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Fishing for a Hero

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Fishing for a Hero

On national holidays like Martin Luther King Day, Memorial Day, and Veterans Day, people all over the United States honor heroes who have protected their country and its residents. While some people receive public recognition for their deeds, others serve as heroes for just a few people. Regardless of their popularity, all heroes possess certain qualities that make them esteemed and respected. The coinage of the term “Hemingway code hero” supports this idea. The expression represents a character in one of Ernest Hemingway’s works that personifies values like bravery, honor, and perseverance and maintains poise in the face of overwhelming challenges. His reactions to difficulties, if elegant and in accordance with these values, assert his manliness. Santiago, the main character in Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*, exemplifies a code hero by defying social and physical restraints, persevering through negative experiences, and gracefully handling failure.

Hemingway predominantly refers to Santiago as “the old man” (Hemingway 9), insinuating that his age has an immense effect on the quality of his life. Descriptions of a “thin and gaunt [fisherman] with deep wrinkles” (9) and scars that “as old as erosions in a fishless desert” (10) illustrate Santiago’s deteriorating physical condition and foreshadow his failure in an environment where strength and youth play vital roles. Santiago, in addition to his disadvantage due to old age, has an eighty-four-day-long streak of bad luck at sea, making him “*salao*, which is the worst form of unlucky” (9). These two factors, when taken into

consideration, make other fishermen either pity or mock him. His pride comes to light during interactions with such fellows, because “he is [never] angry” with them (11) and does not allow his bad luck and lack of broad social support to dishearten him. He tells his companion Manolin, the only person who has faith in him, that he will have luck on his eighty-fifth day at sea and describes bringing in a fish “ ‘that dresse[s] out over a thousand pounds’ ” (16). Instead of despairing over his ill fortune, the old man does everything in his power to improve his life. He tries to counteract the negative physical effects associated with aging by eating eggs for strength and drinking shark liver oil for good eyesight (38). By remaining hopeful and determined, Santiago defies the social and physical restraints working against him.

Although he feels confident in his abilities as a fisherman (23, 27), the old man does not always act in courageous ways. He hides the picture of his wife “on [a] shelf in the corner [of the room] under his clean shirt” (16), indicating that he cannot handle the emotional pain of losing her. He also seems to lack the courage necessary to confront every part of his harsh reality, because he constantly says that he has enough of his own food to eat (16) even though he relies on the boy to bring him meals. Although such instances highlight Santiago’s sensitivity and make him seem dependent on others’ generosity, he demonstrates genuine bravery on the open sea. Unlike other fishermen who “[fear] being out of sight of land in a small boat” (61), Santiago has the courage and resilience to continue pursuing a large fish even after he “saw that no land was visible” behind him (46). He claims that he does not care whether the fish kills him (92), a declaration that emphasizes his valor. During his encounter with sharks on his last night out at sea, Santiago invites the beasts to his skiff, saying “ ‘*Galanos*. Come on *galanos*’ ” (108). He acts fearlessly during his fight with creatures that “would hit a man in the water, if they were

hungry, even if the man had no smell of fish blood nor of fish slime on him” (108). His ability to take risks and deal with potentially life-threatening situations characterizes him as a code hero.

Santiago faces countless challenges while at sea, and he displays great perseverance and elegance in managing most of them. He shows that he respects the sea by referring to it as “*la mar*, which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her” (29). The old man’s reaction when he sees “a Portuguese man-of-war floating close behind the boat” (35) does not seem in accordance with his pleasant conception of his environment. He rudely calls the sea a whore (35), suggesting that he does not possess the grace of a code hero. Although angry at the water, he still uses the feminine form to characterize it, calling it “*Agua mala*” (35) instead of *agua mal*. This insinuates that the old man’s admiration of the sea underlies any temporary frustrations he may have. His words exemplify a sturdiness of character, even if they seem angry and offensive at first. Santiago treats his prey as an equal, saying that “ ‘The fish is [his] friend’ ” (75) even though he feels that it “ ‘is killing [him]’ ” (73). After struggling with the fish for several days, his respect for it demonstrates his ability to maintain poise under immense pressure.

Santiago’s willingness to make sacrifices and endure pain in order to catch “the biggest fish he had ever seen” (63) comes to light several times during his voyage. Although the old man admits that “ ‘No one should be alone in their old age’ ” (48), he tolerates his loneliness, because he did not want Manolin to leave a lucky boat in order to assist him (10). In addition to carrying this emotional burden, Santiago has to deal with physical pain. Since no one could take his place holding the line that hooks through the fish’s mouth, Santiago has to stay awake for almost three days, “bearing the -pull of the fish across his shoulders” (76). He suffers from “the pain [of] the cord across his back” (74) and occasionally “[feels] faint and dizzy” (87) from lack of sleep. After hurting his left hand on the boat, the fisherman consoles himself by thinking that “the

bleeding may keep [it] from cramping” (111). By thinking of his cut objectively, Santiago demonstrates that he can deal with the challenges of fishing in a tough, manly way. His actions and thoughts show that he feels confident in controlling his discomfort and pain (88).

Although he successfully kills the fish, Santiago cannot bring it to shore in one piece, because the sharks attack it until “There [is] nothing more for them to eat” (119). After he realizes that “he [has been] beaten . . . and without remedy” (119), Santiago regrets killing the fish, because he feels that it died for no reason. By apologizing to its carcass instead of dwelling on his own loss (115), the old man accepts his failure with grace. He does not seem particularly troubled when he finally reaches the harbor, but he does not boast about killing the large creature either. Although this suggests that he feels disappointed in the result of his endeavor, it might be a result of his immense exhaustion. After getting some rest, Santiago reflects on his experiences at sea, and he openly discusses his failure with Manolin, saying, “ ‘They [the sharks] truly beat me’ ” (124). By discussing the truth and not trying to conceal the unpleasant parts of his voyage, Santiago shows that he does not feel ashamed. Although he does not avoid his distasteful experience, he does not dwell on it either. He allows Manolin to keep the fish’s spear (124), conveying that he feels that even a small remainder of his hard efforts has value. He and Manolin agree to fish together again (125), showing that Santiago refuses to let one bad expedition ruin his faith in himself and his love of the activity. His actions after he reaches land support his belief that “ ‘A man can be destroyed but not defeated’ ” (103).

Santiago’s actions and opinions truly characterize him as a Hemingway code hero. He demonstrates an exceptional will to succeed even when faced by emotional, social, and physical stressors. The old man’s resilience, principle, and courage compares to that of heroes like Martin Luther King Jr. and soldiers who fight on the battlefield. Even though Santiago did not complete

what he initially endeavored to do, he did gain a little recognition. People admired the fact that he managed to bring a long skeleton to the shore from the middle of the sea, measuring their own achievements to his and talking about his voyage (122, 126). Santiago's positive characteristics make him a good symbol, or code, for heroes, and people continue to recognize and celebrate them in everyday life.

Work Cited

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Old Man and the Sea*. New York: Scribner, 2012. Print.