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A Study of the “Code Hero” in Ernest Hemingway’s Works

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Abstract: This paper explores the theme of the “code heroes” created by Ernest Hemingway, one of the greatest American writers, and analyzes the main characteristics of the “code heroes”. The criticism of Hemingway’s characters can be summarized as the following: First, in Hemingway’s stories there is a stock figure that reappears in many different works, and this character is closely related to Hemingway himself. Second, the character’s perception of life is limited and affected by his early experiences of war and violence. Third, there is a set of values in the “code hero”, and such a set of codes is the goal of the protagonists. Fourth, the characters in Hemingway’s early works lack such codes and are therefore unsuccessful; yet in the later works, he has acquired the important codes and values and therefore turned out to be courageous and undefeated, taking on great social responsibility.

Key words: code hero; pressure; grace; a set of values; undefeated

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1 The Code Hero and His Features

In Hemingway’s works, there exist certain common features among the protagonists, or the “heroes”, portrayed by Hemingway, due to the fact that these characters share identical personalities and life experiences and that they bear similar attitudes towards society. Their way of life can be defined by the way in which they respond to conflicts as well as the way in which they are depicted. Critics, in their description of Hemingway’s characters use the term “code hero”, quite inaccurately over-generalizing their common features. As a matter of fact, such a concept seems to have created the illusion that Hemingway’s heroes all behave in accordance with certain principles or that some code rules their behaviour, and that certain principles dominate their inner conflicts and control their life orientation. Yet the opposite is the case; most of the characters in Hemingway are quite disillusioned with the traditional values and behavioral conventions of the war. They

are inclined to turn away from the old, sacred and abstract morality for an extreme opposite tendency. They never speak of beliefs; they act rather than argue. The characters in the early works of Hemingway epitomize the basic attitudes of the 1920’s and share those common behavioral features and psychological attitudes, they like drinking, indulging in casual love-affairs, hunting games and bull-fighting as well as other manly sports, activities that typical American men dream of but never experience. Roberts points out the deep-seated disillusionment of these individuals; disillusionment caused by the First World War. They are among those that realize the failure of Christian morality to save mankind from the disaster of war. Such disillusionment also forces Hemingway’s heroes to readjust their attitudes towards their surroundings and take a more proactive response, yet at the same time they are basically pessimistic and inert.

The most obvious trademarks of the “code hero” are: “the world crushes every person into pieces, yet

a lot of people rise from the pieces to demonstrate their staying power. The world is likely to kill and break those most brave, benign and excellent, yet it is the hero that rises from failure."

When we see the marlin caught by Santiago reduced to nothing but a skeleton, this excites our sympathy as we can feel his sadness and incompetence when faced with real life tragedy. If we disregard the so-called codes or rules, we can sum up some general features about the protagonists in Hemingway's works.

First of all, the "code hero", if we employ the term here, has great physical potential and courage. Whether he is a soldier, a bullfighter, a hunter, or a fisherman, his physical power is always activated by critical situations and thus creates the most life-like beauty. However this physical power will encounter harm from the greater forces. The real value, according to Hemingway, lies in the fact that the hero can always rise from destruction. Captain Henry in *Farewell to Arms*, Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, and Santiago in *The Old man and the Sea* were all hurt in some way, yet they were not defeated. However, there are some differences in the characterization of Santiago. He is active and chooses to be injured. Unlike the others he suffers only physical harm, not mental pain, and as a result retains his optimism until the end of the story. Santiago is free from that self-pity and vain struggles that haunted Hemingway's former heroes. He accepts his fate with great tranquility and his injuries he regards as insignificant occurrences. Through his portrayal of Santiago, Hemingway successfully demonstrates how man can challenge himself by confronting his failures. By way of contrast, the former heroes are inert and passive under pressure; they simply retreat as a way of protection. For example, Captain Henry retreated from the war after he was aware of its meaninglessness and insignificance. "Generally speaking, the code heroes under Hemingway at that time lacked goals and were lost strugglers."

