his wife, when the former was in his peak of excitement, whilst also facing danger, of being face-to-face with a charging buffalo (see Hemingway, 1946).

Seen from the importance of studying literary works more specifically on the symbolism aspects which are rich in messages as mentioned earlier as well as Hemingway's prominence along with his works up to the present, it is deemed necessary to review one of his works and *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* could be a good choice considering it is one of the most famous of his short stories.

To be more specific, this study intends to investigate the use of symbolism in Hemingway's (1946) *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* using New Criticism framework on the aspect of symbolism.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present study uses New Criticism as the framework of analysis. Meaning is sought within the literary text (Van, 2009). Hence, analysis or interpreting literary works using this framework should exercise objectivity (Van, 2009). Though it is fully acknowledged that to obtain total objectivity may be difficult, to attain this, interpretations of meanings on symbolism in Hemingway's (1946) *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* were based on literature studies on related symbols.

As for the presentation of analysis, the findings will be followed with relevant direct quotations suggesting the findings from the story. It is then followed with discussions or analyses of findings in relation to literature. The copies of this short story have been now widely available online. However, for consistent reference tracing, Hemingway's (1946) printed version of the book *The First Forty-Nine Stories* within which the short story was published is used as the direct quotation source throughout this paper.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Gimlet and Lime Juice/Lemon Squash

Gimlet and lemon squash were introduced early in the story. It was when Francis Macomber offered Robert Wilson, a hunter and tour guide accompanying the safari journey of Francis and his wife, Margot, in Kenya, a drink in his dining tent at lunchtime.

'Will you have lime juice or lemon squash?' Macomber asked.

'I'll have a gimlet,' Robert Wilson told him.

'I'll have a gimlet too. I need something,' Macomber's wife said.

'I suppose it's the thing to do,' Macomber agreed. 'Tell him to make three gimlets.'

(Hemingway, 1946, p. 9)

Gimlet, a drink made with the combination of vodka or gin and lime juice, here, was contrasted to lemon squash. Francis offered Wilson either lime juice or lemon squash, probably signifying his drinking preference. Wilson, however, said that he would rather drink gimlet, which was not initially offered. Interestingly, Margot seemed to echo Wilson's preference for gimlet. Francis, in the end, also ordered gimlet.

Though not specifically mentioned in journal articles on literacy studies, in several articles on alcohol studies, consumption of alcohol, including gimlet, among some men has been associated with attractive masculinity and courage compared to the consumption of non-alcoholic beverages (e.g.: Eriksen, 1999; Jellinek, 1977). In an old, yet possibly relevant publication, Jellinek (1977) even mentioned that alcoholic beverages have been seen as one symbol of power, resulting in incredible prestige attached to it. Whereas among some forward-looking women, alcohol consumption could also symbolise freedom and strength (Eriksen, 1999). Hence, Wilson's preference for drinking gimlet may symbolise his manly courage, whereas Margot's reiterated position as a strong woman in her marriage. Francis finally ordering gimlet could indicate that at that point in the story Francis did not possess strength and courage Wilson possessed yet he wished he had. It could also signify that Francis wanted to level his position with that of Margot in their marriage. Francis finally ordering gimlet could also foresee his later transformation in which he assumed more confidence and courage as a man in the later part of their safari.

Old and New Safari Clothes

Hemingway briefly contrasted safari clothes that Francis and Wilson wore when Hemingway described Francis' physical characteristics.

... He was dressed in the same sort of safari clothes that Wilson wore except that his were new... (Hemingway, 1946, p. 10)

Despite mentioned only briefly in the story, the difference between Francis' and Wilson's clothes symbolised something much deeper. Clothes, Akdemir (2018) stated, could show social and self-identity. For example, safari clothes are clothes worn when the wearers are having an adventure, for example, hunting or being in the wilderness. The old safari clothes Wilson wore, then, could indicate that Wilson was an experienced adventurer and had accustomed to doing wild animal hunting. In comparison, Francis wore new safari clothes indicated that Francis was new to the wild animal hunting experience. Interestingly, Francis wore safari clothes could also be interpreted that he tried so hard to look masculine and strong before Margot, his wife. However, that the clothes were new could not hide his lack of experience in dealing with the wilderness.

Francis' and Wilson's Red Faces

Margot's comparing Francis' and Wilson's red faces also further implied the difference between these two men.

'You know you have a very red face, Mr. Wilson.' She told him and smiled again.

'Drink,' said Wilson.

'I don't think so,' she said 'Francis drinks a great deal, but his face is never red.'

'It's red to-day,' Macomber tried a joke.

'No,' said Margaret. 'It's mine that's red today. But Mr. Wilson's is always red.'

