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Pride and Dignity as the Core of Santiago's Character

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Abstract: This article examines the fundamental role of pride and dignity in shaping Santiago's character in Ernest Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea." Through systematic literary analysis, this study explores how these intertwined qualities define Santiago's identity, motivate his actions, and embody Hemingway's philosophical vision of human existence. By examining textual evidence and scholarly interpretations, this research reveals how Hemingway constructs pride and dignity as inseparable components of authentic human existence, particularly in confronting inevitable suffering and mortality.

Keys words: Santiago, pride, dignity, Hemingway, The Old Man and the Sea, character analysis, existentialism, heroic code

INTRODUCTION

Ernest Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea" presents Santiago as one of literature's most compelling embodiments of human resilience and moral fortitude. Published in 1952, this novella earned Hemingway the Pulitzer Prize and contributed significantly to his Nobel Prize in Literature, yet its philosophical depth continues to generate scholarly discussion [1]. At the heart of Santiago's characterization lies an intricate relationship between pride and dignity—two qualities that Hemingway portrays not as opposing forces but as complementary aspects of authentic human existence. Santiago's eighty-four-day fishing drought and his subsequent epic struggle with the marlin serve as the narrative framework through which Hemingway explores fundamental questions about human worth, perseverance, and the maintenance of self-respect in the face of overwhelming adversity.

This study argues that pride and dignity function as the core elements of Santiago's character, driving his decisions, shaping his worldview, and ultimately defining his humanity. Understanding how these qualities operate within Santiago's consciousness illuminates Hemingway's broader philosophical concerns regarding the human condition, the relationship between success and failure, and the possibility of spiritual triumph despite material defeat.

METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE REVIEW

This study employs qualitative literary analysis methodology, focusing on close textual reading of "The Old Man and the Sea" combined with systematic examination of scholarly interpretations. The analytical framework draws upon character analysis theory, which examines how authors construct fictional personalities through actions, dialogue, internal monologue, and symbolic associations [2]. The research methodology involves identifying key passages where pride and dignity manifest in Santiago's thoughts and behaviors, analyzing the linguistic and symbolic dimensions of these manifestations, and synthesizing these observations with existing scholarly interpretations. The literature review encompasses critical works spanning seven decades of Hemingway scholarship, providing historical

depth and theoretical diversity to the analysis.

Scholarly interpretation of Santiago's character has evolved considerably since the novella's publication. Baker's seminal work on Hemingway established Santiago as an exemplar of the "Hemingway hero," characterized by grace under pressure and adherence to a personal code of conduct despite external circumstances [3]. This interpretation emphasizes how Santiago's pride stems not from arrogance but from professional competence and self-knowledge, while his dignity derives from maintaining standards of behavior regardless of outcome. Young extended this analysis by examining the existential dimensions of Santiago's struggle, arguing that the old fisherman embodies Hemingway's response to nihilism through the creation of meaning and value in an indifferent universe [4]. From this perspective, Santiago's pride and dignity represent acts of defiant self-definition against meaninglessness and mortality. Feminist and postcolonial scholars have offered alternative readings that complicate traditional interpretations. Strychacz examines how Santiago's masculinity intersects with his sense of pride, suggesting that Hemingway both celebrates and interrogates traditional masculine values through Santiago's character [5]. This reading acknowledges that Santiago's pride contains elements of stubbornness and self-destructive determination that cannot be purely heroic. Similarly, postcolonial interpretations have examined Santiago's relationship with the natural world and with Manolin, questioning whether his pride reflects wisdom or tragic isolation from community [6].

Recent scholarship has increasingly focused on the psychological and philosophical dimensions of Santiago's character. Brenner analyzes the internal dialogues and memory sequences that reveal Santiago's self-conception, demonstrating how he constructs and maintains his identity through narrative and reflection [7]. This approach illuminates how pride and dignity function as cognitive frameworks through which Santiago interprets experience and maintains psychological coherence. Wagner-Martin's work on Hemingway's later fiction situates "The Old Man and the Sea" within the author's evolving preoccupations with aging, legacy, and the relationship between physical decline and spiritual growth [8].

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Textual analysis reveals that Hemingway constructs Santiago's pride and dignity through multiple interconnected dimensions: his professional identity as a fisherman, his relationship with suffering and adversity, his internal dialogue and self-conception, and his interactions with the natural and social worlds. Santiago's pride manifests most clearly in his unwavering commitment to his craft despite prolonged failure. The novella opens with the information that Santiago has gone eighty-four days without catching a fish, yet this extended period of bad luck does not diminish his preparation, technique, or determination. Hemingway writes that Santiago's eyes remain "the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated," establishing pride not as boastfulness but as unshakeable self-belief rooted in competence and experience [9].

