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WHOSE FIX IS IT, ANYWAY?:
A CLOSER LOOK AT HEMINGWAY'S
"FIFTY GRAND"



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READERS AND CRITICS WHO VIEW the typical Ernest Hemingway hero as a man of courage and integrity are confounded by Jack Brennan of "Fifty Grand," who places a substantial bet against himself and purposely loses his championship fight by delivering a low blow to his opponent in the bout's final round, thereby winning the bet. Many readers would agree with Earl Rovit and Gerry Brenner's assertion that Jack "breaks the code in betting against himself" (45) or with Phillips G. and Rosemary R. Davies's comment that the code of the Hemingway hero "can be seen most clearly when the courageous action is performed for its own sake" (258), not, as in Jack's case, for the sake of making money. Even James J. Martine, who claims that "there is nothing 'unethical'" about Jack's decision to make money by betting against himself, concedes that Jack has sacrificed "all he had, his integrity" (127), in his final championship boxing match.

Much of this criticism of Jack Brennan, however, results from the mistaken notion that he fixed the fight—that, prior to the bout, he arranged with the gamblers Morgan and Steinfeld to lose intentionally so that he might win his bet. David Thoreen (27), Robert P. Weeks (85), Leo Gurko (178)—and probably most readers—make this assumption, based on the meeting between Jack and the gamblers the day before the championship fight, a scene which readers view only partially because Jerry Doyle, the story's narrator, leaves the room. Neither Jack's comments after that meeting nor his actions in the boxing ring, however, suggest that Jack fixes the title fight. Accepting the premise that Jack Brennan did not fix the fight presents the boxer in a more heroic light, as a man of both courage and great integrity.

The widespread notion that Jack fixes the fight derives from the secret meeting between the boxer and the gamblers, Steinfeld and Morgan, who visit the champ's training camp the day before his title bout with Walcott. Jerry Doyle brings the gamblers to Jack's room and then is asked to leave. Jerry departs and eventually returns with Hogan, the training camp manager, but does not witness whatever deal transpired between Jack and the gamblers. Most readers assume that, during this meeting, Jack agrees to lose to Walcott on purpose. The discussion between Jack and Jerry after the gamblers' departure, however, suggests otherwise. Jack does indeed advise Jerry to bet on Walcott, and Jack informs Jerry that he has bet fifty grand on the challenger, at two-to-one odds. But Jack denies fixing the fight. "How can I beat him?" Jack asks Jerry. 'It ain't crooked. How can I beat him? Why not make some money on it?'" (CSS 240).

Earlier in the story, Hemingway, through Jerry Doyle's narration, establishes the fact that Jack Brennan's best boxing days are past. He is out of shape, over the hill; this fight will be his last. He has not trained well and has slept poorly. He knows that Walcott will defeat him soundly. Jack has assessed his chances for victory honestly and has decided that he cannot win. Early in the story, when Soldier Bartlett tries to encourage Jack by saying, "He [Walcott] can't hit you, Jack," Jack replies, "I wish to hell he couldn't" (CSS 231). Jack knows he cannot defeat the younger, stronger Walcott, so he bets against himself, but he does not agree to lose the fight on purpose. Jack calls Jerry Doyle "the only friend I got" (240); he would not lie to Jerry by saying that the fight "ain't crooked" (240).

Moreover, logic suggests that Jack has not fixed this fight. The betting odds are two to one against Jack, which indicates that those who follow the fight game are well aware of Jack's deficiencies and the challenger's prowess in the ring. Steinfeld and Morgan, two "sharpshooters" (CSS 237) who certainly follow boxing closely, would surely know that Jack's chances of victory are slim. Why would they have to arrange with him to throw a fight that he is very likely to lose? Any doubts that the gamblers had about Jack's condition would have been erased by Jerry Doyle. When Steinfeld, Morgan, and Collins, Jack's manager, arrive at Jack's training camp, Jerry tells them that Jack "is pretty bad.... He isn't right" (235).

Furthermore, if Jack has agreed, during his meeting with Steinfeld and Morgan, to throw the fight, what is his take? The gamblers would be offering Jack money to lose on purpose. If Jack is paid to lose intentionally, why

would he have to lay a bet to make money on the fight? He risks fifty grand by betting on Walcott; and at two-to-one odds, he can win only twenty-five. If Jack agreed to lose the fight, he would have accepted a flat payment from Steinfeld and Morgan for the loss, and he would not have to risk his own money by laying a bet. Throughout the story, Jerry gives examples of Jack's stinginess with his money. For example, Jack gives a tip of only two dollars to his training camp rubdown man; he takes a cheap hotel room in New York City on the day of the fight; and he does not tip the boy who handles his luggage. Would this man risk fifty thousand dollars if he could make the same amount—or more—by agreeing to fix his title fight?

What, then, transpired between Jack and Steinfeld and Morgan at the training camp? One possibility is that they offered money to Jack to throw the fight, but he refused. That is unlikely, as suggested earlier, because the gamblers have no reason to pay a boxer to lose a fight that he would probably lose anyway. Perhaps during his meeting with Steinfeld and Morgan, Jack merely placed his \$50,000 bet. Indeed, shortly after Morgan and Steinfeld depart, Jack first mentions the \$50,000 wager to his best friend, Jerry Doyle, and encourages Jerry to make a bet as well.

