

Santiago's Victory in Defeat in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*

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Abstract

The present paper is an endeavor to analyze Ernest Hemingway's concept of victory through the indefatigable spirit of the protagonist, Santiago in his novella *The Old Man and the Sea*. Ernest Hemingway's writing portrays the role of man in different spheres of life. It is a novella about an old Cuban fisherman and his three day long battle with a giant Marlin fish. Throughout the novella, he withholds the will to continue and the courage to overcome what is believed to be the impossible. His persistence and confidence, his absolute determination and his unique way of accepting the reality makes him a real victor. This is an attempt to redefine the concept of victory through the brilliant depiction of the struggle Santiago triumphs over on the sea and to present his untiring spirit which considers his defeat as another chapter in his history of life.

Keywords: Undeclared, persistence, struggle, determination, obstacles.

Hemingway is considered a pioneer in the field of Modern American fiction because of his simple style, easy ideas and accurate description. Each of his work is full of lively details, adventures and high ideals which help the reader to understand the intricate realities of life. *The Old Man and the Sea* presents an almost perfect image of a protagonist through the character of Santiago who shows the spirit of 'undefeated' in spite of facing so many hurdles and obstacles in his way to achieve success. It presents an epic battle of wills between an experienced fisherman, Santiago and a giant marlin, the largest catch of his life, in a very skillful way. Santiago is presented as a knight without armor who triumphs all his battles by winning himself in spite of the bitter criticism of the society. He proves that the inner strength is the only key to success as his character portrays that success is found inside the person's soul which enables him reach to attain his goal. Throughout our analysis, we revise and redefine the concept of victory which Santiago presents through his unflinching spirit and absolute determination though he could never show his giant marlin to anyone. We also try to examine the different aspects of his struggle and his indefatigable spirit in this epic novella.

The Old Man and the Sea (1952), one of the masterpieces of literature in the 20th century, is the last published novel of Ernest Hemingway before his death in 1961. It was a brilliant expression of "On the Blue Water: A Gulf Stream Letter" (1936), one of the many fishing articles that he wrote for Esquire magazine. It was an essay about marlin fishing. It portrayed an old sailor who hooked a huge marlin that towed him for days, was too big to get aboard, ultimately gnawed by sharks. When the story was published in book form, it became

a runaway bestseller in the USA and England; more significant that the book earned for its author the Pulitzer Prize in fiction in 1952 and contributed to his being awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1954. In many ways, the novel gives us a glimpse into the award-winning author's mind as the events and the themes of the story connected to Hemingway's life. He wrote this novel ten years before his death while living in Cuba. His love for fishing and his time in Cuba presumably inspired this novel. He avoids lengthy descriptions and focuses more on context. In this novel, Hemingway beautifully illustrates the trials and tribulations of a man through Santiago's struggle at the sea. The old man's adventure with the marlin on sea and his dignity, pride and achievement all combined into one emotional fight for life itself. The novel establishes many deeper aspects that man struggles within everyday life. The numerous hardships and the battles Santiago encounters on the sea can be viewed as conflicts man is forced to deal within his lifetime. His persistence and confidence are clearly demonstrated at the beginning of the novel as he seems to run out of luck. He has been unable to catch a fish for eighty four days. As a professional fisherman, eighty four days without catching a single fish would be shameful, especially for an old man like Santiago but he never loses the hope.

Hemingway appears very exact and truthful while depicting the old man. He writes, "The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun brings from its reflection on the tropic sea were on his cheeks. The blotches ran well down the sides of his face and his 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." (1) Santiago is painted as a patient, persevere and hard-working soul. He works hard to earn his livelihood and is living alone in a very miserable situation. He has no friends except for a boy named Manolin. For the first forty days, Manolin had fished with him but Manolin's parents who call Santiago a 'Salao' or 'the worst form of unlucky' force Manolin to leave him in order to work in some more prosperous boat. Manolin is a young boy who treats Santiago as his mentor. "The old man had taught the boy to fish and the boy loved him." (6) They share a very special bond with each other and the boy time and again reminds Santiago that he is the best fisherman in the world even when other fishermen refuses to believe in his ability of fishing. Manolin regards him the world's best fisherman and he expresses his sentiments every time he feels to. "There are many good fishermen and some great ones. But there is only you."(18)

