

# Santiago: transcending heroism



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In Ernest Hemingway's work of literary brilliance, *The Old Man and The Sea*, Santiago finds himself pitted against a beauty of nature – a beast in the eyes of man. At first glance transcending the task of slaying the marlin is what makes Santiago a hero, but in retrospect there is much more than simply killing the brazen fish that defines Santiago's true role as a heroic emblem. Through conquering his conflicts against the sea, its inhabitants, and even himself, Santiago proves that “ a man can be destroyed but not defeated,” and ultimately cements his place as a unique hero in literature (103).

From the first line of the novella, a beaten tone is introduced and Santiago is pitted against his struggle with defeat. “ He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish;” instantly the audience is made aware of Santiago's first of many obstacles (9). Santiago claims to be ridden of any former luck he may have had and the few background characters of the novel help to further express this opinion. His fellow fishermen pity him, and his one side companion is even forced to abandon him because of his infamous bad luck at sea. With all of this riding against him, Santiago displays an interesting sense of confidence and rises for another day on the sea, sailing out even further than the other fishermen. Hemingway distinctly notes that despite these beginning adversities, “ his eyes ... were cheerful and undefeated” (10). Establishing this sense of pride Santiago has within himself is an important part of the opening portion of the novella as Santiago's battle is often one of moral nobility rather than man versus nature as one may be originally drawn to think. This alongside the combined deliberateness of each

small act performed and the simplicity of Hemingway's writing technique help to form a character that is easily recognized as a hero.

From here, Santiago isn't left out at sea long before hooking a fish; it is at this point that the real battle begins. For the mysterious old man, fishing is as much a means of finance as it is a way to prove himself. He sees the sea, – this realm of nature, to be almost entirely one with the realm of morality he struggles with, and he compares the creatures he encounters to all that he has come to know about life. These scenarios, in combination with the sequences of highs and lows that lead up to killing the marlin, help to highlight a lot of the old man's heroic characteristics.

Santiago often dwells on the sea's worthiness but he also makes note of nature's curious fragility. At one point, a small warbler comes to rest on Santiago's fishing line. In reflecting on the bird's worn down behavior, the old man accepts that nature is a place of predator vs. prey – a cycle that can't be broken. Man's conquest has always been to break through this barrier of natural law, but as fragile beings, the task continuously proves futile. The conflicts overcome along the journey ultimately add up to much more. The sea, a symbol of life itself, is something he both loves and mistrusts; he recognizes the strength of the black waves pounding against him, but he commits himself wholeheartedly to enduring and overcoming their presence. In submitting himself to the inevitable, but nonetheless refusing to give in, Santiago displays a great sense of nobility.

Adding to his list of heroic characteristics are the strides of charity, determination, and great strength Santiago displays while at sea. In finally

taking down the giant fish, Santiago proves himself to be both incredibly strong and resilient for a man of his age. The scene also reveals a unique side to his personality though as well. As he resonates so much personally with the fish, the moment is almost one of delirium for the old man. He questions whether he is truly worthy of killing the fish being as it is a creature of such beauty, endurance, and wisdom, but in recognizing these traits, the fish is majorly a symbol for Santiago himself. Once again, the sea becomes an affirmation point for Santiago. If he is to truly prove himself worthy of these titles, –the qualities of life which he values most, Santiago must slay the fish despite his love for the creature. In mustering up every ounce of remaining strength and “ his long gone pride,” Santiago is able to harpoon the giant of a fish and simultaneously overcome the psychological battle he has been fighting (93). For the reader, overcoming this challenge places Santiago in a position of glory, but, in what may seem to be quite an unfortunate twist of events, the story is far from over. Although Santiago’s great task seems to have been finally overcome, the audience is soon made aware that taking down the marlin is only half of the battle.

Like the rhythm of the crashing waves, a hero’s journey is often one of repetitive toil. Life is a journey composed of a multitude of conflicts, and a hero is often forced to prove himself time and time again. Within a matter of hours, sharks start lurking around the small fishing boat in lure of the man’s precious cargo. Having grown quite attached to the fish, Santiago’s stance of heroism shifts from one of man versus the beast to a position stemming from the core of human nature. Though he is almost entirely ridden of hope, he is driven by what truly makes him a hero, his fearless and courageous respect

for life, to keep fighting for his “ brother.” Even in these moments of hopeless and inevitable destruction, Santiago still fights till the end.

Sailing in unnoticed on a curtain of darkness, Santiago’s return is rather undetected for such a courageous hero; he is not greeted by the roars of a kingdom or trampled with sovereign affection. In fact, Santiago’s return is only marked with more struggle. In all realms of this scenario, the old man and the wielded along skeleton are a symbol of defeat, but unlike the carcass tied to his side, Santiago still moves on. Though all hope may seem lost, Santiago accepts his place in the balance of nature; in noting this, he ultimately transcends the vicious cycle of continuation. He remains undefeated, recognizing that this journey encompassed was simply another step in his lifelong path. Santiago, though seemingly destroyed, is never defeated.

In a world that is fundamentally static, man is always struggling to triumphantly break through the pattern of repetition, -but the cycle of nature is one that often flows freely against the staccatos of human ambition. In this battle of mind over matter, most men fail to prove victorious. Regardless of the treasures brought back from war or the numbers slain, a hero is truly built based on more than their material culminations. Against life’s seemingly endless barrage of conflicts, a hero’s status is solidified truly in how they respond to the chaos. With acts of compassion, nobility, and strength, Santiago may have been overcome in his conquest to bring home a bountiful reward, but his status as a hero was entirely cemented by this journey. As Santiago would say, “ a man can be destroyed but not defeated” (103). A true hero is one who knows that amongst adversity, winning the

fight against one's internal damnation can mean much more than slaying a beast. While he returns seemingly destroyed, the old man never let his inhibitions defeat him. Again he will rise from the newspaper-covered bed and return to the pounding current – forever undefeated.