

# A complicated life of ernest hemingway

Literature



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## **Grace Under Pressure in Hemingway's Life and Literature**

Ernest Hemingway has an abundance of experience with the idea of courage.

As a Red Cross ambulance driver and reporter, Hemingway saw five battlefronts. Returning home after wars, he fought *nada* – his own nothingness. Hemingway defined courage as “grace under pressure.” Grace in the face of war and in the face of *nada* exemplify courage in Hemingway's own life. Similarly, courage appears in much of his writing. In “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place,” the older waiter looks into the face of *nada*. Through this character, Hemingway shows his views on grace under the pressure of *nada*.

Hemingway demonstrates the true meaning of courage throughout much of his life. At age 14, he took boxing lessons. In his first lesson, he faced professional fighter Young O'Hearn, who did not “go easy” (Sherrod and Singer 14) on Hemingway as promised. By the end of the match, Hemingway's nose was broken. He revealed to a friend that he was scared of the fight, but went through with it regardless of his fears. Hemingway continued to fight, suffering permanent damage to one eye and countless trips to the emergency room. Through his dedication to boxing at such a young age, Hemingway embodies his definition of courage. Hemingway was the only student in the class to continue after the first lesson. His persistence shows his grace under the pressure of physical fear.

Much of Hemingway's definition of courage can be seen through his own heroism in World War I, which was the “most important war in Hemingway's development” (Moreira). While stationed in Italy as an ambulance driver for the American Red Cross, Hemingway made his way to the trenches, serving

chocolate to Italian soldiers. An Austrian attack left Hemingway injured with 237 shrapnel splinters in his body as he unsuccessfully attempted saving the life of an Italian soldier. Although Hemingway later claimed that his actions were not out of courage, but rather “an impulse” (qtd. in Sherrod and Singer 35). Hemingway did, however, demonstrate tremendous grace under pressure. Hemingway risked his life in an attempt to save another. Although unsuccessful, his courage earned the Croce di Guerra, the Italian War Merit Cross, and the Medaglia d’Argento al Valore Militare, the Silver Medal of Military Valor. Hemingway’s act of courage fits his own definition of “grace under pressure.”

Hemingway combines his definition of courage and his love of bullfighting in his short story “The Undefeated.” In this story, Manuel Garcia, a recently injured bullfighter, wants to return to the sport but must settle for low pay and an inopportune time slot. Although advised not to fight, Garcia enters and is injured again, but still refuses to believe that his time with bullfighting may be over. Garcia demonstrates courage in the sense that Hemingway had in mind.

The bullfighter maintains grace under the pressure of a doubtful agent, the memory of his deceased brother – killed by bullfighting –, a worrisome picador, and charging bulls. Garcia’s courage stems from his dedication to the fight and his desire to return to doing what he loves even with the doubt and skepticism of his audience. There had even been rumors that he had died or lost limbs in the hospital, according to Retana. By returning to bullfighting and sticking to the fight in the story although the outcome seems

grim – and Garcia is gravely injured – Hemingway brings courage to life in his matador who refuses to acknowledge defeat.

Similar to Garcia in “The Undefeated” is the old man in Hemingway’s “The Old Man and the Sea.” The old man, devastated by 84 days without catching a fish, brings his small skipper out to deeper and more dangerous waters, and succeeds in hooking a giant marlin. Catching the marlin requires days of struggling against nature. When he finally catches the fish, sharks attack the boat in an effort to take this marlin, so the old man – exhausted from catching the fish in the first place – must battle sharks on his journey back to safety. The old man, in his battle against nature, shows his courage as he remains graceful while under the pressure of the marlin and the sharks. Hemingway has said that “man is not meant for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated,” (Hemingway qtd in Prescott) and the old man embodies this courage.

The characters in “A Clean, Well-Lighted Place” face neither a boxing match nor trench warfare, but instead face a pressure much scarier than any physical enemy: nada. “Spain believed in ‘nada’ ... Live for the day, for tomorrow is ‘nada’” (Sherrod and Singer 86). The older waiter, when left to think for himself, ponders nada. He asks himself, “what did he fear?” When realizing that his fear was not fear, but “a nothing that he knew too well,” the older waiter is forced into the realization that “it was all a nothing and a man was nothing too” (Hemingway 291). The waiter faces the pressure of nada through cynicism rather than grace, as he recites the Hail Mary prayer, but turns it into an existentialist ode, effectively nullifying spirituality.

Through this cynicism, the waiter demonstrates a possible understanding of the world similar to Hemingway's own views. By accepting the inevitability of nada, Hemingway and the waiter show Hemingway's definition of courage. Many question life until their deaths. This quest to understanding can be viewed as the pressure. Hemingway and the older waiter face the pressure of understanding with a quiet intensity.

The idea of nada can be affiliated with death. In "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place," the waiters encounter an old man who recently attempted suicide. In this attempt, the old man proves that he had accepted the inevitability of nada and was willing to embrace it. The older waiter demonstrates an understanding of this acceptance. Instead of showing a cynicism towards the old man like the younger waiter, the older waiter simply wonders about the reasons for the attempt. While the younger waiter is angry about the long hours the old man spends at the café, the older waiter is content with staying in the "clean and pleasant café" (Hemingway 290).

Hemingway shared similarities to both the older waiter and the old man. Hemingway committed suicide, as the old man attempted to do. The author accepted nada. At some points in his life, he "simply no longer cared if he live or died" (qtd. in Moreira). By accepting nada, Hemingway again demonstrates his courage as grace under pressure.

Hemingway embodied courage from a young age. Be it physical grace and pressures or grace under the pressure of the eventual nada, Hemingway understood courage. Through his understanding of grace under pressure, the

author is able to force characters and readers alike to challenge their understanding of courage, as seen in “ A Clean, Well-Lighted Place.”