The marlin episode serves as the primary vehicle through which Hemingway explores the relationship between pride and dignity under extreme pressure. Santiago's decision to pursue the fish far beyond safe limits reflects pride in its most dangerous form, as he risks everything rather than accept a modest catch. Yet Hemingway carefully distinguishes this pride from mere hubris by emphasizing Santiago's respect for the marlin and his recognition of their kinship. Santiago repeatedly addresses the fish as his brother and acknowledges its nobility, transforming the struggle from conquest into communion. This recognition of mutual dignity between predator and prey elevates Santiago's pride from selfish ambition to existential affirmation—he must prove himself against a worthy opponent not to dominate but to validate both their existences through meaningful struggle. The physical ordeal tests not merely Santiago's strength but his commitment to maintaining dignity through suffering, as he endures cut hands, cramping muscles, and exhaustion while refusing to compromise his standards of seamanship or his respect for the fish.

Santiago's internal monologues reveal how pride and dignity function as cognitive structures that organize his experience and maintain psychological integrity. Throughout his ordeal, Santiago engages

in self-directed dialogue that reinforces his identity and values. He reminds himself of past triumphs, particularly his famous arm-wrestling victory, using memory to sustain present effort. He criticizes himself for mistakes and physical limitations, but this self-criticism stems from high standards rather than self-doubt, reflecting pride that demands excellence rather than accepting mediocrity. Most significantly, Santiago's thoughts repeatedly return to questions of proper behavior and appropriate attitudes—whether he can still call himself a fisherman, whether he has gone too far out, whether he is maintaining dignity in his suffering. These internal debates demonstrate that for Santiago, pride and dignity are not instinctive reactions but consciously maintained commitments that require constant vigilance and reaffirmation.

The destruction of the marlin by sharks introduces the crucial distinction between material success and spiritual victory that lies at the heart of Hemingway's portrayal of dignity. Santiago fights the sharks with desperate ferocity, but he recognizes from the first attack that the battle is lost. His continued resistance against inevitable defeat embodies dignity in its purest form—maintaining standards of conduct and refusing surrender not because victory is possible but because doing so affirms his humanity. When Santiago kills the first shark, he does so knowing "the shark had taken about forty pounds," yet he continues fighting subsequent sharks with progressively inadequate weapons, moving from harpoon to knife to tiller, until he arrives at harbor with only the marlin's skeleton [10]. This progressive degradation of both his weapons and his prize could represent absolute defeat, yet Hemingway frames it as spiritual victory precisely because Santiago never abandons dignity, never accepts passivity, never allows circumstances to dictate his response.

The aftermath of Santiago's journey illuminates how pride and dignity relate to community recognition and self-evaluation. Other fishermen measure the marlin's skeleton and acknowledge Santiago's achievement, providing external validation of his accomplishment. Yet Hemingway carefully shows that Santiago's sense of dignity does not depend upon this recognition. Exhausted and sleeping deeply, Santiago dreams not of his recent triumph but of lions on an African beach—a recurring dream that represents youth, vitality, and timeless rather than circumstantial worth. This dream imagery suggests that Santiago's pride and dignity connect to something deeper than any single achievement or failure, rooted instead in an essential conception of self that transcends particular outcomes. The tragedy is not that Santiago returns with only bones but that such an expenditure of effort and suffering yields so little material result, yet this tragedy simultaneously affirms that human dignity resists reduction to material calculation.

Critical examination must acknowledge tensions and potential limitations in Hemingway's portrayal of pride and dignity through Santiago. The old fisherman's isolation from community norms and his willingness to risk everything for personal vindication might represent not wisdom but tragic stubbornness. His pride leads him "too far out," resulting in needless suffering for himself and the marlin's destruction. This raises questions about whether Hemingway celebrates or critiques Santiago's commitment to his code, whether dignity requires such extreme sacrifice, and whether pride that demands constant proving remains healthy or becomes pathological. Additionally, contemporary readers might question the gendered dimensions of Santiago's dignity, which seems inseparable from traditional masculine values of stoic endurance, physical prowess, and competition. These concerns do not invalidate the power of Hemingway's portrayal but suggest that pride and dignity as embodied by Santiago reflect particular cultural constructions rather than universal ideals.

CONCLUSION

This analysis demonstrates that pride and dignity function as the foundational elements of Santiago's character in "The Old Man and the Sea," shaping his actions, worldview, and essential identity. Hemingway constructs these qualities as inseparable and complementary: pride provides the self-belief and commitment to excellence that motivate Santiago's efforts, while dignity ensures that he maintains integrity and humanity regardless of outcomes. Through Santiago's epic struggle with the marlin and subsequent loss to the sharks, Hemingway explores how individuals preserve self-respect and meaning

when confronted by forces beyond their control, ultimately arguing that spiritual victory remains possible despite material defeat. The scholarly literature reveals diverse interpretations of Santiago's pride and dignity, ranging from heroic celebration to critical interrogation, yet consensus recognizes these qualities as central to both character and thematic concerns. Close textual analysis reveals that Hemingway employs multiple techniques—internal monologue, symbolic association, physical ordeal, and social relationships—to construct pride and dignity as conscious commitments rather than instinctive reactions, emphasizing their cognitive and philosophical dimensions. Santiago's character remains compelling because he embodies universal human challenges regarding self-worth, aging, suffering, and mortality, while his pride and dignity offer one possible response to these existential conditions.

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