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ENGL 215

18 November 2019

Defining Freedom in America

In this essay, I am going to compare and contrast *The Short and Happy Life of Francis Macomber* by Ernest Hemmingway, *The Hairy Ape* by Eugene O’Neill, and *The Open Boat* by Stephen Crane to identify their usage of setting in defining freedom in America. *The Short and Happy Life of Francis Macomber* will be my centerpiece work. I chose these works because they each have a very different setting, yet all portray the struggle for freedom.

First, I will analyze the centerpiece work for this essay, *The Short and Happy Life of Francis Macomber*. This story takes place in the 1930’s on a safari in Africa. The 1930’s, of course, held the Great Depression. Having enough money to go on a safari was rare and something to be quite proud of. Francis Macomber could consider himself a very lucky man as, since he has the money, he has the freedom to do whatever he wishes. In addition, he was lucky enough to marry a beautiful woman. It would seem as though both Francis and his wife, Margaret, have immense freedom from their bountiful wealth and their important social status. However, this could not be further from the truth. Margaret for years used her beauty to manipulate and take advantage of Francis as they both knew he could never find a more beautiful wife. Francis, being as meek as he is, had no control over her actions, and therefore his own life. He could never control what she did and was constantly oppressed by her, but he could not leave her because he had the rarity of being a rich, upper class man in the 30’s, which meant having a trophy wife was essential to the role. Because of this, he actually had very little freedom; he could not leave her, so therefore was stuck with her oppression forever without say. Margaret, as well, in the end of the story begins to lose her freedom. She could do whatever she pleased when she had her looks about her. However, age had stricken her and her beauty was beginning to fade. She tests her luck by sleeping with the safari guide while Francis was there and expects him to be meek and submissive as always. But as ages approaches her, Francis is more willing to leave her behind for someone more attractive and more submissive. Margaret realized this when Francis gains confidence and fears that she will be left to live on her own in the Great Depression where her luxurious lifestyle will be killed. She has to play her cards safe and smart to be able to maintain her freedom of having wealth in such trying times.

In *The Hairy Ape* by Eugene O’Neill, the main character, Yank, is an American, blue-collar worker who spends most of his time in a hot, sweaty belly of a ship shoveling burning coals into the fire. His everyday setting is filthy and pungent, and his work is nothing less. He thinks of himself in high regards due to his athletic build, and his ability to lead and think more intellectually than his coworkers. In the introduction to scene one he is described as being “more sure of himself than the rest. They respect his superior strength” (O’Neill, 1680). That is, until he is exposed to the upper class. He hears how the upper class thinks of him as the ship owner’s daughter calls him a “filthy beast” (O’Neill, 1691). He then realizes his lack of freedom by being trapped in a cage as the more privileged look down on him in disgust and order their commands without ever asking. This is quite the opposite from *The Short and Happy Life of Francis Macomber*. Francis is oppressed by his own wealth and the constant demands he must fulfill to maintain it. He must stick with his controlling wife as he needs a beautiful woman to maintain his important social status, even letting her boss him around by saying “"If you make a scene I'll leave you, darling," Margot said quietly.” (Hemmingway, 20). For Yank, he is oppressed by the wealthy and realizes he will never be seen in their eyes how he sees himself: important, intelligent, and a leader. It was easy to be wealthy in the 20’s due to bootlegging and various other illegal measures. Those of the upper class were extremely wealthy and could do whatever they wished so they viewed the lower class who had to work in grimy settings and were forced to do as they were told without question with an eye of disgust. Yank learns he can never have the freedom to follow his own orders like the upper class and, more importantly to him, never be seen on an equal level as them. It is clear when he goes to town and tries to make contact with the upper class that they will only see him for his dirty job and lack of education. Yank knocks into a rich man in the high class city streets and merely receives a “I beg your pardon” and the man “has not looked at Yank and passes on without a glance, leaving him bewildered” (O’Neill, 1698). Yank then approaches a woman and attempts to woo her with “Hello, Kiddo. How’s every little ting? Got anything on for tonight? I know an old boiler down to de docks we kin crawl into” (O’Neill, 1698). The woman “stalks by without a look, without a change of pace” (O’Neill, 1698). It is made clear to Yank that his desire of freedom to be seen as an equal with the upper class will never be fulfilled because he works in a dirty cage while they enjoy the cleanliness that comes with their wealth. Little does he know that people like Francis also cannot follow their own orders and be free from criticism because of societal demands. Francis and Yank are very different on the surface as they are from vastly different socioeconomic statuses and one was poor in a time where it was easy to be rich and another was rich in a time where it was easy to be poor. They would never believe that they have anything in common and both would argue that they are more free than the other. However, in the end, they are incredibly similar as it is societal standards based off of their socioeconomic status that is keeping them from ever being truly free to do as they wish in America. Both men have to face the struggle of judgment from others that keeps them from being free to do as they wish. Neither man can find his freedom and end up dying trying to obtain it.

