

Ernest Hemingway's the Old Man and the Sea: a Saga of Human Fortitude with Spirituality

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Abstract

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is a study of man's place in a world of violence and destruction. It is a story in which Hemingway seems to suggest that, at least in the natural order, man can find his own dignity and beauty in learning to understand the mystery of human power that is at the heart of so much that appears violent and cruel. This paper deals with the concept of courage, but courage is objectified in the narrative and the novelist seems to have had much faith in either concepts or ideals. Hemingway seems to have simply turned his back on a sick society and all sociological, metaphysical and spiritual efforts to cure it. *The Old Man and the Sea* presents a world in which man and beast survive and are at their best only when acting courageously in a bad world where there is no love nor mercy nor charity nor justice unless man can keep his courage. In the exercise of the physicality of both man and fish, Hemingway demonstrates a kind of nobility that exists only in this world when two creatures achieve brotherhood in a trial of endurance which demands every ounce of strength and every skill they possess.

Key Words: Power, Courage, Protagonist, narrative, Heroism

Introduction

The Old Man and The Sea is based on the simplest of themes possible, which was again an actual incident that Hemingway had heard of. It is Hemingway's masterpiece a novella, largely responsible for the Nobel Prize that was awarded to him in 1954. It is the simple story of an old Cuban fisherman and his courage, dignity and heroism. Santiago, the Old Man, is a professional fisherman and he fishes alone along the Gulf Stream. He has not been able to catch any fish for eighty-four days, on the eighty-fifth day he goes far out and fights a huge marlin single-handedly for three days and two nights. His indefatigable struggle is admirable more so the stoic determination, endurance and indomitableness he displays in his subsequent battle against the sharks who attack and ultimately destroy his hard won prize. His fight against the sharks illustrates his strong commitment to his profession. He keeps struggling to defend his prize even when defeat is inevitable and till he is weaponless and nothing left of the marlin except its long white skeleton. The marlin has been

destroyed but the old man is not defeated. He returns home with the skeleton and eventually makes plans for the future. The theme, therefore, is how a man alone and out of luck may persist and fight and depending upon the manner in which he fight and even at the point of being defeated, he may emerge morally victorious though for all the world he may be physically beaten.

Various Meanings and Interpretations

The Old Man and The Sea admits of various interpretations. Some called it Hemingway's personal parable, a parable of the artist struggling with his craft and his critics. Some critics interpret it as a parable of man's life on earth, a parable of human struggle, others interpret it as an allegory of youth and age. Still others see it as a Christian allegory, with Christian symbols and images of the Crucifixion.

Personal and Private Parable

Many critics see Hemingway as the protagonist Santiago who interprets his struggle as his own struggle. After the publication of *Across the Rive?* and *Into the Trees*, he received a lot of criticism. Critics lashed out against him saying that he was no longer of the same caliber and that he had lost his touch. He, therefore, had to prove himself again as the thousand times he had proved himself before was not of any significance. Therefore, Santiago's struggle against the marlin is seen as Hemingway struggling to master his art. Then his heroic struggle against the sharks with everything he had is Hemingway struggling against the opposing critics and the sharks tearing off the marlin's fish, ultimately reducing the marlin to its bare skeleton is seen as the unfavorable critics lashing out and tearing apart Hemingway's art, the result of his hard work. Finally, even destroyed he is not beaten and he dreams of a better future. This again is interpreted as symbolizing Hemingway's hope and confidence and his unbeatable belief.

A Parable of Human Struggle

From another point of the view, Santiago's struggle is seen as a parable of human struggle, as an allegory of man's life on earth. The story symbolizes man fighting for the good, and fighting against the evil. Life is full of trials and tribulations. Man has to face problems at every step and at every point. He has to grapple with great determination, courage and endurance, the uncontrollable forces of nature that work against him. Moreover, he has to strictly adhere to the rules of living, as Santiago faces with the task of catching and conquering huge fish has to strictly follow the rules and go by his techniques. It also tells how man may be destroyed but not defeated while facing the enormous trials. Santiago struggle against the sharks, trials that threaten to destroy and take away all that is his and all that he has achieved. But by the manner of his struggle, the nature of his persistence, by still daring even when defeat stared him in the face, and thus score a moral victory even in defeat. The message is clear that human life itself is a struggle. Man has to fight and even as he fights he is defeated and crushed but he can still live with dignity and respect by displaying his indomitable spirit.

