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## Tragedy and Pain Transcended In Hemingway- With Special Reference to “The Old Man And The Sea”

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### **Abstract**

*The present article proposes to bring forth the tragedy and pain that are transcended in ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S “The Old Man and the Sea” through the fisherman named Santiago. The striking quality of Hemingway’s novels is that they emphasize what man cannot do, and define his limitations, cruelties or built-in-evil. But, in a stark contrast to the other novels, **The Old Man and the Sea** is remarkable for its stress on what men can do and on the world as an arena where heroic deeds are possible. “The universe inhabited by Santiago, the old Cuban fisherman, is not free of tragedy and pain but these are transcended, and the affirming tone is in total contrast with the pessimism permeating such books as **The Sun Also Rises** and **A Farewell to Arms**.*

Ernest Hemingway was born in Oak Park, Illinois, in 1899, and began his writing career for The Kansas City Star in 1917. During the First World War, he volunteered as an ambulance driver on the Italian front but was invalided home, having been seriously wounded while serving with the infantry. He became a part of the American expatriate circle of Gertrude Stein, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ezra Pound, and Ford Madox Ford. Hemingway's most popular work, *The Old Man and the Sea*, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1953, and in 1954 he won the Nobel Prize in Literature "for his powerful, style-forming mastery of the art of narration." One of the most important influences on the development of the short story and the novel in American fiction, Hemingway has seized the imagination of the American public like no other twentieth-century author.

The story of *The Old Man and the Sea* relates the experience of an elderly man who hooks an enormous fish that pulls his small boat far out to sea. Two days later, he is rescued by fishermen approximately sixty miles to the eastward, from where he was seen last. He is dragging part of a large fish alongside. What is left of the fish is its head and forward part that weigh about eight hundred pounds. The old man says that he stayed with the fish two consecutive days and nights while it swam deeply and pulled the boat. When it finally surfaced, the old man drove a harpoon through its back. As soon as he did this, a school of sharks hit the marlin, and the old man had fought them alone in the Gulf Stream in a skiff... with full impact. He fought them by clubbing, stabbing, and lunging at them with an oar until he became completely exhausted. The sharks devoured most of the fish. He was crying in the boat when the fishermen rescued him and was half crazy from the terrifying experience of loss.

At the outset, the readers are given to understand that Santiago, the protagonist, has been trying for eighty four days to catch a fish but in vain. The old man suffers from "salao, which is the worst form of unlucky." (p. 9) For the first forty days, he had been accompanied by the boy, Manolin, who admires him the most as "the best fisher man". (p. 23) Thinking that the old man has no more luck, the boy's father shifts him to another boat. On the eighty fifth day with unwavering hope and confidence saying, "Tomorrow is going to be a good day with this current," (p. 14) "Eighty-five is a lucky number," (p. 16), the old man sets sail on the eighty-fifth day. This time, he ventures to row far beyond the customary fishing grounds and thereby exposes himself to greater dangers. As Leo Gurko puts it: "To be a hero means to dare more than the

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other men do, to expose oneself to greater dangers, and therefore more greatly to risk the possibilities of defeat and death.”

However, at noon of the eighty fifth day, his hook of hundred fathom line is taken by a large male marlin. The marlin measures eighteen feet from nose to tail. He saw him first as a dark shadow that took so long to pass under the boat that he could not believe its length and says “He can’t be that big”. (pp. 89-90) He secures the line, waiting anxiously for the fish to turn and swallow the bait. Then waiting again until it has eaten it well, strikes “with all the strength of his arms and the pivoted weight of his body” (p. 44) and succeeded in hooking the giant marlin. He sets the hook and places the line across his back and shoulders so that there will be something to give him strength when the fish swings, and the line will not break. Suddenly, the boat begins to move. The giant marlin is powerful enough to pull the small craft toward the northwest direction. Four hours later, Santiago can still feel the pressure from the line below, but he has yet to see the marlin. “It was noon when I hooked him,” he says. “And I have never even seen him; I wish I could see him only once to know what I have against me.”(p. 46) But it does not come out of water for two days. It is on the third day that it comes to the surface. The old man undergoes immense suffering during this period and the way he endures is unparalleled. It is this endurance that makes Santiago’s character all the more fascinating.

