

THE MORAL STRENGTH OF MAN IN THE BATTLES OF LIFE

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Abstract: *The present paper highlights the distinction between two different types of success: the outer, material success versus the inner, spiritual, moral success presented by Hemingway in ‘The Old Man and the Sea’. While Santiago, the main character, lacks material success, the importance of this lack is eclipsed by the possession of the moral success. One way to describe Santiago’s story is as the triumph of the indefatigable spirit over exhaustible material resources, in other words – the triumph of moral strength in the battle of life. Such a spirit is characterized by heroism and manhood. Santiago represents the courage, strength and endurance of the human race. He struggles with faith (the fish), both hating and loving life (the sea). The thing that truly defeated Santiago was his pride. His struggle with the fish and later with the sharks that devour it before he can tow it home becomes, in Hemingway’s hands, a universal fable of human life, with overtones of Christ’s Calvary. Santiago, although he comes back with only the skeleton of the fish, has tested his strength and endurance to their limits and thus achieved heroic dimensions and a spiritual victory.*

Key words: *moral strength, battle, life, courage, stoicism, defeat, code hero, sea.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The 1920s were strange and wonderful years in America. Scott Fitzgerald considered that *‘the uncertainties of 1919 were over, there seemed little doubt about what was going to happen, America was going on the greatest spree in history’* [4].

The *Lost Generation* is a phrase that was used for the first time by Gertrude Stein to describe the fact that in this period, in the post WWI era, many young people had *‘lost’* their American ideals.

At the same time, America lost many fine young writers like Scott Fitzgerald or Hemingway, who decided to stay in Paris where he became a writer.

Ernest Hemingway is one of the most representative American writers of the 20th century. His style turns into the *‘hero’*, that is the protagonist of many of his works. His manner and attitudes have been very widely recognized – not only in the English speaking world, but wherever his books have been widely read.

Hemingway had an extraordinary reputation as a colorful human being and for thirty years his every escape was duly reported in the press. In his books, the author wanted to write the truth, to create a new style. He avoided conventional narration in his stories and tried to make his readers understand his ideas about nature, hard work and war telling his readers about the peasants and fishermen by means of scenes of hard toil. Leaving out many unnecessary details, Hemingway mastered a new short-story form.

2. THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA – A STORY OF COURAGE IN FIGHT AND STOICISM IN DEFEAT

The Old Man and the Sea is a very short novel and some critics insist on calling it a part of a longer work-in-progress. It is the story of an old Cuban fisherman – Santiago – who, after eighty four days without a fish, ventures far out to sea alone and hooks a giant marlin in the Gulf Stream. It is important to mention that the marlin was interpreted as a symbol of

Christianity while the sea represents life as it is thought to be. For two days and two nights the old man holds on while he is towed farther out to sea. He finally brings the fish alongside, harpoons it and lashes it to skiff. Almost at once, the sharks begin to take his prize away from him. He kills them until he has only his broken tiller to fight with. Then they eat all but the skeleton, and he tows that home, half-dead with exhaustion and makes his way to bed to sleep and dream of other days.

The novel is a representation of life as a struggle against unconquerable natural forces in which a kind of victory is possible. It is an epic metaphor for life, a contest in which even the problem of right and wrong seems paltry before the great thing that is struggle.

The Old Man and the Sea is a strong work. In the novel we come across themes like heroism, stoicism, and ceremony, which are also met in other novels. According to Peter B. High, this short story, this simple novel is a beautiful allegory of human life.

The old fisherman catches a huge fish after a long patient fight. But sharks come and eat it down to the bones. The old man then returns with just a skeleton. When tourists laugh at him, he does not complain. The readers see this as a sign of true heroism. The old man showed courage in the fight and stoicism in defeat.

The view of life in this novel had a long evolution from the days of total despair representing nonetheless an extraordinary change in its author.

A reverence for life's struggle and mankind seems to have descended on Hemingway like a gift of grace on the religious. His battle can be seen in heroic terms also representing the greatest victory that Hemingway won.

3. THE CODE HERO IN *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA*

Hemingway influenced the American short story, thus his novels *The Old Man and the Sea* and *A Farewell to Arms* are well-known.

Hemingway took part in World War I, the Civil War in Spain and World War II fighting actively against fascism and war.

One can identify in Hemingway a great preoccupation with violence and, above all,

violent death. Thus, critics identified a *code hero* in his novels.

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, the *code hero* is represented by Santiago, the main character. 'The chief point about him is that he behaves perfectly honorably with great courage and endurance while losing to the sharks the giant fish he has caught'. This, to epitomize 'the message the code hero always brings, is life: you lose, of course; what counts is how you conduct yourself while you are being destroyed' [5].

The code hero comes with an important message: while a man may grow old and be wholly down on his luck, he can still dare strike to rules and by losing, winning, in fact, his own victory.

Santiago is the main character of the novel, a complex one. He is presented as an old man who knows many tricks of the ocean and its inhabitants. He was firm and patient, although 'he had gone eighty-four hours now without taking a fish'.

Santiago was not religious. but prayed automatically. He was illiterate but his inborn wisdom and humanness were incomparable. He was very kind to living beings, he was a philosopher by nature. He deeply loved nature and appreciated its role in man's life. 'His dialogue with a small bird that perched on his skiff is very touching. "Take a good rest, small bird", he said, "then go in and take your chance like any man or bird or fish". Santiago always thought of the sea as *la mar* which is how people call her in Spanish when they love her' [3].

All Santiago's life had been a preparation for his battle with the big fish, the marlin. A strong man had met a strong fish. 'Fish', he said, 'I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends'. The fish had his mouth shut tight on the wire and moved away slowly. Santiago held the line against his back and watchd its slant in the water and the skiff moving steadily to the north-west.

