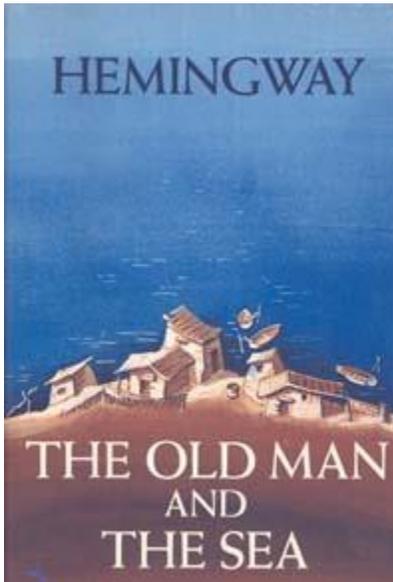


Theme of Heroism in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*

Dr. Pradeep Kumar Debata, M.A, M.Phil, PhD

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 Vol. 13:10 October 2013



Abstract

“A man can be destroyed but not defeated” a statement made by the real hero-writer of the twentieth century whose epoch-making symbolic quotation echoes the invincible spirit of a hero who reaches the zenith of his success ultimately; he is none but the hero of eternity--- Ernest Hemingway. In *The Old man and the Sea* we find a complete triumph over crushing adversity is the heart of heroism, and in order for Santiago the fisherman to be a heroic emblem for human kind, his tribulations must be monumental. In the present study I have tried to discover and redefine the theme of heroism which has been exhibited through the protagonists like the Old Man–Santiago.

Keywords: Heroism, Defeated, Eshark, Old-man, Eighty-five.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:10 October 2013

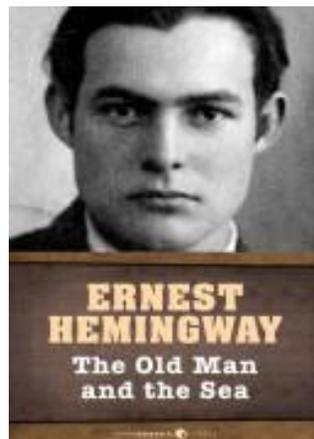
Dr. P. K. Debata

Theme of Heroism in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*

Hemingway's Heroes and Heroism

A man can be a hero because of unusual bravery, nobility of action, moral and intellectual qualities. Like Prometheus, Odysseus, Julia Caesar, Napoleon, a great number of figures are esteemed and respected as models for heroes because they represent the collective desire and yearning for being sublime, and grandeur. So the hero carries its traditional meaning and serves as a prototype for instruction, education and imitation. However, from the late 19th century, owing to the social, political and cultural changes, the hero in the contemporary world bears different meanings.

Hemingway's heroes make a breakthrough in the connotation and transcend the traditional function of heroes. Many of the characters in Hemingway's novels and stories are called heroes because they still preserve some of the virtues of the romanticized figures and the noble people in the traditional sense – bravery, courage, faith, perseverance, dignity, etc. Meanwhile, from their external action and internal mind, there always permeates a pessimistic mood and overtone. These heroes are more human than divine, more complex than simplex. The virtues Hemingway's heroes show when facing the harsh reality serve not as models for people to follow but purely as the revelation of the consolation and comfort for the bitter agony and pains. Hemingway's heroes are not always strong-minded, tough, sturdy, but rather dualized. Their courage, faith and moral code are rooted in the firm presumption that “Man proposes God disposes”.



Animated and Restrained

Hemingway's heroes are both animated as well as restrained, and seem to possess great spiritual energy. His works capture the extremes of heroism and tragedy. His heroes convey a sense of grandeur and power, and arouse strong emotion. In size, strength and emotional intensity; these characters go beyond the real people. The novel *The old man and the sea* describes the adventure of a single fisherman, highlighting his hard work, and his hard earned prize, the huge marlin, which at last, falls prey to the hungry sharks. The novel points out that Hemingway's aristocratic ideal of valour in battle is not the only the kind of heroism possible. Hemingway himself war correspondent, also praised the heroism of the man's long silent struggle with the earth and the elements. Hemingway's story begins most lyrically describing most the personal feeling instead of the acts of heroism portrayed in the epic struggle of the old man and with the huge fish. The story begins depicting the interaction between the primary characters as they prepare their fishing gear for the following day near a Gulf Stream harbour in the 1940s.