Santiago is the only major character in Hemingway who has been heroic with the realistic understanding of situations. He is a simple Cuban fisherman. He is neither like Henry, the chief protagonist in **A Farewell to Arms**, who ridicules the concepts of “sacrifice, glory, and honour” as mere abstractions and makes a “separate peace” bidding farewell to arms, nor like Robert Jordan, the protagonist in **For Whom the Bell Tolls**, who joins the International brigade and fights for the cause of Spanish Republic and thus lends meaning to his life. But this, “strange old man”. (p. 14) in his war against the giant marlin shows extraordinary courage no man has ever shown to withstand and transcend the hardships of time and circumstance. In this novel, Hemingway depicts in detail the elemental tests of endurance – physical struggle, fatigue, solitude, and age to which Santiago is subjected and also his courageous response to encounter those forces that are testing him. In his great struggle against the fish, 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”. In this story with its precise and correct detail and its vivid background of ocean, we see the portrayal of a man’s vain battle with his life. The man of

honour, courage and dignity is the one who has the greatest endurance and who will achieve the most in the end. The novel proves how a man can triumph in spite of defeat. The central character, despite being old, possesses heroic qualities and attains super manhood in the process of bringing the grand fish to the shore.

The size and strength of the fish do not scare him off, instead they tickle his ego. He looks at his cramped hand and asserts that “I am more than I am and I will be so ... with everything he has against only my will and my intelligence”. (p. 64) and he is resolute to kill the fish and show, “what a man can do and what a man endures”. I’ll kill him in all his greatness and his glory, although it is unjust, he thought. (p. 66) According to Clinton S. Burhans, “Santiago represents a noble and tragic individualism revealing what a man can do in an indifferent universe which defeats him, and the love he can feel for such a universe and his humility before it”. Then it appears for the old man that the condition of life is the same for fish and man alike. The way to live in the world is to “go in and take your chance like any man or bird or fish” (p. 55)

“The marlin jerks the line and catches Santiago completely unprepared. The sudden movement pulls the old man down on his face and makes a cut below his eye” (p. 52). But such things as these can never deter him in his pursuit, because he took suffering as it came and “tried not to think but only to endure” (p. 46) He holds out for three days with unflagging resolution. Santiago, demonstrating the never-say-die attitude, states, “Fish, I’ll stay with you until I am dead” (p. 52). He is ready for the fish to surface and jump, but as Santiago pulls the line tightly, the pressure from below increases. The line is almost at its breaking point, and the fisherman releases some of the pressure. The fish continues to pull the boat, but changes to a northerly direction. With a strong determination, Santiago, feeling the clotting blood on his face from the blow against the boat’s mast, says, “Fish, “I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends, let us hope so, he thought.” (p. 54)

“Santiago heroically transcends tragedy and pain and becomes a hero not by his physical strength but by moral fortitude. He defies his old age and his weak body and proceeds for catching the fish. He is the best representation of a hero because he is the only major character in Hemingway who has not been permanently wounded or disillusioned. His heroic side is suggested throughout. Once, in Casablanca, he defeated a huge Negro from Cienfuegos at the hand game and was referred to thereafter as El Campeon. Now in his old age, he is hero-

worshipped by Manolin who always wants to fish with him, or, when he cannot, at least to help him even with his most menial chores. At the sea, Santiago, sharing the Cuban craze for baseball, thinks frequently of Joe DiMaggio, the greatest ballplayer of his generation, and wonders whether DiMaggio, suffering from a bone spur in his heel, ever endured the pain which the marlin is now subjecting him to. And at night, when he sleeps, he dreams of lions playing on the beaches of Africa, the constant association with the king of ballplayers and the king of beasts adds to the old man's heroic proportions."

The novel **The Old Man and the Sea** is full of reverence for life's struggle and mankind. Santiago gets the greatest victory that a Hemingway hero ever won. He is the old man who rises to heroism as a direct result of his struggle and striving. The hero in **The Old Man and the Sea** suffers the greatest defeat in life, but it is also he who reaches the greater heights. He comes very close to being an epic hero. It becomes increasingly clear throughout the story that it is not victory or defeat that matters but the struggle itself. In the words of Donaldson Scott "Suffering was the natural condition of man and death his inevitable end, but each man could face these tyrants as he chose".