(Hemingway, 1946, p. 11)

Though at glance, the excerpt merely shows Margot's addressing Wilson's particularly red face, it conveyed multiple possible interpretations of a red face as a symbol. First, that Wilson had a red face and that Wilson denied it was because of the drink could be interpreted that the red colour of his face was attributed to sunburn due to outdoor activities. Hence, red face signified he was a seasoned adventurer. Seemingly wanting to catch Margot's attention, Francis claimed that his face was red that day. Francis' claiming to also have a red face meant that having a red face might have a deeper meaning, such as masculinity and authority, which Francis claimed to have. To this claim, Margot replied that it was her face that was red (indicating embarrassment), meaning disapproval of the claim. Margot's saying her face was red out of embarrassment indicated conflicts within Francis' and Margot's marriage in which Margot verbally harassed Francis further bringing down his confidence as a husband and as a man.

Front Seat and Back Seat of the Car

In a quite old, yet still relevant publication, H. Harris and Lipman (1980) mentioned the significance of space in our daily life, such as seating, in indicating social identity. They further mentioned people's tendency "to differentiate themselves and to be differentiated from their fellows, by their use of space" (p. 417). Regarding that, the positions Francis, Margot, and Wilson took in the car could be considered another symbol in the story. At the beginning of the safari, before the lion incident where Francis cowardly ran away from the hunting group out of fear, Francis sat on the front seat.

He turned back to where Wilson sat in the rear seat of the doorless, box-bodied motor car beside his wife, them both grinning with excitement, and Wilson leaned forward and whispered, "See the birds dropping. Means the old boy has left his kill." (Hemingway, 1946, p. 20)

That Francis occupied front seat position symbolised the authority he had for the whole safari as he was the one paying for it. Doing so, he was also seen as trying to show his masculinity to his wife as the front seat could indicate courage and the role of a leader, in this case within their marriage life.

However, after the lion incident where Francis ran away from the wounded lion out of fear, he sat in the back seat while Wilson sat in the front seat on their way back to the camp.

Macomber's wife had not looked at him nor him at her and he had sat by her in the back seat with Wilson sitting in the front seat. Once he had reached over and taken his wife's hand without looking at her and she had removed her hand from his ... 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. (Hemingway, 1946, p. 26)

In comparison to the front seat, Francis sat on earlier, which indicated authority, the back seat he sat on after the lion incident symbolised inferiority. Everybody in the safari already knew what had happened to Francis and he could no longer act almighty despite that he was the "boss" of the safari. At that point, being the boss of the safari could no longer count much as fear and inferiority had consumed him. It was worsened with Margot's reaction to the event in which rather than comforting his husband at such a difficult time, she seemed to mock what had just happened to her husband by kissing Wilson right before him. On the second day in the journey to buffalo hunting, Francis also sat in the back seat.

'The boy has it,' Wilson told her. He climbed into the front with the driver and Francis Macomber and his wife sat, not speaking, in the back seat. (Hemingway, 1946, p. 31)

That Francis sat in the back seat in this journey indicated that he was seemingly no longer interested to sit in front. This might be caused by his inability to prove his courage so far. Interestingly, this could also mean that he was no longer interested to impress Margot.

The back seat also contributed to the moment in which Margot, perhaps for the first time in her marriage life, felt inferior to her husband, who had begun to muster courage and manly excitement after a successful buffalo hunting experience.

'You've gotten awfully brave, awfully suddenly,' his wife said contemptuously, but her contempt was not secure. She was very afraid of something.

Macomber laughed, a very natural hearty laugh. 'You know I have,' he said. 'I really have.'

Isn't it sort of late?' Margot said bitterly...

'Not for me,' said Macomber.

Margot said nothing but sat back in the corner of the seat.

(Hemingway, 1946, p. 31)

In the excerpt, the corner of the [back] seat symbolised Margot's loss of control over her husband and, at the same time, the threatened feeling towards his husband's transformation into manhood.

Car, Camp, and Savannah

The next symbols were the car, camp, and the Africa savannah in which safari took place.

In the story, whilst the positions of the characters in the car conveyed certain messages as explained earlier, the car itself symbolised several different things depending on who was in the car. For Margot, car symbolised safety, as when the men went hunting, she stayed in the car, as well as symbolised her being left-out or isolated in every hunting time. However, by the end of the story, she took a 6.5 Mannlicher rifle by her side in the car and shot at the buffalo and hit Francis instead.

... Mrs Macomber in the car, had shot at the buffalo with the 6.5 Mannlicher as it seemed about to gore Macomber and had hit her husband about two inches up and a little to one side of the base of his skull. (Hemingway, 1946, p. 42)

Here, the car, which had been the symbol of protection, became a symbol of power as the car became her "hunting stand" from which she fired the rifle, resulting in her husband's "accidental" death.

The next symbols were the camp and the savannah, operating as the symbols foreseeing the transformation of Francis to manhood. Francis was a very wealthy man and as such he was accustomed to luxury and comfort, symbolised with the camp. However, during the safari, he would leave the camp, or his comfort zone, and entered the African savannah representing wilderness and obstacles he needed to overcome to gain manhood. Hence, the overall safari journey narrated in the story in which Francis left the camp for the savannah told Francis' transformation from a wealthy, yet inferior man into a strong-willed, confident man with conviction.