If Jack did place his bet during that meeting, did that wager prompt the gamblers to arrange subsequently with Walcott to throw the fight? That scenario does not seem to be very likely. Its plausibility, however, depends on how much money Steinfeld and Morgan stand to win or lose on this fight. Earlier in the story, Hogan calls the gambling duo "wise boys" and refers to Steinfeld as a "big operator"; he also informs Jerry Doyle that they own a pool room (CSS 237). But Hogan's use of "wise boys" and "big operator" could be ironic; he uses irony and sarcasm earlier in the story—for example, when he tells his two "health-farm patients with the gloves on" who are afraid to hit each other to "stop the slaughter" and take their gloves off to prepare for a rubdown (236–7). The two "wise boys" could be booking ten and twenty dollar bets at the poolroom, in which case Jack's \$50,000 wager might certainly inspire them to approach Walcott with an offer to take a dive. They could pay Walcott \$25,000 to lose the bout and collect \$50,000 from Jack Brennan—a handsome profit for two poolroom operators who generally handle relatively small bets. On the other hand, if Steinfeld and Morgan are booking only small bets, how could they gain access to a boxing champion and the contender a day before the big title fight? Moreover, would Walcott agree to forfeit his chance to win the title for only \$25,000 or \$30,000?

Of course, we can only speculate about what took place during this meeting between Jack and the gamblers—because Hemingway chose to remove his narrator from the room while the encounter took place. What seems fairly certain, however, is that Jack did not agree to throw the fight at that meeting. Nonetheless, many readers and critics continue to assume that the secret meeting resulted in a fixed fight.

During his bout with Walcott, however, Jack certainly does not fight like a boxer who intends to lose on purpose. After four rounds, "Jack has him bleeding bad and his face all cut up" (CSS 246). He pounds away at the challenger's face: "It's just like it [Jack's fist] was connected with Walcott's face and Jack just had to wish it in every time" (246). Any of those hard left jabs to the face is a potential knockout punch. In the seventh round, Jack lifts his shoulder into Walcott's nose, an illegal tactic designed to break his opponent's nose, which often results in excessive bleeding and defeat by technical knockout. An honest fighter and a man of great integrity, Jack is trying very hard to win this fight, even though he will lose \$50,000 if he beats Walcott. But Jack, as expected, begins to tire in the late rounds. His left arm, which has done most of the damage to the challenger, gets heavy; his legs tire; and the younger Walcott begins to pommel him badly. By the twelfth and final round, Jack can barely walk, but he refuses to quit; he intends to avoid a knockout, finish the fight, and win his bet.

The fix becomes apparent in the final round, but it is Walcott's fix, not Jack's. Walcott intentionally fouls Jack with a low blow. If Jack falls and is unable to continue, Walcott is disqualified, and Jack wins the fight but loses his bet. But quickly sensing the fix, and seeing his fifty grand slipping away, Jack courageously remains standing, despite incredible pain, and waves away the referee. In the next exchange, Jack belts Walcott twice in the groin, and Walcott falls to the canvas. Jack is disqualified for the low blows, and Walcott is declared the winner.

In the end, Jack did throw the fight, but he made that decision in the middle of the final round, not during the pre-fight meeting with Steinfelt and Morgan. During the fight, Jack maintains his integrity; he fights to win, even though winning would cost him fifty grand. Jack decides to lose intentionally only after he is fouled, when he realizes that Walcott has fixed the fight and intends to lose by delivering a low blow to Jack in the final round. In that sense, Jack calls to mind another Hemingway hero, Frederick Henry of *A Farewell to Arms*, who honorably performs his duty as a soldier until he is

fouled. During the great retreat at Caporetto, Italian officers and battle police are randomly selecting retreating officers and shooting them for abandoning their troops during combat. When Frederick Henry is grabbed by a battle policeman and selected for execution, he deserts. By deserting, he violates the military code of conduct, but only after he has been violated. "Anger was washed away in the river along with any obligation," he says after his escape. "Although that ceased when the carabinieri put his hands on my collar" (AFTA 232).

Like Frederick Henry, Jack Brennan is a man of both courage and integrity. Like other Hemingway heroes, Jack abides by the rules of his profession—he fights to win a championship bout, even though a victory will cost him big money. He participates in no pre-fight fix; he takes no dive. Jack breaks the rules only after realizing that his opponent has violated the most sacred code of the profession to which Jack has devoted his life. Paul Smith states that Jack fails morally by hitting Walcott twice, once "to set things even" and a second time to win his bet (130). But Walcott certainly deserves what he got; he holds the title but is no champion. Jack has lost his title, but, as David L. Vanderwerken notes, he goes down swinging (9). He also wins his bet and, more importantly, earns the respect of the men in his corner. John Collins, Jack's manager, is on the mark with his remark to his fighter in the dressing room after the fight: "You're some boy, Jack" (CSS 249).

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