

Author: Rachael Burns

Prompt 2: The journey or quest in literature (for example, *Gilgamesh*, *The Odyssey*, *Don Quixote*, *Huckleberry Finn*, *The Grapes of Wrath*, *The Wizard of Oz*) often brings about a change in the protagonist. Using specific examples from the book, write an essay that illustrates how Enrique's quest to reunite with his mother changes him.

.....

A Journey to Self-reliance

"The longest journey is the journey inward, for he who has chosen his destiny has started upon his quest for the source of his being." Enrique's mother is the literal and physical source of his being, and remains so throughout the early childhood he spends with her. Yet because Enrique's mother left so early, he never developed an identity independent of hers. He has no source of his own. As a result, he expects that upon reuniting with her, he can resume his childlike dependence. Enrique's true journey is the dismantling of this expectation and the development of self-reliance without the egocentrism of childhood. In this way, despite its subject matter, Enrique's Journey is a classically American coming-of-age tale.

When his mother leaves, Enrique still thinks in the self-centered manner of youth. He "does not understand" (Nazario 3): he only understands his mother as she relates to himself, and so to him she can only be present or absent, not existing independently elsewhere. He grows to see her as a distant salvation, just as warm, caring, and absolutely fundamental to his existence as the day she left: she remains the source of his being, the focus of his hopes and of his memories. Similarly, Enrique's perception of himself does not change, for how could it, with his central reference point gone? And so he remains a child, the responsibility for his fate resting with his

absent mother: he never stops waiting for her to return. With no cues but continued loneliness, Enrique's emotions do not mature, but only alter in their expression: "bewilderment turns to confusion and then to adolescent anger" (Nazario 9). Anger is the most egocentric and unreasoned of emotions: it is an attempt, tragic in its futility, to force one's own desires on the outside world by feeling. Enrique's behavior is repeatedly egocentric and dependent, fueled on the surface by anger and beneath by abandonment. He demands absolute attention: he "stands on top of a teacher's desk and bellows, 'Who is Enrique?'" (Nazario 24). Spending time with "bad boys" (Nazario 25) gives him an archetype to imitate, relieving him from the construction of his own identity. Sniffing glue becomes an all-consuming addiction, a means by which to return to the blissful oblivion of infancy.

The absence of his mother is not the only factor holding back Enrique's development and perpetuating his bad behavior. Surrounded by poverty, personal growth seems futile: social and economic status is stagnant regardless, and there appears to be little future aside from the eternal repetition of the past.

Nazario describes Enrique's journey in the language of destiny and predetermination: "his mother never returns, and that decides his fate" (Nazario 5). But in fact Enrique embarks on his journey in defiance of his fate: he refuses to wait passively for his mother to return, and refuses to passively succumb to the structural poverty and broken family life that defines his environment. For the first time in his life, Enrique decides his own direction and "steps off" (Nazario 44).

Enrique sees the fragility of human life first-hand during his journey. Faced with the reality that his existence is thoroughly contingent on luck, and that he has no special place or privilege, the self-certainty of Enrique's childhood and cocky pretensions of adolescence evaporate. Enrique witnesses the most horrible and most charitable sides of human nature and on

a fundamental level he realizes that the difference is a choice. Where others turn back or give up, Enrique repeats his own choice not to succumb to the whims of fate and begins his journey again, seven times. At each setback, Enrique is noticeably absent of anger and frustration. Instead, he identifies useful lessons for his next attempt.

Enrique had hoped that reuniting with his mother would erase the horrors of his journey, bringing “deliverance itself, the answer to every problem” (Nazario 7). When this proves untrue, Enrique experiences crushing disappointment. The self-reliance that had been so useful while riding freight trains and evading authorities, fueled by instinct, adrenaline, and single-minded focus, is all of a sudden immensely complicated and burdensome. It runs counter to the expectations of renewed maternal dependence harbored by both his mother and himself. Enrique copes by returning to his old habits of angry outbursts and numbing substance abuse.

After three years of living in the United States, Enrique makes a final purposeful step in his internal journey: consciously recognizing the negative effects of his behavior, he “resolves to change” (Nazario 217) for the sake of his daughter. He finally applies the determination and responsibility he had developed over the course of his journey towards working, breaking his addictions, and bettering his personal appearance and living conditions. As a result, he can finally have a healthy relationship with his mother: Enrique no longer needs her, which changes the dynamic of their relationship from a reflex to a choice. And because their choice is not compulsory but based on acknowledged love for each other, love will remain the defining aspect of their relationship.