

# **THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA BY HEMINGWAY DEDICATED TO THE CONCEPT OF ‘SELF VERSUS NATURE’**

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## **Abstract:**

**The Old Man and the Sea is the high watermark of Hemingway which is dedicated to the concept of ‘self-versus nature’. In the worldly sense, the protagonist of the story is a loser, and a miserable one but in another sense, far more meaningful, he emerges morally triumphant in his conflict with the Marlin. In fact, the story of this novella is an allegory of human life and man’s general and heroic effort for survival in this universe.**

**Key words: Transcending, Temporal, Dimensions.**

## **INTRODUCTION**

Although Hemingway’s protagonist here is one who is dauntless Cuban fisherman whose chief lineaments of character are based on the grand old fisherman of Casablanca in Havana, yet Santiago is not based on Hemingway’s memory of any one man alone. Into his making are woven the memories of Hemingway’s adventure with a marlin and sharks in Key West. However, it is futile to indulge in the guessing game of who is who, for this might unnecessarily restrict the thematic implications of the story. In fact, *The Old Man and the Sea* is a universalized metaphor for the struggle of the individual human being to keep himself alive in this large universe; the novella becomes an all time parable, transcending temporal and spatial dimensions.

What Hemingway has done in this novella is to locate man’s place in the cosmic scheme and study his relationship with the rest of God’s creation. Santiago is alone, on a wide sea, but he is not isolated from all sentient or insentient beings. An archetypal character, Santiago represents us all, the mortal millions who are ever at war with the hostile forces of life. He absolutizes man’s predicament. Situated as he is, the individual finds himself pitted against the ruthless and all powerful forces of Destiny, symbolized by the sea. But Santiago, a humble fisherman and very human, unlike the traditional larger-than-life hero, does not withdraw; he accepts the battle and fights. Odds are against him; and within those odds he fights alone.

In his great struggle against the fish and the sharks the old man, a fighter, whose best days are behind him, gives expression to Hemingway’s view that “a man can be destroyed, but not defeated.” The man of honour, courage and dignity is the one who has the greatest endurance and who will achieve the most in the end. Santiago is placed in the context of a vast plural world in which there are many forces superior to him, and somehow he has to come to terms with those forces. Like many other Hemingway’s characters Santiago faces danger, pain, defeat, without whimpering, and his fortitude comes from within. From any viewpoint, Santiago wins the contest. He achieves the victory through suffering. What he has achieved for himself is also significant. For some readers the old man’s effort is meaningless and only a self-destructive venture. But it is through the recognition of man’s ultimate defeat which Santiago endures with resolution and courage and which brings him into an acceptance of reality with a conditional victory is

one. Though he does not die, he is one of those for whom the bell tolls. What Santiago has at the close of this story is what all the heroes of Hemingway have had – the proud, quiet knowledge of having fought the fight, of having lasted it out, of having done a great thing to bitter end of human strength.

Here it would be interesting to mention the view-points of various authorities on this novella. Each of these critics, however, is especially concerned with Santiago's epic individualism and his love, like that of Coleridge's "Ancient Mariner," for creatures who share with him a world of inescapable violence. But the qualities are viewed from different angles altogether. Philip Young, for instance, regards this talk of courage, endurance, pride, humility and death as remarkably classical. It is classical not only technically for "its narrow confines, its reduction to fundamentals, the purity of its design, and even in the fatal flaw of pride," for Santiago exceeds his limits and goes out too far. It is also "classical in spirit, in its mature acceptance, and even praise, of things as they are. It is much in the spirit of the Greek tragedies in which men fight against great odds and win moral victories."<sup>1</sup>

Philip Young remarks that the qualities of humility and pride "must be forged in the smithy of a man's soul, only when the individual neither requires nor uses external crutches – ...can he achieve that power of selfhood... that old Santiago, the fisherman, boat, alongwith his path, his endurance, his love achieves in his open boat, alone with his path, his endurance, his love for the noble marlin that is his opponent, his defeat, and yet his ultimate triumph."<sup>2</sup>

The Old Man and the Sea is a "parable" about life, the story of "a struggle against the impossible odds of unconquerable natural forces in which a man can only lose, but which he can dominate in such a way that his loss has dignity, itself the victory."<sup>3</sup> Carlos Baker believes that the novel is Christian in content and, as the old man moves into, and through, the next phase of his operation – fighting the sharks – "the force of the crucifixion idea is gradually intensified."<sup>4</sup> We clearly remember the image of the old man with the cord stretched tight across his back while the big fish is towing him. He takes his suffering as it comes and feels that pain does not matter to a man."<sup>5</sup> Melvin Backman believes that such an image of Santiago suffering gently and the bow and wood "blend magically into an image of Christ on the cross."<sup>6</sup> He subscribes to Baker's evaluation who notices Santiago's natural piety, compassion and thorough humility. These virtues of Santiago are discerned by Philip Young as well.