Santiago is altogether very distinct from other heroes of Hemingway. He has tremendous mental resources. He calls for them when he undergoes suffering either external or internal. It is his mastery over his self and mental poise and equanimity which stand him in good stead in times of crisis. As Baker has pointed out, "Santiago possesses certain qualities of mind and heart which are clearly associated with the character and personality of Jesus Christ in the Gospel stories". First among them is the "staying power" which gives him determination to fight unto the end. Second is his "ability to ignore physical pain" Apart from these the other he possesses are the qualities like humility and compassion.

If there is any God in old man's life, it is the sea which Santiago both loves and mistrusts because to the old man it is sometimes calm and sometimes violent, but to which he can commit himself because he knows many tricks and because he can endure. Clearly in Santiago's world, luck and pain are closely related. Luck is something that comes and goes, and man may hope for it day by day, "but who knows? May be today. Every day is a new day," (p. 32) but it is meaningless unless one is prepared to endure pain. The marlin hurts Santiago second time as it lurches forward and pulls the old man into the bow. This sudden movement would have cast Santiago into the ocean if he had not braced himself carefully. The line burns Santiago's hand

and makes it bleed. Shifting the weight of the line from his right shoulder onto his left one, Santiago washes his hand in the sea.

By sunrise of the third day, the marlin begins to circle. Santiago begins to feel the weariness of the struggle. The marlin keeps swimming away each time that the old man is ready to strike. "You are killing me, Fish," the old man thought...but you have a right to. Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or nobler thing than you, brother. Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who" (p. 92) At last, the chance comes, and Santiago hurls the harpoon with all his might, driving it into the marlin's heart. The fish lands in the water with the spear projecting at an angle from the shoulder. The area turns red from the blood: the fish is silvery and very still. Now another hard task is at hand for the old man as he prepares to tie the fish alongside the boat.

What enhances the stature of the old man in his struggle against marlin is his refusal to admit suffering at all. He took suffering as it came. "He was comfortable but suffering, although he did not admit the suffering at all" (p. 64) This is because the old man is not one to accept defeat. He is "strange old man". "Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated". (p. 10) Like other Hemingway heroes, old man's philosophy is that man is not made for defeat. "A man can be destroyed but not defeated" (p. 103). So he puts up a desperate fight against the sharks. The old man is well equipped with many tricks and he has resolution. And trying to kill them is a trial of endurance and the old man "tried not to think but only to endure". (p. 46)

Having secured his catch and moved off with the beneficent trade wind towards the south west and home, Santiago enjoys brief respite. Side by side, like brothers, the old man and the marlin move through the sea. Up to now they have been, as Santiago believes, friendly and mutually respectful adversaries. But when the sharks attack, they join together in the fight against the common enemy. With the arrival of sharks, begins a tragedy of deprivation. But the old man is armed with resolution, "What will you do now if they come in the night?" asks the voice inside Santiago. "Fight them" (p. 115) says the old man aloud. His capacity for heroic effort is not short-lived but sustained. Its full significance can be understood by his power of resolution that never failed him. "I'll fight them until I die", says the old man. (p. 115). An hour after he kills the marlin, the problems actually have begun for the tired old man in the form of sharks. The first of the sharks is a giant mako. Santiago, standing poised with his harpoon, hears

the clicking chop of his great jaws just before he drives the point of his weapon into the mako's brain, "without hope but with resolution and complete malignancy" (p. 102)

The shark is killed but when it sinks, it takes with it forty pounds of the marlin's flesh, the harpoon and the rope. Santiago loses what he has achieved. He loses only 40 pounds flesh of the dead marlin but not his will and optimism. He comments at his loss, "think about something cheerful, old man," he said 'every minute now you are close to home. You sail lighter for the loss of forty pounds.'" (p. 104) The desire to make the best of the worst characterizes Santiago, after killing the mako Shark. He regrets that he would not have gone out so far. But he will not let the clouds of discouragement and diffidence hover over his mind. He is nothing but the most practical till the end. When he loses the knife he wishes that he had a stone but immediately thinks, "Now is no time to think of what you do not have. Think of what you can do with what there is" (p. 110). The old man wishes that the whole ordeal had been a dream and that he could be home. As Tripathi says, it is beyond the resources of man to try to transcend the forces of the universe yet his ability to act according to his resolution gives him an extraordinary self-confidence and makes him state heroically as follows. "But man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated" (p. 103)

