



A Thematic Study of ‘The Old Man and the Sea’

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Abstract:

The present paper deals the major themes of The Old Man and the Sea – one of Ernest Hemingway’s enduring works. Told in language of great simplicity and power, it is a story about an Old Cuban fisherman who struggles in the most difficult part of his life – down on his luck and his supreme ordeal – a relentless, agonizing battle with a giant marlin far out in the Gulf Stream. Despite of a short and simple work, it is not only filled with drama but with the idea that a simple man is capable of overcoming the struggles in life. Hemingway recasts, in strikingly contemporary style, the classic theme of courage in the face of defeat, of personal triumph won from loss. Santiago, the main character in the novel, is depicted by Hemingway as a person who is looking deep within to summon the decency, dignity and heroism which are necessary to get through the triumph and tragedies that life presents. Written in 1952, this hugely successful novel confirmed his power and presence in the literary world and played a large part in his winning the 1954 Nobel Prize for Literature.

Keywords – Sea, Old Man, Fish, Fisherman, Nature etc.

Introduction:

The Old Man and the Sea is a novella by Ernest Hemingway and was published by Charles Scribner's Sons in 1952. The book was first published in America. It was the last major work of fiction to be produced by Hemingway and published in his lifetime. It is the seventh novella wrote by Ernest Hemingway. The novel consist of 48 pages. In 1958 The Old Man and the Sea was adapted in a film with the same title The Old Man and the Sea presented by Peter Viertel and the film was starring Spencer Tracy, in a portrayal for which he was nominated for a best actor Oscar, the film directed by John Sturges.

The Old Man and the Sea starts with a description of an old man, Santiago, a fisher who spent eighty-four days without any fare. Local fishermen had already defined him as “salao”, a pathetic loser. Of course, it is offensive for Santiago who spent all his life at the sea and travelled a lot while being young. He also is an excellent and skilful fisherman, he just did not find a big fish worthy of selling for a long time. At first a boy, Manolin, was helping him, but after forty days without fare his parents forbade him to attend the old man, so now he works with another fisherman. The boy has a kind of affection to Santiago and they meet in the evening to share some talk and food.

Characters in 'The Old Man and the Sea'

1. **Santiago:** The novella's central character. A dedicated fisherman who taught Manolin everything he knows about fishing, Santiago is now old and poor and has gone 84 days without a catch.
2. **Manolin:** A young man from the fishing village who has fished with Santiago since the age of five and now cares for the old man. Manolin recently began fishing with another fisherman whom his parents consider luckier than Santiago.
3. **Martin:** The owner of the Terrace (his name is Spanish for St. Martin), he sends food and drink to Santiago through Manolin.
4. **Rogelio:** A man of the village who on occasion helps Santiago with the fishing net.
5. **Perico:** A man at the bodega (his name is Spanish for St. Peter, an apostle and fisherman) who gives Santiago newspapers to read.
6. **Marlin:** An eighteen-foot bluish billfish and a catch of legendary proportions.
7. **Mako:** A mackerel shark (dentuso in Spanish) that is a voracious and frightening killer known for its rows of large, sharp teeth.
8. **Shovel-nosed sharks:** The scavenger sharks (galanos in Spanish) that destroy the marlin.
9. **Pedrico:** A fisherman in the village who looks after Santiago's skiff and gear and receives the marlin's head to use in fish traps.
10. **Tourists:** A man and woman at the Terrace who see the marlin's skeleton and, misunderstanding a waiter's explanation of what happened, think the skeleton is that of a shark.

Hemingway's Style

Hemingway's writing style owes much to his career as a journalist. His use of language — so different from that of, say, his contemporary William Faulkner — is immediately identifiable by most readers. Short words, straightforward sentence structures, vivid descriptions, and factual details combine to create an almost transparent medium for his engaging and realistic stories. Yet without calling attention to itself, the language also resonates with complex emotions and larger and larger meanings — displaying the writer's skill in his use of such subtle techniques as sophisticated patterns; repeated images, allusions, and themes; repeated sounds, rhythms, words, and sentence structures; indirect revelation of historical fact; and blended narrative modes.

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, nearly every word and phrase points to Hemingway's Santiago-like dedication to craft and devotion to precision. Hemingway himself claimed that he wrote on the "principle of the iceberg," meaning that "seven-eighths" of the story lay below the surface parts that show. While the writing in *The Old Man and the Sea* reflects Hemingway's efforts to pare down language and convey as much as possible in as few words as possible, the novella's meanings resonate on a larger and larger scale. The story's brevity, ostensibly simple plot, and distance from much of this period's political affairs all lend the novella a simplistic quality that is as deceptive as it is endearing.

Themes of 'The Old Man and the Sea'

Resistance to Defeat:

As a fisherman who has caught nothing for the last 84 days, Santiago is a man fighting against defeat. Yet Santiago never gives in to defeat: he sails further into the ocean than he ever has before in hopes of landing a fish, struggles with the marlin for three days and nights despite immense physical pain and exhaustion, and, after catching the marlin, fights off the sharks even when it's clear that the battle against them is hopeless. 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 memories of his youthful strength; he relies on his pride by demanding that he prove himself a worthy role model for Manolin or by comparing himself to his hero Joe DiMaggio; and he prays to God, even though his prayers do nothing to ease his physical suffering.