To prove his worth Santiago decides to go into the deep of the sea to catch a big fish and he hooks a great marlin. He does not have Manolin's help therefore he must struggle on his own and has to bring the marlin back to the shore. Many times in our life we are not given any advantage to ease our pain and suffering when we are striving for achievement. The old man does not allow in pity for not having any help but rather is very rational about the situation. This represents the fact that in life we must move on and put great efforts into tasks seemingly impossible when these are done independently. The absence of Manolin places emphases on dealing with struggle when man has little to fight with. Though he needs the virile power of the young boy to catch the marlin yet he fights alone with the marlin for three days and proves himself the champion of struggle and hardship.

Hemingway presents the character of Santiago as larger than life because he presents the struggles and situations of a common man who wants to win the battle of his life. Santiago's inner struggle amidst the battle on the sea with the great marlin is presented as the struggle of every man who wants to prove his worth in the most adverse circumstances. "But he seems calm he thought and following his plan. But what is his plan, he thought. And what is mine? Mine I must improvise because of his great size. If I will jump I can kill him. But he stays down forever."(52)

The story shows that in life a person receives both good and bad. On the one hand, the fish would jump and be caught, but in another, the fish would stay down forever as would the old man represents how greatly the actions of others can impact our lives, both positively and negatively. In the effort to show his worth, Santiago fights with the giant marlin. Time and again the marlin jumps out of the water and Santiago has to struggle with him in order to hold him but it is a very big fish and the old man is too small for this struggle but he does not give up. He thinks that through the effort to battle the inevitable a man can prove himself. Indeed, a man can prove this determination over and over through the worthiness of the opponents he chooses to face. Santiago finds the marlin worthy to fight just as he once found “the great negro of Cinefeugos” worthy whom he defeated in a wrestling match in his young age. His admiration for these opponents brings love and respect into an equation with death as their destruction becomes the point of honor and bravery that confirms Santiago’s heroic qualities. He says to the great marlin, “I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends.” (46)

After sharks have destroyed the marlin the old man apologizes again and again to his worthy opponent. As the sun rises, the fish is swimming in the shallower waters. The old man tries his hard to slow the fish by attaching a yellow weed to the line. He notices that his left hand is bleeding from where the line has cut it. Aware that he will need to keep his strength, the old man eats the tuna he caught the day before and expected to use as bait. Santiago gets angered and frustrated by the weakness of his body and wounds. His left hand is badly cut. For hours the old man fights circling fish for every inch of the line, slowly pulling it in. He feels dizzy and faint. When it passes under the boat, he can’t believe its size even. The fish lurches out of the water brilliantly and beautifully alive as it dies. When it falls back into the water its blood stains the waves. His wounds remind him that his battle with the marlin was real and not a dream. “Santiago’s hand injury demonstrates his weakening life powers, because hands represent his essential tool. The bleeding from hands strengthens this interpretation, because bleeding demonstrates a leak of life powers too. The blood also represents the fire and human soul, which appears a sharp contrast to the water and cold blooded sharks.” (Muller 131)

After some time a mako shark hits the marlin and the old man sinks his harpoon into the shark’s head but the shark has taken up nearly forty pounds of meat from the marlin’s body. He realizes that his struggle with the marlin was for nothing, all will soon be lost but he muses, “But man is not made for defeat, he said. A man can be destroyed but not defeated.” (93) Santiago tries to be hopeful because “It is silly not to stop hope, he thought. Besides I believe it is a sin.” (83) He reminds himself that he hasn’t killed the marlin just for the food but for pride and love. At one point of time he wonders if it is sin to kill anybody you love. On the other hand, he does not feel guilty about killing because he has done it in self-defense. He kills many more sharks who attack the marlin in order to complete his journey to the shore. The loss of the harpoon and the knowledge that more sharks are coming serve to break Santiago’s will; it is almost better to have never won the fish if he will never able to show it off. Using all the tricks, skills and will power, Santiago fights all the sharks making it back to shore with nothing but the skeleton and the head of the fish. “I’m tired than I have ever been, he thought, and now the trade wind is rising. But that will be good to take him in with. I need that badly.”(79). Santiago’s hard-work has been destroyed but he has proved his self-worth. Despite his low mood and the fact that he has lost all the meat of the fish, he realizes that he has lost nothing; in fact, with the other fishermen seeing the skeleton Santiago has won back his respect and reputation. He beats back old age, catches a huge fish and then beat back the sea and the sharks. He refuses to give up the persistence of will-power which shows that he can be destroyed in body but not in mind.

