

The Spiritual Encounter and the Human Endurance in Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea

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Abstract

Ernest Hemingway's protagonist Santiago is one of the most illustrative, consistent and metaphoric characters among his works. Throughout *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago is depicted as a heroic figure. He is "a strange old man" of eighty four years of age, still powerful and still wise in all the ways of his trade. He fights with the marline with epic skill and endurance, showing "what a man can do and what a man endures". And when the sharks come, he is determined to fight them until his death, because he knows that "a man is not made for defeat...A man can be destroyed but not defeated". His spiritual attitudes are very clear as he fights with the fish. He seeks the help of God and Mother Mary in his fight with the marline. The old man's realization of what he has done is reflected in his apologies to the fish, and this realization and its implications are emphasized symbolically throughout the novel. Santiago's awareness of his individual role in the universe permits him more authentic effort. Before became a writer, Ernest Hemingway was a boxer, fisherman, a lover of blood sports and a war hero.

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INTRODUCTION

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* can be interpreted as a parable of mankind, showing man's life as a struggle against unconquerable natural forces, a struggle in which, through dignity and spiritual faith, the final victory is won. Though Santiago the protagonist is waging a very crucial battle against the forces of nature, he is a real Old Man like any other human being. Bickford Sylvester in his article "The Cuban Context of *The Old Man and the Sea*" argues in a similar vein: "He is real like us, yet he behaves and thinks – with remarkable regularity – as we are able to behave and think only in our best moments. And that is exalting to us *because* he is human; he is possible" (Donaldson 245).

Santiago, a poor Cuban fisherman, has gone eighty four days without taking a fish and it is now regarded as *saloa*, 'the worst form of unlucky' (Hemingway 5). He has even lost the service of the boat-boy Manolin whose parents have sent him to work on a luckier boat. Manolin loves Santiago, however, and surreptitiously helps and feeds him. On the eighty fifth day, Santiago tries to change his luck by rowing his skiff far out into the sea. There he hooks a fish so big that it tows him still farther out. Nonetheless, he cannot pull the fish towards the shore since he is not strong enough. Instead, the fish starts to pull the boat away. Several times Santiago wishes the young boy had been there with him so they could pull it together.

When the fish pulls his boat very far from the beach, though he was exhausted but he does not lose his hope. In the same way, when his hands get injuries with the rope, he never think of cutting the rope and turning back to home. The old Santiago's health weaken more by every passing day and he nearly faints several times; however, he does not get discouraged and goes on with his struggle and he believes that the struggle to death is only just beginning.

The excitement of Hemingway's novels was equalled by his action-packed life- a life spattered with the blood of war, hunting, bullfights and brawls. Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* reflects classical nature, romanticism and Christian belief and the old fisherman is suggestive of Christ, a symbol of supreme self sacrifice. Hemingway has been increasingly concerned with the relationship between individualism and interdependence and *The Old Man and the Sea* is the culminating expression of this concern in its reflection of Hemingway's mature view of the tragic irony of man's fate: that no abstraction can bring man an awareness and understanding of the solidarity and interdependence without which life is impossible; he must learn it, as it has always been truly learned, through the agony of active and isolated individualism in a universe which dooms such individualism.

Hemingway the novelist stress the idea of pain and endurance through the character Santiago. He goes fishing all by himself, though he know that it is dangerous. The value of endurance of pain is emphasised in the novella. Santiago fishes in the Gulf stream for his living, but after eighty four days of fishless days, Santiago fishes not just for his living and food but to prove to the world that he can become a great fisherman. His encounter with the great marlin on the eighty-fifth day proved that he is the best fisherman according to the terms of pain and endurance and his struggle there is an ascending degree of pain. Beginning his right hand is out and his left hand is cramped, more physical pain comparable to the pain that DiMaggio must have suffered with his bone spur. But soon it goes beyond this. He is utterly exhausted to the point that he cannot even hope. But he goes on and in this pain an image of the crucified Christ can be seen in his climbing towards his shack shouldering the heavy mast and finally going to sleep. "Face down on the newspapers with his arms out straight and the palms of his hand up"(Hemingway 122). The novella highlight the aspect of how a man can endure and what a man can do.

Throughout *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago is given heroic proportions, still powerful and still wise in all the ways of his life. After he hooks the great Marlin, he fights with him like a hero in skill and endurance. And when the sharks comes, he is determined "to fight them until he dies" because he knows that "a man is not made for defeat". In searching for and in catching his big fish, Santiago gains a deepened insight into himself and into his relationship to the rest of created life-an insight as pervasive and implicit in the old fisherman's experience. As he sails far out on the sea, Santiago thinks of it "as feminine and as something that gave or withheld great favours.

Santiago endures his suffering by himself. He is towed by the huge marlin for two days and two nights and he endures the struggle whole heartedly. His hands are injured-his right hand bleeding, his left hand cramped and his back and muscles sore, he is tired due to his continued struggle and his lack of proper nourishment, rest and sleep. He is utterly exhausted and he feels that the fish is killing him. But he persists in his solitary struggle knowing that he has to be alone to fight for his cause. A mere struggle to survival-a struggle between himself and the natural world (Sen 269).