Ultimately, Santiago represents every man's struggle to survive. And just as Santiago's effort to bring the marlin back to land intact is doomed, no man can ever escape death. Yet through Santiago's struggle, Hemingway makes the case that escape from death is not the issue. As Santiago observes near the end of his struggle with the marlin, "a man can be destroyed but not defeated." In other words, victory over the inevitable is not what defines a man. Rather, it is a man's struggle against the inevitable, even when he knows it is inevitable, that defines him. And the more difficult the struggle, the more worthy the opponent, the more powerfully a man can prove himself.

Friendship:

The friendship between Santiago and Manolin plays a critical part in Santiago's victory over the marlin. In return for Santiago's mentorship and company, Manolin provides physical support to Santiago in the village, bringing him food and clothing and helping him load his skiff. He also provides emotional support, encouraging Santiago throughout his unlucky streak. Although Santiago's "hope and confidence had never gone," when Manolin was present, "they were freshening as when the breeze rises." And once he encounters the marlin, Santiago refuses to accept defeat because he knows Manolin would be disappointed in him.

Yet most of the novella takes place when Santiago is alone. Except for Manolin's friendship in the evenings, Santiago is characterized by his isolation. His wife has died, and he lives and fishes alone. Even so, just as he refuses to give in to death, he refuses to give in to loneliness. Santiago finds friends in other creatures. The flying fish are "his principal friends on the ocean," and the marlin, through their shared struggle, becomes his "brother." He calls the stars his "distant friends," and thinks of the ocean as a woman he loves. Santiago talks to himself, talks to his weakened left hand, and imagines Manolin sitting next to him. In the end, these friendships—both real and imagined—prevent Santiago from pitying himself. As a result, he has the support to achieve what seems physically impossible for an old man.

Youth and Age:

The title of the novella, *The Old Man and the Sea*, suggests the critical thematic role that age plays in the story. The book's two principal characters, Santiago and Manolin, represent the old and the young, and a beautiful harmony develops between them. What one lacks, the other provides. Manolin, for example, has energy and enthusiasm. He finds food and clothing for Santiago, and encourages him despite his bad luck. Santiago, in turn, has wisdom and experience. He tells Manolin stories about baseball and teaches him to fish. Santiago's

determination to be a good role model for Manolin is one of his main motivations in battling the marlin for three days—he wants to show Manolin "what a man can do."

Santiago's age is also important to the novella because it has made him physically weak. Without this weakness, his triumph would not be so meaningful to him. As Santiago says, he "had seen many [fish] that weighed more than a thousand pounds and had caught two of that size in his life, but never alone" and never as an old man. Santiago finds solace and strength in remembering his youth, which is symbolized by the lions on the beach that he sees in his dreams. He recalls these lions—slow, graceful but fierce creatures—from the perspective of an old man. In doing so, he realizes that he too, although slow, can still be a formidable opponent.

Man and Nature:

Since *The Old Man and the Sea* is the story of a man's struggle against a marlin, it is tempting to see the novella as depicting man's struggle against nature. In fact, through Santiago, the novella explores man's relationship with nature. He thinks of the flying fish as his friends, and speaks with a warbler to pass the time. The sea is dangerous, with its sharks and potentially treacherous weather, but it also sustains him by providing food in the form of dolphins and shrimp. Finally, Santiago does not just see the marlin as an adversary, he loves it as a brother. In the middle of their struggle, Santiago says to the marlin, "Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who." Santiago's statement shows the depth of his admiration for the marlin and hints at the fundamental law of nature that unites man and animal: all beings must die, must kill or be killed. In this way, man and nature are joined in a circular system, in which death is necessary and fosters new life.

Respect:

As the sun rises on Santiago's second day at sea, he speaks aloud to let the fish know his intentions. Readers may find it odd that Santiago wants to kill a fish that he claims to love and respect. However, his respect comes from the fact that he has never come across a fish so strong or clever, and he values his self-respect as a fisherman more than he values the life of the fish.

On his second night at sea, Santiago begins to feel sorry for the marlin who must have been hungry, but he does not let that pity get in the way of his desire to kill the marlin. He then thinks how many meals can be made from the marlin and feels the noble creature deserves a better end than to be eaten by his neighbors. Even though Santiago seems to feel great affection for his neighbors and fellow fisherman, his respect for the marlin transcends his daily life, and he does not want the fish's meat to go to anyone who does not deserve such a meal.

Conclusion:

During the thematic exploration, examination and re-interpretation of the novel the paper has tended to prove that victory is not a requirement for honour. Instead, glory depends upon one having pride and determination to see a struggle through to its end, regardless of the outcome. Even if Santiago had returned with the marlin undamaged, his moment of glory, like the marlin's meat, would have been unimportant and short-lived. The glory and honour of Santiago comes not from his battle itself but from his pride and grit to fight till the end.

The novel is not a story of just one man called Santiago. It is the story of all people who struggle for the best in life whether he fails or succeeds. Man must believe in himself and in God to have grit and nobility to push through every in hurdle he might undergo. He can use his pride to pursue in every battle.

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