*The Open Boat* by Stephen Crane depicts a different type of a lack of freedom. This lack of freedom is based off nature. This work was written during the Realism era where writers depicted nature as an emotionless force that simply followed its biological orders with no intent against humans as shown in the text, “A singular disadvantage of the sea lies in the fact that after successfully surmounting one wave you discover that there is another behind it just as important and just as nervously anxious to do something effective in the way of swamping boats” (Crane, 1492). The men in the boat are out in the open ocean, but finally come close to the shore of Florida. They can feel the hope inside them rise as they believe they are finally free from the devastation of the stormy ocean. However, they are continuously pulled back to sea and have to work again to obtain freedom from their troubles. This is different from *The Short and Happy Life of Francis Macomber* as Francis’ main oppressor is his wife and the societal standards that require her to stick around. But Francis is also oppressed by nature as it is the safari that causes his wife take away all of his freedom. Francis came to Africa to prove his dominance to his wife, but at first does the exact opposite. His poor aim when shooting the lion and then his fear and pathetic fumbling when face to face with the lion gave Margaret just enough reason to completely take his freedom away by sleeping with the guide and then allowing herself and the guide to actively shame Francis for his lack of control over her. While Francis is furious with his wife for taking all of his freedom, he is also furious with the wild to have caused this. He feels oppressed by the wild as it is causing him to lose control of his life. He felt pathetic and weak after his encounter with the lion and worried about it all night as he could feel the wild taking away his control over his own life. This is the exact situation that the men in *The Open Boat* are in. They are oppressed by the sea and have no control over their lives while out there. All they want is to conquer their surroundings so they can be free to live without worry again, but the sea, similar to the wild animals in Africa, is merely following its natural course. The men overcome their oppressor when they reach the shore and they can taste the freedom on their tongues. The excitement of finally seeing freedom causes them to persevere and escape the sea, but one man falls victim to his own desperation and drowns in the ocean. This is similar to Francis. He finally obtains his freedom from being victim to his wife when he successfully shoots the buffalo. He is above her for once and knows that now he can do as he pleases and boss her around. Margaret sees that her freedom has now been lost and she, like Francis and the men in the boat, is absolutely desperate to retrieve it. Whether an accident or not, she feared the worst for herself and fatally shot Francis. In both cases, in *The Short and Happy Life of Francis Macomber* and *The Open Boat*, the people are driven by their desire for freedom and are so desperate they will even act irrationally to obtain it.

In all three stories, the person searching for freedom dies before they can ever reach it. This is very representative of freedom in America in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s. Life was difficult in many different ways and many people could only long for the freedom they desired. It is clear in these three different works based off their setting that freedom can be defined in many a different way. For Francis as a rich man in the 30’s, freedom was be the ability to do as he pleases without being criticized and to have control over his life and family. For Yank, a working class man in a grungy job, it would be being viewed as an equal with those of the upper class and to not feel lesser than them. For the men in the boat in the stormy ocean, it would be the reassurance of safety of life on land with no natural dangers. For the men in the boat it is a physical freedom they desire. Yank and Francis both perceive themselves as free, but mentally they are trapped by society and the people directly nearest to them (the rich girl in *The Hairy Ape* and Margaret, Francis’ wife). Freedom in America, in my opinion based off these works, can be defined as having the ability to be physically and mentally free to do as one chooses without the fear of danger, criticism or any kind of oppression.

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