The Old Man and the Sea portrays a world, filled with struggle, pain, and loss, but also shows how a human being may find meaning in such a tragic world. Santiago refuses yielding to depression. After the marlin jumps out of the water “more than a dozen times” (*Old Man* 69), fearless and confident, he tells himself, “You better be fearless and confident yourself, old man” (69). His majesty is shown when he takes great pride in performing his task with precision and integrity. He resolves to remain true to his vocation which extends beyond his determination to outlast the marlin to his determination, to save the marlin from the attack of sharks once the marlin is tied to the small boat. When Santiago sees the first shark, a big Mako, “his head is clear and good and he is full of resolution” even though he “has little hope” (85). He has little hope because he knows that the marlin’s blood will attract many other sharks. Later, Santiago tells himself: “You violated your luck when you went too far outside,” but reconsiders and says, “Don’t be silly” (98).

After enduring the pain he “rested sitting on the unstepped mast and sail and tries not to think, but only to endure” (43). In spite of his efforts, Santiago suffers “plenty” (106) during his three-day struggle with the marlin, but through his battle with the sharks, he summarizes his attitudes toward suffering when he states: “Man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated” (87). True to his statement, Santiago shows his majesty. Hemingway in the end of his novel tries to portray the kind of human majesty, when Santiago eagerly tries to re-establish his working relationship with the fishermen in his village, including Manolin, and to renew his relationship with the natural world. These values are realized and affirmed by Santiago when he re-experiences the pleasure and struggle related with vocation.

The Old Man and the Sea has more scriptural reference than any other work by Hemingway. There is the influence of spiritual elements of love, forgiveness and compassion apart from the biblical imagery depicted in the novel. Santiago is the Spanish name of St. James. Manolin calls Santiago as the best fisherman. Jesus Christ taught his disciples Peter, James and John how to catch men rather than catching fish. The same kind of communication comes to Santiago, who is like any other fisherman in the beginning.

Sylvia Beach says that she has always felt that Hemingway was a deeply religious man (87). He was a devout Catholic. He went to churches and prayed. The Bible was a wonderful influence on his thinking and writing. He went to the extent of presenting his Nobel Prize Medal to the shrine of ‘Neustra de la Caridad del Cobre’ or ‘Virgin del Cobre’ near Santiago in Cuba in 1956 two years after receiving it. (Rao 70)

He had a great devotion to Blessed Virgin Mary. It is very visible in the novel. As Santiago says:

‘I am not religious,’ he said. But I will say ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys that I should catch this fish, and I promise to make a pilgrimage to the Virgin de Cobre if I catch him. That is a promise’.

He commenced to say his prayers mechanically. Sometimes he would be so tired that he could not remember the prayer and then he would say them fast so that they would come automatically. Hail Marys are easier to say than Our Fathers, he thought.

‘Hail Mary full of Grace the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners

now and at the hour of our death. Amen. 'Then he added, 'Blessed Virgin, pray for the death of this fish. Wonderful though he is' (63).

In the beginning of the novella one notices Hemingway highlights two religious symbols such as the picture of Sacred Heart of Jesus and the Virgin of Cobre (12). The pictures comfort him and strengthen his heart and hence prayers to them during his struggle with the great marlin. It also symbolizes the good values and faith that Santiago had in divine providence.

Another religious symbol depicted in the novel is marlin's death to that of Jesus crucifixion and death on the cross. The marlin's strange death occurs at noon and Santiago remembers the death of Jesus on the cross at three o' clock in the afternoon. Hemingway points out in the novel:

Then the fish came alive with his death in him, and rose high out of the water showing all his great length and width and all his power and his beauty. He seemed to hang in the air above the old man in the skiff. Then he fell into the water with a crash that sent spray over the old man and over all the skiff. (93-94)

This picture the vision of Jesus on the cross high up in the air with a spear piercing his side (St. John 19:34). Scriptural symbols move back and forth between Santiago and marlin. In Santiago there is a clear picture of an old man and he took his suffering as it came, telling himself 'Rest gently now against the wood and think of nothing' (58). The marlin is nailed first and lashed to the wood of the boat.

Santiago's wounded hands, the dried blood on his face, his climbing up the road with the mast on his shoulder, his falling under the weight and the way he lies in his shack 'with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up', all remind the reader clearly the suffering, pain and finally of the crucifixion of Jesus narrated in the Bible. He is imbued with the characteristic attributes and qualities of fortitude and courage. The hurts and injuries inflicted on him by the casualties of a neutral, a moral world settle down in his psyche as a traumatic thorn of the unreasonable wound.

Conclusion

The novella was assessed from all perspective more especially from the point of spiritual encounter and the human endurance. Hemingway has beautifully and movingly spun out of an old fisherman's great trial just such as a pragmatic ethic and its basis in an essentially tragic vision of man; and in this reaffirmation of man's most cherished values and their reaffirmation in the terms of our time rests the deepest and the enduring significance of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Irrespective of what most critics consider of how Hemingway portrays Santiago, his endurance, his unfortunate ordeals of human bonding and his spiritual relation with Almighty are exemplified in the novel. Hemingway has not evolved new moral values; rather, he has reaffirmed man's oldest ones-courage, love, humility, solidarity and interdependence.

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