
The Tragic Hero: The Old Man And The Sea And Romeo And Juliet

The use of a tragic hero for character development is a common literary device used by authors. The Old Man and The Sea by Ernest Hemmingway and Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare both explore the theme of the tragic hero and use this theme for character development. "In literature, a tragic hero is someone who suffers a downfall as a result of a character defect or flaw." (A. Wiesner-Groff) While Santiago is the tragic hero in the book, The Old Man and The Sea, Friar Laurence is the tragic hero in Romeo and Juliet. This is shown in the critical reading by Robert Davis, Professor of English at Smith College, of "The Old Man and The Sea" and the critical reading by Jill Kriegel, a doctoral candidate at Florida Atlantic University, of "Romeo and Juliet". Both of these critical readings explore how the tragic hero is used as a literary device.

The central character in the novella "The Old Man and The Sea" is a Cuban man named Santiago, who is still fishing for a living in the later days of his life. After 84 days of not catching a single fish he decides to set sail off the coast of Cuba into the Gulf Stream. He chooses the month of September during the hurricane season. The month when the great fish come (P.6). Using fresh sardines and tuna for bait, Santiago hooks a marlin a hundred fathoms below the skiff. Santiago begins to share in the suffering of the enormous, beautiful and graceful catch. The fishing adventure is a courageous challenge of both physical courage and a test of skill as a fisherman. "The ultimate is now demanded of the craft which a half-century of fishing has taught him." (R. Davis)

After days and nights of hunger, exhaustion and pain from the fishing line cutting into his hands, he finally harpoons the enormous fish and ties it to the side of the skiff. A group of sharks follow the trail of blood to the marlin and begin to devour the flesh. Despite his best attempts to fight off the sharks, only the skeleton is left behind. The tragedy of the fishing trip is poignant. To lose a magnificent catch to the sharks and be left with little to eat is a tragedy for a hungry man.

Santiago is an independent and very proud man. He is determined not to become reliant on others. "I may not be as strong as I think, but I know many tricks and I have resolution." (P.9)

He refuses to let his age become an impediment which prevents him from continuing on as a fisherman. His determination is his fatal flaw that drives him to take a risk that may end his life. In the end it is his determination that leads to the loss of the marlin. However, the downfall does not necessarily signal his ultimate defeat. But man is not made for defeat,' he said. 'A man can be destroyed but not defeated.'" (P.54) The old man knows that humility is not a disgrace, but simply engenders respect for the creatures in the sea. The old man has learned humility, which he knew 'was not disgraceful, and carried no less of true pride. (R. Davis) In the final pages of the book, Santiago plans future fishing trips with the boy, Manolin. The story is treated more as a setback by an older man determined to show his prowess as a fisherman rather than a tale of ultimate defeat.

As an older man Santiago was seeking to defy the inevitable changes that come with aging. Once a proud and successful fisherman he wanted to continue to catch fish into his older age.

Disappointed that he hadn't caught a fish in 84 days, he heads to the Gulf Stream in a little skiff to prove to himself that he still has what it takes.

"Now he was proving it again. Each time was a new time and he never thought about the past when he was doing it." (P.33)

To Santiago, a key component of catching a large fish is endurance. "I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures." (P.33). Not just physical endurance but also inner strength to endure pain longer than a fish can endure their own pain. "I must hold his pain where it is, he thought. Mine does not matter. I can control mine. But his pain could drive him mad." (P.45)

Although, Santiago respects the fish of the sea, it is pride as a fisherman that leads him to kill the marlin. "You killed him for pride and because you are a fisherman." (P.55) "Fish," he said, "I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends." (P.26) There is deep disappointment when he finds out the Marlin is too big to fit into the skiff and has to be tied by the side of the boat. He knows it is likely the sharks will come by to eat the marlin because of the blood leaking out of the harpoon wound. The inevitable does happen and Santiago expresses his feelings of regret from sailing out too far from the coastline. "I shouldn't have gone out so far, fish," he said. "Neither for you nor for me. I'm sorry, fish." (P.58)

Santiago is certainly a tragic hero. He tried to mend his broken pride only to find he broke it again through his lack of good judgement. "This determination to keep going, even when he knows it may be too much to handle, is Santiago's fatal flaw" (A. Wiesner-Groff) Similarly, Friar Laurence becomes a tragic hero due to his lack of good advice and actions.