During his struggle with the marlin, to boost his confidence, the old man recalls the great arm-wrestling match he won as a young man. Having beaten the great Negro from Cienfuegos (town in Cuba), Santiago earned the title 'EL CAMPEON' or 'the Champion'. He thinks about the sea-life, Base-ball and the life of a great Base-ball player Di-Maggio, although he feels numb with pain. He still feels sorry for the great marlin though he has determined to kill him. He feels a brotherly feeling towards the marlin. It seems that he has an intimate connection with the marlin as well as with the sea and stars. He constantly pledges his love, respect and sentiments of brotherhood to the marlin. For this reason the fish's death is not portrayed as senselessly tragic. Santiago and seemingly Hemingway feels that since death must come in the world, so it is preferable that it comes in the hands of a worthy opponent. The old man's magnificence, the honor and the humility with which he executes his task-elevates his struggle to a rarified, even transcendent level. Hemingway writes, 'it (humility) was not disgraceful and it carries no loss of true pride.'"(9)

Hemingway unites the old man with the marlin through Santiago's frequent feeling of kinship. He thus suggests that the fate of one is the fate of other. Although they are opponents, but they are also partners, allies and in a sense doubles. The fanatical final stage of the old man's fight with the marlin brings a tragic lesson to the forefront what happens when man's pride forces him beyond the boundaries of his rightful human place in the world. Santiago though sails out too far from his place but has not left his true place which suggests the man's greatest potential can be found in his return to the natural world from which modern advancements have driven him. At one point, Santiago embraces his unity with the marlin, thinking, "You are killing me, fish----- but you have a right to----- brother, come on and kill me. I don't care who kills who?" (82) Santiago thinks everything in the world must die and only a brotherhood between men or creatures- can alleviate the grimness of the faces which appears due to the inevitable struggle of life. "Then the fish came alive, with his death in him and rose high out of water showing all his great length and width and all his power and his beauty." (84)

Santiago, as the greatest fisherman and embodiment of their philosophy, becomes a solitary human representative to the natural world. He accepts the inevitability of the natural order in which all creatures are both predator and prey, but recognizes that all creatures also nourish one another. He accepts the natural cycle of human existence as part of that natural order, but finds within himself the imagination and inspiration to endure his greatest struggle and achieves the intangibles that can redeem his individual life so that even when destroyed he can remain undefeated. Accepting the natural order and cycle of life, struggle and enduring and redeeming his life's work, then passing on to the next generation everything he values. "The sea represents the depth of the unconscious. In a vocabulary definition, the sea symbolically represents a dangerous area of innumerable treasures and forms hidden in its darkness, the sea demonstrates an inexhaustible source of life power but also a deep life chasm." (Becker 180)

Santiago becomes an archetypal representation of the human condition and the story becomes the everyman's story. He achieves the crucial balance between pride and humility. His unceasing struggle with the fish against a vast backdrop of ocean is so memorably presented in terms of a contest of endurance that he enters immediately into the gallery of literary immortals. His courage and confidence make him believe that man is not mere a puppet in the hands of his circumstances. He can establish his identity and move the mountains if there is an exaltation of noble striving and honorable failure. In this epic fight with the great marlin he knows that either he or the fish must die, and he is determined to win.