Secondly, the "code heroes" have strong willpower. Above and beyond their physical strength, their determination proves even more significant. With

such willpower the heroes of Hemingway are able to remain graceful even after being destroyed, and can still demonstrate their dignity as human beings. Santiago's physical power is much reduced by the fact that he is already an old man with all that youthful strength whiled away and long faded. Hemingway more than compensated that physical handicap by endowing his hero with mental strength that is both determined and focused: "The strong physical beauty can only be pleasing to senses, but the strong willpower can move one in the depth of his heart." The willpower forms the essential strength of the protagonists and enhances the intensity of the conflicts between characters.

Thirdly, another important feature of the "code heroes" is their loyalty. They are not without strong passions and faith, and such quality makes their character life-like and reliable, conveying warmth and love to people around. However, such quality is implied rather than displayed in the "code heroes". It is not spoken of but performed, not told but suggested. Henry's loyalty to love, and Santiago's loyalty and passion to the child Manolin can only be felt through their behaviour and specific actions, while the characters themselves never say a word about it. Such a quality creates an integrated and outstanding individual. Yet the loyalty breaks from common political or religious beliefs and does not stem from some abstract ideology but comes from a sense of belonging and dependence on certain individual groups, personal circles and friendships or from the love for some specific regions.

Fourthly, the "code heroes" maintain great dignity in all situations. Hemingway always tries to present a failed ending. Barns lost everything, the old man Santiago lost everything, too. The importance is that they maintain a sense of honour. Such quality serves to promote the character's personality and activates their courage and optimism, which also makes up the basic tone of the "code heroes".

Fifthly, the "code heroes" are endowed with certain specialized skills, such as fishing, bull fighting, and hunting, etc. Such skills are necessary

for the internal courage and constraint in the heroes. In another sense, a person that is good for nothing is likely to be presented as "weak" or useless, yet the Hemingway's heroes are free from such deficiencies as they possess practical skills.

Finally, the "code heroes" are always put in some touch-and-go situations, what the heroes must always face up to is their own personal fear of death and the threat of destruction, and it is this obstacle, death, that they have to overcome. As one critic said, the world is always testing us, threatening us and presenting us with obstacles. The important thing is to persist when confronted with them. Those that fail to do so will fail the testing of fire. The testing of the Hemingway's heroes happens at a crucial stage, where it is not certain whether the hero will respond courageously or in a cowardly fashion, and either choice will produce vastly differing consequences. The threat of death is always there for the heroes to face, and it is because of this that the life attitude of the heroes becomes something pure and definite, their life becoming more meaningful a result of such purity. Death is the central theme of Hemingway's works but it is more the attitude towards death that is important than death itself in defining the individual. Death is an eventuality while life and love are transitory, fleeting states. Such perspectives are implied in Hemingway's tragedies. The valuable thing is that his characters do not easily give up the desire to live, but demonstrate great courage and bravery in pursuit of their future. That is why there is such optimism in Hemingway's tragic stories, some light amid the foreboding atmosphere. Finally, the strength of the "code heroes" comes from the integration of their physical, spiritual, psychological and social qualities, qualities that form their very identity. When these heroes encounter some destructive forces, it sparks their potential, making them what they are.

