Ernest Hemingway

In the year 1899 in Oak Park, Illinois, Ernest Hemingway was born. He received a cultural and socialization program of traditional values. Hemingway is considered one of America’s greatest writers. For some time he worked as foreign correspondent in France where he met other great writers such as Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Hemingway pursued an adventurous lifestyle as a big game hunter and sport fisherman. He also enjoyed watching bullfights in Spain. His writing style was characterized by simplicity, clarity and compression. In 1954 he won the Nobel prize for literature. In his last years, he suffered much health decline, was depressed and losing his eyesight. He unfortunately died by suicide in 1961.

In his adult years Hemingway lived fully, enjoying celebrity status, indulging in alcohol, women, and serious adventure. For Hemingway living on the edge was preferred to ordinary living. One can liken his life to a balancing act at the tipping point to a life consumed by self-gratification. Hemingway needed to be at the center of the event—either in war, the bullfight or enjoying big game hunting. It was not until the 1950’s that Hemingway’s acclaim began to diminish. Refusing to surrender to his critics, he wrote The Old Man and the Sea in 1952, which earned him the Pulitzer Prize followed by the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954. At the reception he offered the following for his acceptance speech in 1954:

“Writing, at its best, is a lonely life…He grows in public stature as he shed his loneliness and often his work deteriorates. For he does his work alone and if he is a good enough writer he must face eternity, or the lack of it, each day.”

By 1960 however, Hemingway’s health was seriously declining. He developed diabetes, vision impairment and kidney problems. After a psychiatric hospitalization and electroschock treatments he was discharged. On July 2, 1961 Hemingway committed suicide by a self-inflicted wound to the head. For Hemingway, courage was the hero’s main attribute. His hero would not engage in self-deception and accurately interpreted his reality. Honesty and integrity were his core values and his hero was concerned with maintaining manhood while honoring the Hemingway code “grace under pressure.”

In The Old Man and the Sea, Santiago is an old fisherman who has not caught a fish for 84 days. To avoid feeling defeated, inadequate and old, Santiago has faith that he can seize a prize catch. His strong will and faith enables him to overcome forces of nature and he battles a big fish for three days. After reeling in the large marlin Santiago attaches it to his boat. As Santiago rows to the village sharks chew off chunks of the fish, leaving only a skeleton for the other fishermen to see. Santiago emerges as the hero because of his unwavering faith in self and his indefatigable spirit.

Santiago understands that the sea can be kind, unforgiving and unfair. Although he knows that he could be regarded as a guest to the sea, and that it is part of nature, Santiago perceives himself as part of nature. By doing so he avoids becoming the antagonist doing battle against an external, natural force. For Santiago conquering the elements of the sea, in the form of fiercely capturing a fish is the driving force of his heroism. His monumental triumph occurs after three days of battling and reeling in his marlin. Santiago now is victorious and Hemingway has Santiago declaring “Man is not made for defeat…. A man can be destroyed but not defeated” (p. 103) Santiago as the heroic figure has dignity and grace, never surrendering to defeat.

The other driving force in Santiago is pride. As a fisherman, Santiago compromised his safety by venturing further out to sea to land his big catch. In the end, Santiago emerges as a hero by killing the marlin and experiencing a sort of spiritual grandeur—the outcome of his undying will to overcome external forces and elements pitted against him: “I’ll kill him though in all his greatness and his glory. Although it is unjust… But I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures. Now is when I must prove it. (Hemingway, 1952, p.66)

In the end, this novella is a parable about life—that life is an endless struggle for perpetuation and meaning. In the story, Hemingway shows that there is honor in struggle and defeat.

Hemingway’s characters in his short stories and novels were given to violence, living hard, rugged lives and using alcohol, being sexually promiscuous and these characters were at times, in despair and taking risks. These male characters lived in an unforgiving, tough world and their bruised bodies reflected their rugged life. Hemingway’s heroes faced death squarely in the face and weren’t afraid to let their lips touch death. Philip Young, a Hemingway biographer created the phrase “Hemingway code hero” (Young, 1966) to describe characters in Hemingway’s novels who possess honor, courage and endurance in confronting pain in suffering in life. The code hero shows no emotions because it represents a sign of weakness and vulnerability.

The existentialist themes in Hemingway’s work is expressed in characters being strong and persevering—enduring life’s painful challenges and seeking to create their unique, individual meaning in a seemingly meaningless world. Hemingway’s characters realize it is their responsibility to make something of their lives, to define and explicate their own moral codes.