Parable of Youth and Age

Another point of view leads us to the theory that the story is a parable of youth and age. Manolin, the boy and the lions on the beaches of Africa are symbol of the Old Man's past youth. They are sources from where Santiago draws, hope, courage, strength and inspirations during his long ordeal at sea. Santiago says, "the boy keeps me alive" and this is there both literally as well as figuratively. Manolin is seen as taking care of all the Old Man's physical needs in the beginning and end of the story where he appears. He helps the Old Man carry his equipment, brings food, coffee and beer for the Old Man, provides him companionship and says he shall take care of his other needs. He even provides the Old Man with sardines to use as bait the next day. During his ordeal Santiago constantly remembers the boy, wishing he were there with him. But whenever he thinks of the boy and how he would help him, it is as though he gained new strength, new resolution, and he promptly goes on with his job. Thoughts of the boy rejuvenate him. Finally, in the end, it is the boy who assures him that he was not beaten by the fish and it is because of his assurance that he shall now accompany him in the future that Santiago is able to make plans for the future. The lions, another memory from his youth release him and makes him happy whenever he dreams of them. During the ordeal when he is tired, he sleeps and is dreaming of the lions, is happy and feels better. Thus, the allegory in the novel is that Santiago the Old Man struggles for life and in this struggle, he is supported and helped by youth and images of youth.

A Christian Allegory

Santiago's story is also a Christian allegory in many ways as he exemplifies many Christian virtues such as love and compassion, humility and dignity etc. He loves the boy Manolin, his pupil since the age of five as a father would. He loves most of the creatures of the sea especially, the meek and the beautiful and the good and strong. He loves the fish, calling them his principal friends. The marlin he looks also arouses his deepest love and respect and he calls it his true brother. He invites the small warbler to stay for as long as it likes, pitying its delicateness in its fight against the sea which could be cruel. Santiago has also attained humility though he did not know when he had and his humility was of the kind that contained no loss of pride. Apart from his being endowed with Christian virtues there is a Christian symbolism underlying the text. For example, his left hand is cramped and useless and he scolds himself for its untrustworthiness throughout his life and his right hand is injured and bleeding but its doing all the work. The significance of this can be seen if one goes back to the significance of the left and the right in the crucifixion scene as given in the Old Testament. There is also the image of the crucifixion superimposed over Santiago during and after his ordeal. As sharks attack, Santiago utters 'Ay' of which Hemingway offers no other explanation but that of a noise that one would utter as one felt the nail go through one's fish into the wood. Then as Santiago comes home he climbs homeward bearing the mast on his shoulders, cross-like, he stops and rests several times and finally on reaching home he goes to sleep face down on his bed, his arms stretched out and his injured palms facing upwards. In this symbolism of Santiago as being crucified and then warning to plan for the future and happy dreams can be seen as the Christian allegory.

Deceptive Simplicity of the Narrative

The narrative of the text is, therefore, deceptive in its simplicity. Though the language; style and story are simple, there are various levels of meaning working within the text. This simplicity and its various allegorical meanings are important aspects that contribute to the huge success of the novel and Hemingway's reputation as a major novelist of the twentieth century.

Santiago's Heroism

Santiago's characterization is made in heroic terms. Moreover, the manner of his struggle against the marlin and then the sharks is an extraordinary achievement that would be a matter of pride for anyone. But he is a man who has attained humility and with the knowledge that his humility was not disgraceful and that it carried no loss of pride. He gracefully accepts the boy's help in various ways, the boy's offer of providing food, beer and even the sardines to use as bait for the next day. Santiago is heroic even in the manner in which he maintains his hope and confidence though he has not been able to catch any fish for eighty-four days and Manolin's father has declared him *salao*, the worst form of unlucky. His awesome struggle against the marlin and the manner in which he retains his confidence and whatever little is left of his strength and stamina, is again a show of extraordinary courage and valor. His stoic endurance and determination though injured and exhausted due to lack of food and sleep, he never gives up, even when he sees black spots before his eyes and he feels faint and dizzy due to his extreme exhaustion, he after having been locked behind the marlin for two days and two nights and half a day yet, attempts to harpoon the fish. He fails and he attempts and fails seven times before he is finally able to harpoon it. The fish turns out to be two feet longer than the skiff.