Hemingway's fiction presents a world peopled exclusively by men who live most successfully in the world through the displays of skills. In his world, mere survival is not enough, rather to elevate oneself above the masses; one must master the rules and rituals by which men are judged. Time and again, we see Santiago

displaying the art and the rituals that make him a master of his trade. Rules and rituals dominate the rest of his life as well. When he is not thinking about fishing, his mind turns to religion or baseball. His worship of Joe Maggio and his constant comparison between the baseball and himself suggest his preference for the world in which men are measured by a clear set of standards. “I would like to take DiMaggio fishing,’ the old man said. They say his father was a fisherman. May be he was as poor as we are and would understand.”(16). Santiago respects him as his ideal and hero. “Joe Di Maggio may be understood as his hero. Santiago compares his injuries to Joe’s in acute situations and thoughts about Joe’s sufferings help him to endure his own pain.” (Pearsall 249)

Early the next morning, Manolin comes to the old man’s shack and the sight of his friend’s ravaged hands brings him to tears. All other fishermen have gathered around Santiago’s boat and measured the carcass at 18 feet. When the old man wakes, he and Manolin talk as they share their bond of love and affection. Santiago shares the details of his adventure with her friend. Manolin insists on working with Santiago again, regardless of what his parents say. Given the depth of his tragedy- most likely Santiago will never be able to catch another fish in his lifetime- the novel ends on an optimistic note. Both friends reunite and the promise of triumph and regeneration is supported by the closing image of the book. The destruction of the marlin is not the defeat of Santiago; rather it leads him to his redemption. Indeed the fishermen who once mocked him now stand in awe of him when Santiago says, “fishing kills me exactly as it keeps me alive.” (95)

Hemingway points to the vast, necessary and ever-shifting tension that exists between loss and gain, triumph and defeat and life and death. The old man’s battle with the fish is not only a battle of strength, but a battle of wills. The old man makes up for his old age with incredible endurance, willing to withstand hunger, physical pain and isolation from the rest of the world as he battles the fish. Endurance becomes the way we connect the old man and the fish he fights, as they share a determination that in its magnitude, separates them from other people and creatures. The old man sees the fish as his brother, not his enemy, yet he never wavers in his resolution to kill the fish, which ultimately he does. “He is a great fish and I must convince him, he thought. I must never let him learn his strength nor what he could do if he made his run. If I were him I would put in everything now and go until something now and go until something broke. But, thank God, they are not as intelligent as we who kill them; although they are more noble and more able.”(55)

Santiago’s success with the marlin gives him hope for his future. He will no longer be the failing fisherman but the victor of the village. In the last scene of the novel, the village fishermen marvel at the skeleton of the huge marlin. Santiago’s old reputation as an unlucky man has died and a heroic image of a fisherman who endured a great deal rose up in its place. Santiago though destroyed at the end but never defeated. Instead, he emerges as a hero. His struggle does not enable him to change man’s place in the world. Rather, it enables him to meet his most dignified destiny. “a man who keeps fighting is not a failure.-----The knight in shining armor can fight, nevertheless. This him noble, like the marlin. And it makes him undefeated.” (enotes.com). He represents every man’s struggle to survive and his effort to bring the marlin back on the shore has changed the whole scenario. Hemingway seems to give a message that though nobody can escape from death yet the more difficult the struggle and the opponent, the more powerful a man can prove himself. Santiago never gives in to defeat; he sails further into the ocean than he ever has before in the hope of landing a fish, struggles with the marlin for three days and nights despite immense physical pain and exhaustion. “The fish was caught right in the noon, which implies to a time of the strongest power of the sun.” (Muller 226)

After catching the marlin, whenever the situation gets particularly difficult and despair threatens to overwhelm Santiago, he turns to a number of tactics to fuel his resistance to defeat; he recalls the memories of

his youthful strength, he relies his pride by demanding that he proves himself a worthy role model for Manolin by comparing himself to his hero Joe Maggio and he prays to God, even though his prayers do nothing to ease his physical suffering. Santiago finds solace and strength in remembering his youth, which is symbolized by the lions on the beach- he sees in his dreams. He recalls these lions; slow, graceful but fierce creations of God from the perspective of an old man. In doing so, he realizes that although slow but he can be a formidable opponent. Lions are the striking images of dreams. In terms of interpretation, lions bring in a masculine feature of power (king of animals) and majesty and also of a dangerous predatory energy. This energy should be asserted in one's life to become individual person. According to Carl Jung, "The repetition of dream may confirm the constant unconscious urge." (Jung 56)

