

## On the Manhood in face of Tragedy Theme of *The Old Man and the Sea*

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**Abstract.** *The Old Man and the Sea*, the peak of Ernest Hemingway's works, portrays an old Cuban fisherman, Santiago, triumphant even in defeat. Integrated with Hemingway's individual life and artistic attainments, this thesis intends to demonstrate the theme of *The Old Man and the Sea* and analyze Ernest Hemingway how to gradually bring this theme to his readers. *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway, an allegory of inner strength and courage about an old Cuban fisherman's struggle to bring home a giant marlin he has caught after innumerable hardships, actually deals with the theme of manhood in face of tragedy.

Ernest Hemingway, the spokesman of the "Lost Generation" and one of the most beloved and greatest American writers of the twentieth century throughout the world, was awarded a Nobel Prize in 1954 for literature as "mastery of the art of modern narration"[1]. *The Old Man and the Sea*, published near the end of his life, mainly tells a story of the back-breaking and losing struggle between the old fisherman and the giant fish—a marlin. In a tragic sense, it is a representation of life as a struggle against unconquerable natural forces in which only a partial victory is possible. Nevertheless, there is a feeling of great respect for the struggle and mankind. Because the connotations of *The Old Man and the Sea* are rather diverse and complex, its theme has always interested its readers and led to some disputes.

### I . A brief introduction to *The Old Man and the Sea*

*The Old Man and the Sea* is a novelette with a flavor of allegory. This masterpiece writes the sea-fishing story of an old Cuban fisherman, Santiago: The old man lives in poverty. Although considered now in the worst form of unluck after eighty-four days without taking a fish, Santiago is still cheerful and doesn't lose his heart because he believes that everyday is a new day. On the eighty-fifth day, he alone rows his skiff to the deep sea and at noon hooks a giant marlin that is two feet longer than the skiff. Suffered from starve, cold and wounds, the old man kills the marlin after two day-and-night hard struggle. However, on his way to the fishing village the marlin fastened to the bow results in hits of groups of sharks. Santiago tries his best to fight against the cruel, hateful and greedy sharks with his harpoon, knife and oar, but finally the old man is beaten. Exhausted Santiago only brings home with an eighteen feet long skeleton of the dead marlin, which has aroused other fishermen's surprising praises. At the end of the fiction, the old man is sleeping in his shack and again dreaming about the lions.

When published in *Life* magazine in 1952, *The Old Man and the Sea* reached five and a half million people. American reviewers were mostly ecstatic at it. Harvey Breit called the book "momentous and heartening." Joseph Henry had nothing but praise for this "miracle-play of Man against Fate." And since then, *The Old Man and the Sea* has been translated into several kinds of other languages.

### II . Comments on the theme of *The Old Man and the Sea*

The theme of a literary works is the main idea or the dominant feeling that the writer wants to communicate to his readers. A fiction isn't only to tell a story, but to express its author's ideas or feelings. A theme often possesses four features—non-directivity, integration of ideas or feelings, richness in internal connotations and varieties in demonstration.

In one sense, Hemingway is more limited in scope than most of his contemporaries, for he has but a single theme—how man may face tragedy in a world stripped of all values except that of intensity. The ideas contained in *The Old Man and the Sea* are complex, but its main idea (or theme) is to affirm mankind's enterprising spirit—manhood in face of tragedy. Although the struggle of man against external powers is destined to fail, his indomitable spirit is really another sort of victory. He may be physically beaten, but in the spirit aspect he must defeat his opponents or even enemies so as to safeguard his own dignity. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, this theme is the most outstanding among many of Hemingway's works.