Santiago thinks that this will kill him and he cannot do this for ever. But, four hours later, the fish was still swimming steadily in the sea, towing the skiff and the old man was still braced with the line across his back. Then he

looked behind him and saw that no land was visible. He thought that this will make no difference. *'I can always come in glow from Havana. I wish I could see him only once to know what I have against me'*, then the old man said to himself: *'The fish never changed its course and the old man followed it in his skiff all the night'*. Then he began to pity the great fish that he had thought. *'Never have I had such a strong fish, not one who acted so strangely'* [6].

The fish came up the second day: *'he came out unendingly and water poured from his sides. He was bright in the sun and his head and back were dark purple and in the sun the stripes on his sides showed wide and a light lavender'* [3].

The fish was two feet longer than the skiff. The battle was a difficult one and full of danger. The old man tried to rest a little but he was given no chance to do so. *'He was pulled tight on the bow and he could not move. The sun was rising for the third time since he had put to sea when the fish started to circle'*.

The old man was on the safe side of the boat and at last the fish came up 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 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 the all of the skiff.

Santiago has conquered the marlin but the battle with the sea had not ended. *'Deep down in the water as the dark cloud of blood had settled and dispersed sharks had caught the scent and came up upon the surface of the blue water'*. They started swimming on the course the skiff and the fish had taken.

4. SANTIAGO – A DEFEATED HERO?

Can Santiago be perceived as a defeated hero? He represents the courage, strength, and endurance of the human race. Just like all men, he struggles with faith (the fish) both hating and loving life (the sea). The thing that truly defeated Santiago was his pride.

The old man did not give up the fight. He said to himself: *'Man is not made for defeat,*

man can be destroyed, but not defeated'. He fought the sharks to the very end: with his knife lashed to one of his oars, with his club he freed the tiller from the rudder and *'beat and again'*. *"And what beat you", he thought. "Nothing", he thought aloud. I went out too far. Though the sharks had eaten the marlin and nothing was left but the backbone, the old man had morally won the battle. He showed what man could do and what man could endure. Santiago's words "man can be destroyed but not defeated" is the main idea of Hemingway's story'* [3].

Santiago was one of Hemingway's best heroes in his gallery of the undefeated which included Manuel Garcia (*The Undefeated*), Harry Morgan (*To Have or Have Not*), etc.

We could also say that Santiago represents humankind. Hemingway compares this character with Jesus Christ on several occasions. Santiago *'picked the mast up and put it on his shoulder and started up to the road. He sat down five times before he reached his shack'* much like Jesus did on the journey to his crucifixion, carrying the cross. Santiago sleeps *'face down with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up'*, the position of Jesus on the cross. All throughout the book, the old man wishes for salt, a staple seasoning in the human diet. He is a fisherman just like Christ's disciples.

5. ALLEGORICAL ELEMENTS IN SANTIAGO'S STORY

The story written by Hemingway can be read as an entirely personal allegory to its author, as an account of his own struggle, his determination, and his literary vicissitudes [5].

Just like Hemingway, Santiago is a master who sets out his lines with more care and precision than his competitors, but he has not had any luck in a long time.

Once he was very strong, the champion, yet his whole reputation is in peril now and he is growing old. Still he feels that he has strength enough; he knows the tricks of his trade; he is resolute and he is still out for the really big success.

It means nothing that he has provided his strength before; he has got to prove it again and he does. After he has caught his prize, the

sharks come and take it all away from him as they will always try to do. But he caught it, he fought it well, he did all he could, it was a lot and eventually he is happy.

Hemingway's ideal of manhood is nearly inseparable from the ideal of heroism. To be a man is to behave with honor and dignity: not to succumb to suffering, to accept one's duty without complaint, and most importantly, to display a maximum of self-control.

The representation of femininity, the sea, is characterized expressly by its caprice and lack of self control - '*if she did wild or wicked things it was because she could help them*'.

The representation of masculinity is the marlin or a fish referring to it. This is described as being great, beautiful, calm and Santiago steels him against his pain by telling himself, '*suffer like a man*'. In Hemingway's ethical universe, Santiago shows us how to live life heroically.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The Old Man and the Sea is a masterpiece for its imaginative language and the description of nature. At first glance, it seems a very ordinary story, but on second thought, one finds it full of allegory and intellectual depth. In this story, Hemingway wrote '*straight honest prose of human beings*' as he believed writers should.

Being heroic and manly are not merely qualities of character which one possesses or does not. One must constantly demonstrate one's heroism and manliness through actions conducted with dignity. Interestingly, worthiness cannot be conferred upon oneself.

Santiago is obsessed with providing his worthiness to those around him. He had to prove himself to the boy: '*the thousand times he had proved it meant nothing. Now, he was proving it again. Each time was a new time and he never thought about the past when he was*

doing it'. The hero had to prove himself to the marlin: '*I'll kill him...in all his greatness and glory. Although, it is unjust. But I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures*'.

A heroic and manly life is not one of inner peace and self-sufficiency; it requires constant demonstration of one's worthiness through noble action.

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, which helped Hemingway gain the Nobel Prize, the old Cuban fisherman Santiago, alone in the vastness of the ocean, captures a gigantic marlin which is both his opponent and his 'brother' in the unity of man with nature. His struggle with the fish and later with the sharks that devour it before he can tow it home becomes, in Hemingway's hands, a universal fable of human life, with overtones of Christ's Calvary.

Santiago, although he comes back with only the skeleton of the fish, has tested his strength and endurance to their limits and thus achieved heroic dimensions and a spiritual victory.

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