Lion and Buffalos

There were two wild animals repeatedly mentioned in the story, a lion, and three buffalos. In general, wild animals symbolise power and strength as well as big challenges. In this story, Francis failed when he ran away out of fear in the lion hunting on the first day of safari, which meant that Francis had yet to overcome the barrier of his lack of confidence and conviction. He, however, succeeded in the buffalo hunt, which earned him courage, confidence as a man. It could be seen in the excerpt.

Macomber aimed carefully at the centre of the huge, jerking, rage-driven neck and shot. At the shot, the head dropped forward.

'That does it,' said Wilson. 'Got the spine. They're a hell of a looking thing, aren't they?'

'Let's get the drink,' said Macomber. In his life, he had never felt so good. (Hemingway, 1946, p. 35)

The excerpt captures Francis' delight after he could take down one of the buffalos. From this point onward, Francis had transformed into a man of courage and confidence, though this "happy life" was cut short within a day.

Guns and Rifles

The next symbol was guns and rifles. The word "gun" was understandably mentioned forty times throughout the story as it narrated a hunting journey. Hemingway might have purposefully used the word to convey some underlying messages.

As to who held the guns gave the message of who took charge throughout the hunting journey. The male members of the hunting group, Francis, Wilson, and several gun-bearers, were noted to bear the guns, leaving Margot as the only person in the group not to bear any rifle, except towards the end of the story where she took a rifle by her side, fired it towards Francis and the buffalo he was aiming to take down, resulting in Francis' death. As guns or rifles have been attributed to masculinity image as they provide attained expression of immediate power (Cooke & Puddifoot, 2010; Yamane, 2017), Margot's late bearing rifles could be seen as her being psychologically side-lined during the whole hunting journey, which was then inverted as she asserted her "power" by the end of the story by actually firing a rifle.

Secondly, Hemingway detailed Francis' and Wilson's abilities in actually using their rifles for hunting. As guns also symbolises physical representation of power and autonomy (Mencken & Froese, 2018), in the story, Wilson who was able to operate a rifle properly to survive in the wilderness, as seen in the lion hunting on the first day, was pictured to be a stronger and more autonomous man than Francis. It could be seen when Francis, with his loaded gun, ran away once he sensed the lion they were hunting was approaching them, leaving his hunting group for life.

Macomber close to Wilson, his rifle cocked, they had just moved into the grass when Macomber heard the blood-choked coughing grunt, and saw the swishing rush in the grass. The next thing he knew he was running; running wildly, in panic in the open, running toward the stream. He heard the ca-ra-wong! of Wilson's big rifle... Macomber, standing by himself in the clearing where he had run, holding a loaded rifle, while two black men and a white man looked back at him in contempt, knew the lion was dead. (Hemingway, 1946, pp. 25-26)

That Francis started to compose himself and could use his rifle better on the second day implied that he steadily gained his confidence, courage, and strength. It could be seen from this excerpt.

... Macomber, as he fired, unhearing his shot in the roaring of Wilson's gun, saw fragments like slate burst from the huge boss of the horns, and the head jerked; he shot again at the wide nostrils and saw the horns jolt again and fragments fly, and

he did not see Wilson now and, aiming carefully, shot again with the buffalo's huge bulk almost on him and his rifle almost level with the oncoming head, nose out, and he could see the little wicked eyes and the head started to lower, and he felt a sudden white-hot, blinding flash explode inside his head and that was all he ever felt. (Hemingway, 1946, pp. 41-42)

Here, Francis' multiple shots did hit the buffalo, suggesting the better handling of his rifle, which also implied his transition towards a more courageous and assertive man. He would have probably succeeded in taking down the buffalo had he not been shot by Margot in the head, thus killing him. The gunshot killing Francis could also be interpreted that his pursuit of finding his courage finally got him killed.

Interestingly, that Hemingway gave this story its title *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* could also imply that rifles, in contrast to its general symbolism meaning of power, also symbolised Francis' happiness itself. The brief moment of buffalo hunting before his death by a gunshot wound inflicted by Margot, when Francis could finally muster his courage, firing his rifle with such a conviction towards the buffalo, was perhaps the happiest in his life.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Hemingway's *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* provides various implicit matters conveyed through seemingly simple literal sequences of events. The story is rich with symbols signifying much deeper messages and importance. Many of these symbols are related to the binary differences between Francis Macomber and Robert Wilson in terms of masculinity, Francis' transformation towards manhood, as well as a power relation between Francis and Margot, his wife, within their marriage.

Though the short story has been analysed in many literary studies, it is still appealing to further study this short story, especially in the context of English literature teaching. For example, teacher researchers could ask learner participants to read the short story and ask them to report their subjective analysis and interpretations using Reader Response framework (Van, 2009) on certain elements such as symbols, characters, and conflicts. The reported findings on learners' subjective interpretation on the text could offer more flexibility in that it can help demystify literary texts and connect them to individual reader's experiences (Mart, 2019).

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