Through the course of his life Ernest Hemingway goes in for bullfighting, fishing, hunting and all kinds of risking activities, especially having a deep love for the lions on the African fields or beaches that he thinks of as a symbol of bravery, strength and victory. One of the important things that make Hemingway popular is that in a time of general despair and pessimism he wrote stories with heroes that the readers could admire. This is also one of the reasons why his stories sold very well. There is a particular term "Hemingway code heroes" for some protagonists in Hemingway's works. Such a masculine, sensitive and intelligent hero with stoic courage, resolute action and few words lives alone in

a world that is essentially chaotic, meaningless and hostile.

Hemingway places emphasis on courage as one of the most important things in man's life and has explored courage in many forms. He portrays courage and cowardice in battle and also writes about courage with which people face the tragedies in life. He defines courage as "an instinctive movement toward or away from the center of violence, with self-preservation and self-respect the mixed motives". To Hemingway, man's greatest achievement is to show "grace under pressure", or to hold the "purity of line through the maximum of exposure"[2]. It is this kind of "despairing courage" that enables a man to behave like a man, to assert his dignity in face of adversity[3].

All good novels do more than tell a story. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway comprehensively employs multiform artistic techniques such as realism, symbolism, ambiguity, inner monologue, stream-of-consciousness, montage in movie and makes a successful use of his famous iceberg theory of writing. All these make it a prose poem with diverse connotations, as Hemingway has said, "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." (Time magazine, December 13, 1954, P72.)

In *The Old Man and the Sea* Hemingway presents old age facing life and death with courage, hope, pride, endurance, and wisdom. For all its apparent simplicity it is a work of consummate art. This masterpiece parabolically shows Hemingway's view of the world and personality of manhood. To Hemingway, people are living in a world overflowed with hatred and life is tragic; only his courage, will and endurance could make him stand up to the trial and meet his own tragedy, and thus incarnate his life's highest meaning and value.

### **1. The real manhood**

Manhood, defined as "the conditions or qualities of being a man" in Longman Active Study English-Chinese Dictionary, has already been promoted to a new higher degree by Ernest Hemingway.

Hemingway is always preoccupied with manhood—individual courage, will, and endurance. It doesn't involve mere physical strength, sexual potency, or ability to accumulate (or spend) wealth. According to Hemingway's opinion, a man is defined by will, pride and endurance: "the will to face defeat or victory without whining on one hand or boasting on the other; the pride of knowing that one has done one's best, with the courage to act truly according to one's own nature; and the endurance to accept pain, even loss—when the loss can't be avoided." [4]

The old Cuban fisherman who fishes alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream, Santiago, does embody this real manhood. Indeed, with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck and everything about him being old, he is too old even to dream of women. Furthermore, he is so poor that he is short of foods and clothing, his torn sail is patched with flour sacks and even his newspaper has been given by the proprietor of the Terrace. In a word, he has grown beyond physical strength, sex, violence and wealth. "All he has is the capacity for endurance, for will and for courage—and these are just Hemingway's definition for manhood itself." [5]

Most of the content in *The Old Man and the Sea* is about the struggle between the old man and the giant marlin. His age couldn't prevent him at all from the pursuit for his big fish, for his conquest and even for his self. Although he is called being Salao and made fun of by many of the fishermen, his seawater-colored eyes still are good, cheerful and undefeated. Beyond the suffering and disappointment, the old man sees hope, "Hope is the duty of man." After hooking the marlin on the eight-fifth day, the old fisherman originally has greeted it as an income resource and the end of his doom. But, like Santiago, the marlin is also so strong-minded that it would never yield to any power. As the struggle goes on, the marlin's dogged spirit makes the old man begin to admire its strength, beauty and intelligence; "Fish," he says, "I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends." [6] And then, on the vast sea, these two sides launch a heartening match. The hooked marlin wishes to escape but Santiago tries his best to hold the line; both sides has been at a deadlock for two days and two nights before the old man conquers and kills the marlin with his endurance, willed courage and superb skills. Later on, a big group of sharks are tempted to share the marlin when Santiago is towing it towards his home. Even faced with defeat and knowing that he has no chance against sharks, he doesn't quit but continues the struggle against them with all he has. At last, the battle is over. The old man kills some sharks and drives them away. But almost all the marlin's meat has been bit away, only the fish skeleton—the symbol of human spirit—left.

