

Stephanie Fegel

Professor Mason

English 200 Intro to Literary Studies

18 September 2023

What is Masculinity?

The concepts of masculinity and femininity have continued to appear throughout history, changing based on the societal norms of the time. Judith Butler once said, “Masculine and feminine roles are not biologically fixed but socially constructed.” As we continue to enter new centuries, we see the idea of what it means to be masculine or feminine change. In 1936, Ernest Hemingway presented his version of masculinity through his writing in *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*. In this short story, we see Francis Macomber internally battle himself in an effort to appear masculine. Through his writing, Hemingway makes it very clear that the correct way to live as a man is to portray oneself as strong and brave as possible and that anything less is a sign of weakness.

As the story begins, Francis Macomber and Wilson return from an encounter with a lion. It is apparent that Francis had been afraid during the confrontation, and, as a result, loses the respect of his wife, Margaret. Hemingway writes, “She did not speak to him when she came in and he left the tent at once...” (Hemingway 3). Margaret doesn’t even want to look at her husband because of his cowardice. She views him as weak. Through this short moment between

Francis and his wife, Hemingway demonstrates that fear is extremely emasculating. Since Francis showed a small sign of weakness, he is seen as much less worthy of his wife's respect.

On the other hand, Margaret is very impressed by Wilson, who doesn't show fear and is courageous in the face of danger. She says, "What importance is there to whether Francis is any good at killing lions? That's not his trade. That's Mr. Wilson's trade. Mr. Wilson is really very impressive killing anything. You do kill anything, don't you?" (Hemingway 8) In the eyes of Margaret, being strong and courageous is what defines one's worth as a man. In fact, Margaret leaves Francis to rendezvous with Wilson after learning about Francis' cowardice and Wilson's bravery. This is an additional element that adds to the ongoing battle of masculinity between Francis and Wilson. At this point in the story, Francis is the one losing this competition. He is only seen as a coward, not as a masculine figure in any way.

Towards the end of the story, Francis faces another life-or-death encounter. He is facing a water buffalo. However, this time, he stands his ground. He fights to conquer his fear and is determined to be more courageous. Hemingway writes, "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." (Hemingway 33) This lack of fear that Francis has adopted changes the way he is viewed by others. Wilson begins to accept Francis's masculinity and refrains from competing against him. Margaret's opinion of Francis also changes drastically. At first, she looks down upon him, but after this encounter, she becomes extremely threatened by his masculinity. Now, Francis has the ability to regain power in their relationship. Unfortunately, this frightens Margaret so much that she goes so far as to shoot him.

This portrayal of masculinity is not uncommon in books and movies. For example, the way Ernest Hemingway portrays masculinity in *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* is very similar to the way Greta Gerwig and Ryan Gosling portray masculinity in *Barbie*. Francis Macomber deals with a lack of respect from his wife because of his lack of masculinity. In *Barbie*, Ryan Gosling's character, Ken, feels disrespected by Barbie, causing him to take on an exaggerated role of masculinity. In his song "I'm Just Ken," Ken says, "Cause I'm just Ken, anywhere else I'd be a ten. Is it my destiny to live and die a life of blonde fragility." Ken feels worthless because Barbie doesn't love him. Very similarly, Francis feels worthless because his wife doesn't respect him. While Francis faces a water buffalo to prove he has bravery, Ken discovers the concept of patriarchy and attempts to change his whole life. He discovers massive fur coats, horses, and tries to redefine himself. He redecorates Barbie's Dreamhouse and transforms it into what he calls his "Mojo Dojo Casa House." Ken tries his best to portray himself as much more masculine than in the beginning of the movie. Both Francis and Ken feel pressured to display a particular view of masculinity.

Unlike Hemingway, Greta Gerwig attempts to redefine what it means to be masculine. By the end, Barbie and Ken have a serious discussion about where their relationship stands and Barbie urges Ken to find his own passion. Ken learns to be who he is and stops pretending to be "more manly." He's able to be true to himself as a person. It is a choice that culminates with a happy ending of rediscovery. Conversely, in *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber*, Francis is forced to "be a man" by dealing with the fear in front of him. He doesn't truly

rediscover himself. Instead, tragically, he ends up dead, never able to be himself without fear of judgment.

Works Cited

Gerwig, Greta, director. *Barbie*. Warner Bros, 2023.

Gosling, Ryan, “I’m Just Ken,” *Barbie: The Album*, Atlantic Records, 2023

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber* - UW Faculty Web Server, faculty.washington.edu/jdb/303/Hemingway/The%20Short%20Happy%20Life%20of%20Francis%20Macomber.pdf. Accessed 19 Sept. 2023.