2 The "Code Hero" in "The Old Man and the Sea"

2.1 The origin and the development of the concept of the "code hero"

As early as 1930, critics noticed the common features in Hemingway's characters and began to discuss the "code" belief of Hemingway, namely, the code of courage and honour in this non-intellectual writer. Lincoln Kirstein (1932), Max Eastman (1934), Wyndham Lewis (1934), and Delmore Schwartz (1938) all emphasized Hemingway's attention to death and physical courage, and believed that the "code heroes" of Hemingway were still under construction and far from mature. Some critics furthered the point that the "pretentious persistence" in Hemingway's characters is but a deliberate disguise of the "depression, disguised skepticism, and despair" (Kashkeen) that is deep-rooted in their true self. In his *The Great Tradition: An Interpretation of American Literature since the Civil War* Granville Aicks (1933) made important distinctions for Hemingway's characters, he thought there are two types of characters, that is, one is the "autobiographical" hero, the other is the kind of hero that Hemingway himself is not but expects to be, namely, the code hero. According to such categorization, Captain Henry in *Farewell to Arms* belongs to the "autobiographical" hero, his friend is the code hero. The criticism prevailing in the thirties in China held that the main features in Hemingway's heroes are that "they become dumb because of the injuries of war. They no longer think, nor do they meditate. And they despise traditional morality and well-respected values. What is left in them is but self-abandonment and a strong desire for sex." Such criticism is basically a reflection of the contemporary views abroad at that time. In the fifties, Young expanded the concept of the "Hemingway's hero" and the "code hero" and related them to "psychopathological morbidity", believing that the reason "Hemingway's heroes" always confront death and injury is due to the forced repetition of the wounded experience caused by their psychological morbidity, whereas the "code" serves to provide a solution to the dilemma of such characters, enabling them to control their emotions. And the relationship between the two is one of giver and receiver. The representation of such a relationship is

successfully realized in Santiago; that is to say, two kinds of heroes have merged into one entity. The sixties saw the new terms “tyro” and “tutor” in place of the “autobiographical hero” and “code hero” and “Nada” in place of the wound theory. Shridan Baker in his *Ernest Hemingway*.

An introduction and interpretation regarded Hemingway's characters as two independent characters, they do not coexist as protagonists and antagonists in the same story but appear in different works in different periods. He thought the characters in *Farewell to Arms* and *The Sun also Rises* are passive and defeated, and the characters in the later work, *The Old Man and the Sea* are undefeated. Critics in China regard Santiago as the epitome of the “code hero”, since he never gives in and maintains his dignity as a human being when faced with the negative forces. Barns and Captain Henry in *The Sun also Rises* and *Farewell to Arms* are representatives of a “lost generation”. They despise war and challenge the traditional morality but fail to find any solution to their depressing existence and so indulge in drink and lovemaking. Chinese criticism also believes that the tragic endings of Hemingway's stories are the reflection of a deep-rooted pessimism. At the same time, the critics in China also pay great attention to the code hero's grace under pressure and the theme of Nada. Much of the criticism focuses on human isolation, the sense of being lost, loneliness, and the character's eventual despair. The criticisms of Hemingway's characters can be summarized as the following:

First, in Hemingway's stories there is a stock figure that reappears in many different works, and this character is closely related to Hemingway himself.

Second, the character's perception of life is limited and affected by his early experiences of war and violence.

Third, there is a set of values in the “code hero”, and such a set of codes is the goal of the protagonists.

Fourth, the characters in Hemingway's early works lack such codes and are therefore unsuccessful and passive but ultimately they are individualist and

influenced by the theme of Nada; yet in the later works, he has acquired those all-important codes and values and therefore turned out to be courageous, taking on great social responsibility.

Fifth, the character has experienced a change from Nada to social humanism. However, such attitudes towards Hemingway's characters are criticized by Dahiya (1978), as he believed that the criticism of Hemingway's characters is but an evolvement and shift of terms and contributes little to the understanding of the characters themselves. He pointed out that the various criticisms mistakenly identify the fictional characters with Hemingway himself while ignoring the artistic independence of the works, thus losing much of the interest in the art itself.