Hemingway fails to view old age in any other terms but through the values of pride, sacrifice and endurance rather than the softening qualities of youth. "He no longer dreamed of storms, or of women, or of great occurrences, or of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor of his wife. He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach. They played like young cats in the dusk and he loved them as he loved the boy."(19). He wrote a story not of youthful disillusion or frustration but rather the story is about an aged fisherman for whom power of will has replaced the power of flesh and the wisdom of true pride and humanity have replaced the arrogance and the ambition found in the youth. In this novel, Hemingway struggles to decide what sort of heroism is possible as a man gets older. As Santiago is physically and mentally drained during his struggle with the marlin but he thinks that if he has to give his life then why not do it fishing. Most people would not dare to do such thing in their twenties but Santiago is a man who has endured many ordeals. As noted by Melville Backmann, the act of killing the marlin represents his rebellion against death. (in Baker 254). His strength and vision are not that of an old man. His eyes remain cheerful and have a transcendent power of imaginative vision. He knows how to keep alive in himself and others the hope, absorption and resolution essential to withstand suffering which transcends it and ultimately transforms oneself. "The shark came in a rush and the old man hit him as he shut his jaws." (103)

One way to describe Santiago's story is as a triumph of indefatigable spirit over exhaustible material resources. Triumph over crushing adversity is the heart of heroism, and for a fisherman like Santiago his tribulations must be monumental. Hemingway's vision of heroism is Sisyphean, requiring continuous labor for essentially ephemeral ends. What we achieve or fail at externally is not as significant to heroism as comforting ourselves with inner nobility. His focus, his strength and his resolve in the face of tremendous obstacles, as well as the sheer artistry with which he executes his tasks, mark him as a hero. Although his memory makes him sad but his determination is unchecked. The poet and the critic Delmore Schwartz regards *The Old Man and the Sea* as a dramatic development in Hemingway's career because Santiago's 'sober hope' strikes a sort of compromise between youthful naiveté and the jadedness of age.

Throughout the novel, no matter how baleful his circumstances become, the old man exhibits an unflinching determination to catch the marlin and bring it to the shore. He meets every challenge with the same unwavering determination; even he is willing to die in order to bring in the marlin and to battle the feeding sharks. It is this conscious decision to act, to fight, to never give up that enables him to avoid his defeat. Although he returns to Havana without the trophy of his long battle, but he returns with the knowledge that he has acquitted himself proudly and manfully. Hemingway seems to share that victory is not a prerequisite for honor. Instead, glory depends upon one having the pride to see a struggle through to an end, regardless of the outcome. The glory and honor Santiago accrues itself but from his pride and his determination to fight.

Hemingway confessed in an interview about the novel, “I tried to make a real old man, a real boy, a real sea and a real fish and real sharks. But if I made them good and true enough they would mean many things.” (Baker 29)

Hemingway’s message in the novel is tragic in many respects, the story of Santiago and the destruction of his greatest catch is far from dismal; unlike Fredrick in *A Farewell to Arms*, Santiago is not defeated by his enlightenment. Although Santiago’s struggle will bring about defeat- the great marlin is devoured by sharks- Santiago emerges as a victor. He takes the remarks of the other fishermen positively and goes to the deep sea then fights with the marlin and sharks. In spite of hunger and pain, he transcends all the evils of the world by enduring them. In an interview with “The Paris Review” in 1958 Hemingway spoke about *The Old Man and the Sea* “Anyway, to skip how[the writing] is done, I had unbelievable luck this time and could convey the [old man’s] experience completely and have it be one that no one have ever conveyed. The luck was that I had a good man and a good boy and lately writers have forgotten there are still such things.”

To Hemingway, Santiago and Manolin were true to the real world as protagonists like Frederic Henry of *A Farewell to Arms* or Jake Barnes of *The Sun Also Rises*. He was an accomplished fisherman and provides the readers with many details concerning the art of capturing marlins. The novel has a hero whose virtues are worth remembering and emulating. It teaches the readers to guard against pride, to set workable limits to laudable goals, and above all to love and respect God’s beautiful creatures even as one must struggle daily to survive in the world red in tooth and claw. He gives us an idea to never give up, no matter what the circumstances are, we need to keep going and fighting for our beliefs and goals. It leaves a message of self-determination. Hemingway puts Santiago as an example of eternal survivor against the nature and at the same time, he experiences the fulfillment of the victory after facing the odds of nature.

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