Jill Kriegel, in her 2010 review of Friar Laurence's character in *Romeo and Juliet*, describes the friar as a near-tragic hero rather than a tragic hero. Perhaps that is because the Friar considered suicide but fled from the scene and later asked the Prince for atonement. The Friar did not lose his life due to his poor judgement, but he did lose confidence in himself and a lack of respect from others. I feel that the Friar's character is similar enough to Santiago's to also be regarded as a tragic hero.

Friar Laurence is Romeo's priest who is best able to help Romeo plan out his future with Juliet by organising a secret wedding. The friar, a holy man with the best of intentions, is hoping to use the situation to resolve the feud between the Capulets and the Montagues.

I'll thy assistant be;

For this alliance may so happy prove

To turn your households' rancor to pure love. (2.3.90-92)

Although an honourable man, his intention to deceive the feuding families is not moral. His lack of good judgement is a flaw that becomes his downfall later in the play.

A day after the masquerade ball, the friar creates a sleeping potion which is at odds with his beliefs as a Christian. Shakespeare himself a religious orthodox is opposed to the Friars actions and sets the scene for the tragedy to follow.

Shall, stiff and stark and cold, appear like death,

And in this borrowed likeness of shrunk death

Thou shalt continue two and forty hours,

And then awake as from a pleasant sleep. (4.1.103-106)

Friar Laurence joins Romeo and Juliet at the altar and weds them in secret. Romeo is distraught from his banishment due to murdering Tybalt. So the friar devises a plan. He sends Romeo to Mantua and remains with Juliet to fake her death with the sleeping potion. His intention is to deceive Juliet's parents so that she doesn't have to participate in an arranged marriage with Paris. The thought of marrying Paris leads her to think about suicide, which at the time was not morally acceptable in the Catholic Church.

Juliet considers the Friar trustworthy "hath still been tried a holy man" (4.3.29) and places her life in the hands of the Friar when she decides to drink the potion. "Ensuring the tragic conclusion, Juliet accepts the Friar as her guide with filial and reverent trust." (J. Kriegel) The deceit she participates in is undoubtedly removed from the principles and fundamental truths of Christianity. In the end, the deception and bad timing lead to the deaths of Paris and Romeo, both of whom believed that Juliet had died. When Friar Laurence discovers that both Romeo and Paris are dead by suicide, he flees from the chamber afraid of how Juliet will take the news. "I dare no longer stay" (5.3.159). Inevitably, when Juliet wakes up and discovers Romeo is dead she takes her own life.

Friar Laurence was a poor mentor and confidant for Romeo and Juliet. Later he takes responsibility for the tragedy. "miscarried by [his] fault" (5.3.266) He confesses to the Prince and offers his life as atonement for his sins. Even though the Prince absolves him, "We have still known thee for a holy man" (5.3.269) he is still a tragic hero suffering intense grief from the result of his own lack of good judgement. Kriegel interprets this situation differently and considers the friar a near tragic hero because of his repentance. "His culpability, clearly owing to his embrace of natural magic, makes him a near-tragic hero, redeemed only by his repentance, which marked the Christian orthodoxy so indispensable to Shakespeare."(J. Kriegel)

Both Hemmingway and Shakespeare used the tragic hero as a literary device in the books discussed in this investigation. From Santiago we learn to be measured with expectations of our abilities and acknowledge that defeat is only suffered when we stop trying. Friar Laurence strayed from Christianity into science and the natural world to solve a complex situation. His deceit did not solve the problem of the feuding families but led to the tragic suicides of three young people.