Meanwhile, he also sensed the danger of character-interpretation using non-literary theories, thinking that to rectify the erroneous description of Hemingway's characters we need a theory completely based on the reading of the original texts, and such a theory should not be produced from the non-literary ideas. He also believes that the widely accepted so-called “code hero” concept has little foundation, since the protagonists in Hemingway's works never pursue “codes” or “tutor” to understand life, what they pursue is life itself and they learn about life through their own personal experiences. The so-called code heroes are those of minor importance and are interwoven in one way or another with the protagonists. However, while Dr. Dahiya criticized the practice of mixing the characters with the author, he also denied Santiago's hero status. He blamed Santiago for his lack of social concern as well as his failure to develop an independent perception of life; something limited by his narrow personal circumstance. However, such views are greatly biased. Santiago's experiences are not broad, yet his life circumstance is of much wider significance. His is an uneventful existence, yet his life has an individual claim of very high meaning, particularly when he is faced with the big fish in the sea. Santiago as a protagonist is not a simple reprint of the early “code

heroes", and the value of his character cannot be overstated. One cannot also ignore the fact that the story received three awards immediately after its publication. Moreover, it has been instrumental to the award of Nobel Prize for the author.

2.2 The protagonist and other characters

The word "hero" can mean both "hero" and "protagonist" in English. In the literary works the two concepts "hero" and "protagonist" are both closely related and distinctive. The protagonist in a story is supported by other minor characters or gains his position by direct conflict with the antagonists. Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* is the protagonist and also the "hero". In the story the presentation of facts such as going out to the sea, fishing, fighting, losing, and turning back from the sea is unfolded along with the development of the protagonist Santiago. And the conflicts between characters as well as the settlement of the conflicts such as that between Santiago and marlin and that between Santiago and sharks focuses on Santiago. There are very few characters in the story and the personal background of the protagonist is left unexplained, so the readers' full attention is focused on the hero, the now and the present. The author also adopts a very objective point of view and never disrupts this neutral stance with authorial comment. The tone is cold and unfeeling, thus creating great tension and passion to further intensify the readers' perception of the character and the story. At the same time, in the protagonist Santiago is displayed remarkable spiritual motivation as well as an impressive personality through his friendship with the little boy Manolin, his care for the other fishermen, and his great skills and perseverance demonstrated while fishing the marlin. The readers are made to identify Santiago with the most outstanding personality in human beings and are therefore encouraged to discover all that is implied in Santiago. Moreover, the author depicts the protagonist as an old man that is physically weak. He is helpless and isolated, fending for himself. The protagonist is an old Cuban

fisherman and his personal background and his relationship with the villagers are somewhat elusive. In the story, there is another minor character, Manolin, a little boy. In the boy the basic links between the hero and human society and the hero's attitudes towards that society is of great importance, because in the coming three days and two nights the protagonist is cut off from human society, and he has no contact with any life form but the fishes in the sea. Furthermore, two events, namely, fishing the marlin and fighting the sharks serve as catalysts for the unfolding of the story. The two scenarios are arranged in such a way that they are closely connected but independent of each other at the same time. The beginning of the story is also the beginning of conflict, and when that conflict has been resolved the story comes to an end. According to Hemingway, in the story there is nothing symbolic, the sea is the sea. The old man is the old man. The boy is the boy. The fish is the fish. The sharks are the sharks. Yet the simplicity of this storyline is of great significance to the reader. It has both a beginning and an ending, and presents a complete round of fighting between a hero and his circumstance. Yet it has no beginning and no ending at all, because the beginning and ending are limitless, and this round of fighting is but one of the many rounds of fighting. The story is pure and honest and what is conveyed reflects much of the truth of human existence.

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论海明威作品中的“硬汉”形象

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摘 要: 论述了美国伟大作家海明威塑造的“硬汉”形象这一主题, 分析了“硬汉”形象的主要特征, 表现在以下几个方面: (1)海明威作品中存在着一个重复出现的人物, 而这一人物与海明威本人存在着极其密切的关系; (2)人物对生活的认识仅限于他早年对战争和暴力的经历; (3)在“硬汉式”英雄身上存在着一套价值模式, 而这一价值模式正是主人公所竭力获得的; (4)海明威早期作品中的人物缺乏这一套价值模式, 是被动的和被打败的, 在后期作品中, 人物获得了这一套价值模式, 是积极的, 未被打败的, 富于个性和社会责任感的.

关键词: 硬汉; 重压; 风度; 价值模式; 未被打败

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