Santiago experiences a form of defeat, but is not destroyed. When he has to fight the sharks to protect his marlin, he does so with all his might, but attempting to beat five hungry creatures is more than he can possibly handle. He knows from the time that the marlin begins to pull the boat that he is going too far out into the ocean. His ordeal comes by way of mankind's daily toil. His heroism, as Hovey says, is "unforced and unassuming". Perhaps, the most notable part of Santiago's life is his acceptance of pain and suffering. When Santiago sets out on the fishing excursions, he has no mental image of what will happen. He does not realize that he is destined to experience an ordeal that will bring him physical and mental pain.

Both of his palms are seriously cut in the "working part". The right is cut first and then the left. By the time the old man has clubbed the fifth and sixth sharks into submission just at sunset, a full half of the marlin has been gouged away. Santiago, for the first time, admits that "they have beaten me", "you're tired, old man," he said. "You're tired inside."(p. 112). Many critics thought the old man is really been beaten by the sharks and he is defeated. But he utters these words out of frustration and disgust. It is a momentary exhaustion. But his resolution to save the marlin is strengthened. He is determined to fight them. "Fight them," he said. "I'll fight

them until I die”. (P. 115). In the end he is wearied and “he knew he was beaten and without remedy.” He spits into the ocean and vengefully says “Eat that, galanos. And make a dream you’ve killed a man.” (P. 119).

But a little later on his way back to the shack, he thinks of the bed and the sound sleep he will get on account of his fatigue. He does not admit defeat and asks himself, “what beat you”, the answer is “nothing”. “I went out too far.” (P. 120) Even though he is defeated physically he is not defeated mentally.

After the long struggle, Santiago views the lights from the Havana harbor. He is finally home after taking a terrific beating. As he steps off the boat, his whole body aches; his limbs and back are sore. Hemingway describes this scene vividly and impressionistically; “He started to climb again and at the top he fell and lay for some time with the mast across his shoulder. He tried to get up. But it was too difficult and he sat there with the mast on his shoulder and looked at the road. He had to sit down five times before he reached his shack.” (P. 121)

When Manolin comes to visit Santiago in the morning, the old man is asleep. He has suffered through a terrible experience. The only prize which could have demonstrated his ability as a man has been destroyed by vindictive creatures; he had defended it, but had not succeeded. While he sleeps, the other fishermen are gathering around the skiff to look at what is lashed beside it. One man is measuring the skeleton with a length of line. “He was eighteen feet from nose to tail,” the man announces (P. 122) In the concluding scene of the novel, Santiago returns to his shack and falls asleep out of utter fatigue and exhaustion, dreaming of the lions which used to occupy his mind as a child.

“Dream of the long yellow beach and the early dark and then the other lions came and he rested his chin on the wood of the bows where the ship lay anchored with the evening off-shore breeze and he waited to see if there would be more lions and he was happy.” (P. 81)

His dreaming of the lions on the African beaches suggests not only the spiritual regeneration but also implies his lionine manner of life style. Philip Young suggests that the dream may be a nostalgic return to the strength of one’s youth or a desire for immortality. Despite Santiago’s defeat and suffering, the final effect is that of a triumph. The old man loses the battle he has won. The winner takes nothing but the sense of having to fight to the limits of his strength, of having shown what a man can do when it is necessary. “Santiago’s victory is the

moral victory of having lasted without permanent destruction of his belief in worth of what he has been doing”. Though he fails to bring the giant marlin to market, he succeeds in showing what a man can do and what a man endures.

Hemingway’s message as always is simple; but it is true, and even noble. He says, simply, that a man must endure this life, must be brave in the teeth of its challenges, even unto death, to sail on this ocean of life and take it when it comes. If a man does this, he will remain undefeated no matter what he loses. “A man is not made for defeat; Physical defeat is immaterial in Hemingway. Accordingly, though, at the end of the novel, Santiago is physically defeated; he is not defeated in spirit,” and so he transcended the pain and tragedy and claimed a moral victory in spite of a physical defeat.

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