The Old Man and the Sea has many roots in the rest of Hemingway's work. Much of it goes back to an essay "On the Blue Water" which the author published in Squire in April 1936. The essay says:

Another time an old man fishing alone in a skiff out of Cabanas hooked a great marlin that, on the heavy sash cord handling, pulled the skiff far out to sea. Two days later the old man was picked up by fishermen sixty miles to the Eastward, the head and forward part of the marlin lashed alongside. What was left of this fish, less than half, weighed eight hundred pounds. The old man had stayed with him a night, a day and another night while the fish swam deep and pulled the boat. When he had come up the old man had pulled the boat upon him and harpooned him. Lashed him alongside, the sharks had hit him and the old man had fought them out alone in the gulf stream in a skiff, clubbing them, stabbing at them, lunging at them with an oar until he was exhausted and the sharks had eaten all that they could hold. He was crying in the boat when the fishermen picked him up, half crazy from his loss, and the sharks were still circling the boat. This essay, of course, is the germ of the novel. And the old man himself is also, to some extent, an outgrowth of past performances. Just as Colonel Cantwell presented the Hemingway hero aged for the first time beyond his young manhood, so Santiago is the first of the code heroes to have grown old. In spirit Santiago is a code hero who has grown old. He is especially related to men like prize-fighters such as Manuel Garcia, "the undefeated" bullfighter, who loses in one way but wins in another. Like Manuel, Santiago is too old for what his profession demands of him. But he still dares, and sticks to his rules and will not quit when he is licked. He is undefeated, he endures, and his loss therefore, in a way, is itself a victory.

The Old Man and the Sea is a remarkable story for its stress on what a man can do and what a man can endure. Like other Hemingway's protagonists, Santiago is confronted with a universe filled with tragedy and pain. Hemingway chooses a common man as contrasted with the noble men of Greek tragic tradition and we are moved not by the fall of a noble or a great man, but by the elevation to heroism of a poor fisherman. Unlike the princely heroes of the Greek and the Elizabethan tragedies, Santiago does not derive stature from his position or from his title and rank. To be a Hemingway hero or a code hero means to dare more than other men, to explore one to greater dangers, and therefore more greatly to risk the possibilities of defeat and death. Like Melville's Captain Ahab and Conrad's Lord Jim, "Santiago is pitched into the dangerous ocean; for only there and with only himself to fall back on, he can work out his destiny and come to final terms with life."<sup>7</sup>

The Old Man and the Sea is the story of an old Cuban fisherman called Santiago who had once been a champion fisherman. He is the perfection of Hemingway's undefeated loser: "But man is not made for defeat", he said. "A man can be destroyed but not defeated."<sup>8</sup> His patched sail looks "like the flag of permanent defeat"<sup>9</sup> – that is, it is still sailing, still flying, in the very teeth of defeat. The old man has faith. The faith, of course, is in one's own ability, one's endurance, one's undefeated courage. Santiago has gone without catching any fish for eighty-four days. Once again he sets out to try his luck. He rises in the cool dark morning and rows out towards the mile-deep Gulf Stream. It is the month of September, the time of the big fish. But this time he is alone because the boy Manolin, his apprentice, has been forced by his parents to stop accompanying the old man. The boy is the old man's messiah of strength and hope. The boy's father thinks Santiago has no luck: "You tried to buy it with eighty-four days at sea. They nearly sold it to you too.... Luck is a thing that comes in many forms and who can recognize her."<sup>10</sup>

Manolin is sent to a luckier boat and Santiago all alone ventures too far out into the sea. In the deepest of his baits he hooks his fortune, a giant marlin, the greatest Santiago has heard of, that pulls him even farther. The marlin has the hook in his mouth. When the hook sinks in, the marlin begins the long pull towards the Northwest. Now the battle with the fish is portrayed at the classical level. There are these two equals – on the one side is Santiago and on the other side is this big marlin which he has hooked. The two of them struggle with each other to the death, but without animosity or hatred. The battle with the fish will not be so easy. As the fish pulls, Santiago thinks of how the fish has chosen the direction because of Santiago's own treachery.

His choice had been to stay in the deep dark water far out beyond all snares and traps and treacheries. My choice was to go there to find him beyond all people. Beyond all people in the world. Now we are joined together and have been since noon. And no one to help either one of us.<sup>11</sup>

During the first night, another fish takes one of the baits, a marlin or a broadbill or a shark, but Santiago cuts it loose. He deliberately chooses to follow the quest of the big fish rather than to sacrifice his opportunity for what might be an ordinary catch. The next day a small bird sits on the line and Santiago talks to it. He asks the bird if this is its first trip, and then does not warn the bird that hawks will be coming out to meet it. "Take a good rest small bird", he says. "Then go in and take your chance like any man or bird or fish."<sup>12</sup> The bird however will be going to the opposite direction, the direction Santiago will take on his journey returning home. This is not merely a foreshadowing of the danger that Santiago will face on his return trip, it is a statement of the condition of man. The bird is going into the world, where it will meet the type of dangers Santiago is familiar with.

The marlin is hooked, but since the line is very heavy, the old man can not move it and for nearly two days, the fish tows the skiff. He lives on plain water and raw fish, and goes almost without sleep; his hands are cut open by his line, his back is lashed by the line, he gets an eye-piercing headache and his chest

constricts and he spits blood. Now he is extremely exhausted and weary. But he has a vast, quiet courage and great skill; he knows the “tricks”, his modest term of his craft, and he holds on.

The marlin is never coming up, never changing its course, swimming steadily under water at a depth of six hundred feet. The old man can not but brood on the heroic qualities of his strange adversary. The old man’s knowledge of risk, loss and even death increases the intensity of the fight. However, he is determined to fight till the very end. “Fish”, he says softly, aloud, “I’ll stay with you until I am dead.”<sup>13</sup>

The old man becomes more spirited as he thinks about the possibility of killing of fish and ultimately establishing his supremacy. “Fish”, he says, “I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends.”<sup>14</sup> When the fish jumps out of the water, the old man thinks that the fish is doing this to show him how big it is. The marlin measures eighteen feet from nose to tail and must weight over fifteen hundred pounds. So the old man is also determined to show what sort of a man he is. He is sure that he will kill the great fish in all its greatness and glory.

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