Santiago indeed has received a material failure in a world whose usual standard of measuring success is certainly the accumulation of money. However, in spiritual terms, the old fisherman Santiago is a permanent triumphant because he has displayed all his own courage, power and dignity during the struggle. Compromise and concession are just the true marks of failure; only with indomitable will, a man can never be defeated. "But man is not made for defeat," he says. "A man can be destroyed but not defeated." [7] What a great commoner of mankind! He is a "man" in the fullest sense of the word. In his action there is always dignity and self-respect. Old but not senile, "unlucky" but not defeated, gentle but not soft, proud but not boastful, resigned but not passive, and—perhaps most important—hopeful for himself without being jealous of others, the old fisherman Santiago (who dreams of "lions") is himself a poetry of the human spirit [8].

### **2. The real old fisherman**

Although the book was published in 1952, the germ or seed of the story was in Hemingway's mind at least fifteen years earlier. In April 1936 Hemingway wrote a news report On the blue water for Esquire magazine:

An old man fishing alone in a skiff out of cabanas hooked a great marlin that, on the heavy sashcord handline, pulled the skiff far out to sea. Two days later the old man was picked up by fisherman 60 miles to the eastward, the head and the forward part of the marlin lashed alongside. What was left of the fish, less than half, weighed 800 pounds. The old man had stayed with him a day, 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 up on him and harpooned him. Lashed 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 they could hold. He was crying in the boat when the fishermen picked him up, half crazy for his loss, and the sharks were still circling the boat.

On the basis of the one-paragraph account in the magazine and his own fishing experiences for marlin in Caribbean waters, Hemingway created the book *The Old Man and the Sea*.

However, art comes from life and stands above life. The old fisherman in the real world is completely different from the old man Santiago: The real old fisherman lives on fishing. What he really cares about is his material success. He is filled with joy after hooking a giant marlin that would certainly bring him large profits. Later on, the sharks eat more than half of the marlin, which has made him enraged into crying. It is obvious that he has no heroic sense at all and also gives no thought to so-called “manhood”, so he doesn’t matter crying in others’ presence. Santiago, on the other hand, an old penniless man, thinks that most of the creatures of the sea are brothers and to kill them is justifiable if there is need or if there has been a fair contest. This romantic attitude towards animals lets his fishing not for money but for his own mission and reputation, his fight against the shark not for defending his laboring gains but for his own grace and dignity. In fact, Santiago’s economic loss is far larger than that of the real old fisherman. Exhausted and beaten, Santiago finally is back to the shore in dark. Without flowers and greeting people, Santiago is a hero in triumph with his badge of courage—the scars. He neither cries nor is half crazy because of his “strange” disregard for material failure. He has eventually realized that the means are always more important than the ends, that the “success” of one’s struggle is of less importance than the struggle itself. He faces up to failure and even death and has presented the fearless courage and the fighting spirit of an iron-like man.

### III. Conclusion

We can now well conclude that the theme of *The Old Man and the Sea* is the extolling of manhood in face of tragedy. To a great extent, Hemingway’s individual life and war experience founded his tragic viewpoint about mankind’s fate. In *Santiago* Hemingway places his understanding of human life and confidence on humanity. To him, all lives are suffering from all kinds of tragedies with permanent loneliness, defeat and death; only his “despairing courage” could assert his own dignity and show “grace under pressure” when faced the tragedies in life. A tale truly told can mean many things. On the theme of *The Old Man and the Sea*, different people have different views. Perhaps what I have already denoted is no more than one eighth of the iceberg being above water. It is my sincere hope that this thesis will contribute to further research on Hemingway’s works as well as to studies of Hemingway’s life and Hemingway’s artistic attainments.

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