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Sanctity and Santiago, the Message of *The Old Man and the Sea*

For my book report, I read *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway. This novella tells the story of Santiago, an old Cuban fisherman. Santiago has gone 84 days without catching a single fish, causing him to be either shunned or distantly pitied by the entire community and his fellow fisherman, due to the perception that he has become the worst possible form of unlucky. This unluckiness is viewed by the community as a sort of curse, and they avoid him as one would avoid a sick man so that they do not become tainted by his unluckiness. What affects him the most about this is the fact that he is forced to separate from his apprentice, who he refers to simply as “the boy”. The boy’s parents have forbidden him to fish with Santiago, and would rather him fish with the other, more successful fisherman. The boy still helps out Santiago, carrying his mast, serving him meals, and seeing him to sleep and bringing him coffee in the morning. The biggest service he provides, however, is companionship, giving Santiago someone to talk to about baseball and more.

On the morning of the 85th continuous day with no fish, Santiago sets out, as he does every other day. Today, however, he ends up hooking a gigantic Marlin, one that he fights for two days and nights and drags him out so far into the deep that he loses sight of the land and the lights of the coast. When he is finally able to bring the fish in and kill it, it takes him another day and night to return to shore. During this journey, sharks continually attack the dead Marlin,

which is so big Santiago has to strap it to the side of his skiff, as it would sink it if he brought it on board. Despite his best efforts to fight off the sharks, by the time Santiago reaches his community, the Marlin has been stripped down to just a skeleton with a head, sail, and tail. He staggers home and sleeps for almost an entire day. The other fishermen judge the fish to be over 18 feet long. Rather than keeping it as a trophy, Santiago gives what is left of the fish back to the community that had all but abandoned him. As the boy promises to fish with him again, Santiago falls asleep, dreaming of the lions on the beaches of Africa he visited as a younger man.

This story is full of allusions to religion and spirituality. Santiago often speaks of the sea and the fish in a reverent manner, referring to the sea as one giant living organism full of fish and other creatures, with its own will and senses. He also treats the fish with a great sense of respect, viewing their battle not as fishing, but as bonding. He refers to him as noble, a brother, or a guest/company. Santiago repeatedly prays, or promises to pray, that only he could bring in the fish. But even when he does so, he still upholds the nobility of the fish, “Then he added, ‘Blessed Virgin, pray for the death of this fish. Wonderful though he is’” (Hemingway 61). Another key theme is the idea of loneliness, and how man is better off in his own company when out in nature. Santiago is by himself, but he understands that he is not alone, as he looks up at the clouds, he states that “he knew no man was ever alone on the sea”, for there were the creatures below him, and God above watching him (Hemingway 57). Santiago repeatedly wishes that he had the boy with him, not just to help him bring in the fish, or to assist him with the physical struggle, but also to help him win the mental fight as well. Santiago speaks often to the animals around him, to God, to himself, and (in his imagination) to the boy and to baseball star Joe DiMaggio. A simpler metaphor that runs throughout the story is the old kindergarten lesson of needs and wants.

Santiago wishes for a lot, wishes he had salt for the fish he ate, wishes that he had a fancy boat with a radio to listen to baseball, wishes that he had lemons, wishes for more water, but despite it all, he manages to go on with only what he brought with him or what he could acquire from the sea. Running parallel to this metaphor is often a message about preparation and learning lessons from hardship. When he wants for salt, he regrets that he had not simply poured some seawater into the bow to let it evaporate while leaving the salt behind; when his knife breaks, he reminds himself to always bring a second one and a hatchet and stone. Throughout all this, however, he constantly reminds himself that thinking such things is only wasting his time, and that there is nothing he can do but make what he does have work. I think the most prevalent and important theme is summed up by one of my favorite quotes within the book, “a man can be destroyed but not defeated” (Hemingway 96). This quote embodies the theme of perception. Some might say that because, in the end, Santiago was only able to bring in a skeleton of the fish, with little meat left, he failed. Santiago, and most of the community as well, view it as a success. Santiago broke his bad luck and streak of not catching any fish, and proved to himself, to the fish, and to his community that he was still an excellent and capable fisherman. Men who are able to find success in their failures, or even failure in their success, are not defeated. It is men who are only able to think and see the world in a simple, bipolar, black and white manner that are truly defeated.

Works Cited

Hemingway, Ernest. *The Old Man and the Sea*. C. Scribners Sons, 1984.