It is impossible to take the fish on board and so he lashes the fifteen hundred pound fish alongside and begins to sail forward. But sharks attracted by the blood from the marlin attack throughout the night. Santiago valiantly defends his prize. He loses his harpoon in killing the first shark, then he uses the knife, club and the tilled till finally he is weaponless and there is nothing left of the marlin except its skeleton. Still he doesn't give up. He keeps hitting out even when he cannot see, at what he can hear and feel. Thus Santiago displays indefatigableness and an indomitable spirit that separates and elevates him far beyond ordinary men. He may be physically defeated and destroyed but he refuses to be defeated. His dignity and moral courage can be seen in the manner in which he expresses his regret to the fish and says that nothing had beaten him, he had only gone too far out. He had gone beyond all people and his fate was only a punishment for his transgression. In this view, he is comparable to Christ and to Saint James. Hemingway himself intended Santiago to portray the Greek philosophy that "God doesn't forbid human kind to cross the mortal limits but those who do have to pay a heavy price." Santiago, therefore, pays a heavy price, but his heroism is not the ordinary kind. He is again able to rejuvenate himself, to retain his confidence and having proved himself make happy plans for the future and dreams happy dreams. "The old man was sleeping again...The old man was dreaming about the lions."

Narrative Style

As always, Hemingway, the master story teller comes up with a marvelous story based on an ultra-simple storyline and in accordance to the Hemingway technique, the story is told with simple candor in a language simplistic, bare and minimal, devoid of any kind of flourishes or embellishments. Though some critics have pointed out that Hemingway's style had become another rhetoric which he merely seems to be attempting again, there can be no doubt of the beauty and originality of the prose. As simple as Santiago is, as simple his story and the language in which it is told. There is a grace and rhythm in the prose that not even classical prose can boast of. The colloquial language possesses a musical quality that Hemingway enhances occasionally by using alliteration. The sentences he uses are short and simple. There is nothing difficult in his prose, even children can easily go through the text. However, this simplicity is deceptive for underneath lies various levels of meanings and herein lies the beauty and greatness of the text. An example for close consideration as follows:

The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cover the sun bring from its reflection on the tropic sea were on his cheeks. The blotches ran well down the sides of his face and hands had the deep creased scars from handling heavy fish on the cords. But none of these scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert. Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated.”

Hemingway’s use of colloquial, non-literary prose is renowned. The effect can be better seen in his dialogues which are spare and to the point. This medium is highly suitable for his subject.

Flaws in the Story

The Old Man and The Sea, is Hemingway’s masterpiece, a classic of the twentieth century but it is not completely free from faults. He received quite a few negative comments and criticism for the novel. Philip Young, one of his biographers was of the opinion that in his rhetoric he seemed to be no longer original, but imitating the style he himself had established as a rhetoric. Therefore, he accused Hemingway for not being creative. Robert P. Weeks, an eminent Hemingway critic, has called the novel a ‘fakery’ because he has not created a real fish, a real sea or a real man as Hemingway asserted. According to Weeks, ‘The realism of Hemingway’s first published stories is not an arbitrarily selected technique: it is an inevitable part of his world view ...but his style has gone soft in The Old Man and The Sea because the view of the world has gone soft. Santiago’s universe is not the chaotic universe in which Nick Adams, Frederic Henry, Jake Barnes, and Robert Jordan encountered meaningless violence and evil. It is more nearly a cozy universe in which fish have nobility and loyalty and other virtues...It is a universe so dummy that the heroes call birds his brothers. Even his sharks which are an embodiment of evil tend to be “stagey” and ‘melodramatic’ and unbelievable. This cosmic camaraderie is patently false and forced.

Phillip Toynbee, another Hemingway critic calls it a forced literary effort. He says The Old Man and The Sea...is stuffed with the burden of all these which had been written about Hemingway’s message and philosophy. The demands which it makes on us are crudely literary. In fact, it sounds like that penultimate note of a musical scales which creates a sense of intolerable incompleteness in our ears.” According to Toynbee, Hemingway’s earlier stories were a better example of the struggle within and The Old Man and The Sea the product of a genius on the decline. Finally, Leslie Fielder gives the most critical negative viewpoint. He writes. “The youngsters of today are disgusted not only by the outdated and ridiculous role which Hemingway, more and more frantically, played in his own life, but also by his failure to project an adult life, an adult commitment, an adult coverage, from which they might revolt with dignity, this breathless pursuit of wars, swordfish, and lions leave cold a generation born older than he will ever get.” Therefore, he states that Hemingway has regressed and thus declined in his ability, other criticism against the novel is that flashbacks during Santiago’s ordeal, about his hand wrestling match, the porpoises and the marlin couple and the lions are mere additions just to break the monotony of the text and provide crude variety.

Conclusion

However, some critics may condemn the text, the fact remains that most are in its favor. And though the points they have raised may be true to a certain extent, it cannot detract from the essential greatness of the text. Moreover, material facts such as it becoming a (best seller), a publication and

winning the 1953 Pulitzer Prize and then being responsible for the Nobel Prize that he won in 1954 speaks for itself.

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