The Power and Nobility

The power and nobility of Hemingway's novels are resonant throughout the novel. The opening profile is of Santiago, and 'Old Man' in the title, and the main character, throughout the story, basically speaking, he is depicted as the hero of the novel. But as heroic his hug marlin, Santiago calls him his 'brother'. He is a Cuban fisherman, described as being old in every way except his eyes, which "were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated?" (p.5). Although Santiago has not caught a fish for eighty-four days, he ignores the jeers and pity of other fishermen and returns to the sea in his skiff day after day. The old man's sail was "patched with flour sacks and furling it looked like the flag of permanent defeat" (P.5). Other fisherman seems to believe that Santiago himself is a walking symbol of permanent defeat, as he does not catch a fish for eighty-four days. Yet, when unfurled, the sail still carries out its function, carrying Santiago out into the deepest water where the great marline awaits him. Likewise the old man proves himself when the time comes, giving a lasting impression of endurance.

Manolin - Symbol of Youth, Potency and Hope

The second described is Manolin a young boy whom Santiago taught to fish. Manolin had fished with Santiago before his parents made him stop, citing the old man's fishless streak as "the worst form of unlucky" (p.5). Despite working for another boat Manolin remains Santiago one loyal friend, always willing to obtain meals coffee and bait for the penniless old man, and more importantly to provide companionship. Hemingway seems to praise the ideals of freedom dignity of the individual; and heroism over coming tyranny—ideals characterizing the American emancipation through the boy, Manolin. Even more so than the lions, the boy provides Santiago with the ultimate symbol of youth potency and hope. More often than he prays to God for help, the old man recalls memories of Manolin wishing the boy were there - to give him strength in his time of need.

The Foreshadowing

After reminiscing about a fish that nearly ripped apart Santiago boat – foreshadowing the old man's inevitable encounter at sea - they carry the sail, lines, and harpoon back to Santiago shack, The foreshadowing continues as the old man's anticipation for the following day offers, Eighty-five is a lucky number ... How would you like to see me bring one in that dressed out over a thousand pounds? (p.11). The boy brings Santiago supper, and they discuss their favourite conversation topic: baseball-the New York Yankees and Joe DiMaggio. In particular Santiago's continual fixation with DiMaggio is an apt metaphor. The New York Yankees and Joe DiMaggio, whose career, Santiago follows in the Newspapers. DiMaggio – a two time American League Most Valuable Player, and one of the greatest second half of this career. One of the better known injuries was the bone spur in the heel of his left foot, which limited his abilities. The Next year, however, DiMaggio Comeback with another MVP season. Santiago sees the Great DiMaggio as an ultimate symbol of the resilience and courage- traits the old man shows throughout his three day journey.

Dreams Every Night

Manolin leaves for the night, and Santiago sleeps, dreaming of the Africa he remembers from his youth. The old man dreams nightly of the African coast, as “ he no longer dreamed of storm, nor of women , nor of great occurrences , nor of great fish , nor fights , nor contests of strength nor of his wife . He only dreamed of places now and lions on the beach. They played like young cats in the dusk and he loved them as he loved the boy (p.19). Santiago was a sailor in his youth, and travelled to Africa, where the young lion playing on the beach. Dreaming about the lions each night provide Santiago with a link to his younger days, as well as the strength and idealism that are associated with

Santiago rests, unawares that in the morning he will embark upon a three day journey of epic proportions. Hemingway had a particular genius for tragedy. Like others American writers of his time, he dealt imaginatively with heroism and the apparent gap between the real and the ideals. The gaps form the term of the Old Man and the Sea. In the novels, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and *A Farewell to Arms* heroism is tied to the central characters confrontation with mortality. Just before sunrise on the second day, Santiago begins to pity the great fish towing him. The old man reflects “He is wonderful and strange and who knows how old he is” (p.40). A shared bond between the two is thus established, as Santiago has previously called himself ‘a strange old man’ (p.55), in addition old man begins to call the fish his brother, and revels that the he loves and respects the fish. Throughout the rest of the novel Heming way details and deepens the parallel between Santiago, who perseveres through the night to stay with his fish who swims resiliently against the inevitability of death. Hemingway portrays the psychologically probing story on themes such as heroism and honour.

Three Key Images

Santiago begins to feel the fish is slow, and he hopes the fish will jump, so that “he will fill the sacks along backbone with air and then he cannot go deep to die”. (P.44). The fish gives a sudden, unexpected pull which causes the fishing line to slice through Santiago’s hand. In spite of his stained hand, which quickly begins to cramp, Santiago endures the pain and holds on

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:10 October 2013

Dr. P. K. Debata

Theme of Heroism in Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*

371

his line. Finally the fish jumps; a marlin which bulges out of the water ‘unendingly’ (p.52). For Santiago, the fish that is two feet longer than his skiff is “the biggest fish that he had ever seen and bigger than he had ever heard of” (P.53). To comfort himself in the midst of his challenge, the old man thinks of the three key images throughout the book: The Great DiMaggio, the lions on the African beach, and the boy, Manolin. Santiago continually wishes that the boy were with him, even though he knows that it is impossibility, yet, just the thought of Manolin seems to give the old man strength and courage to endure.

After catching a fish and eating it, the old man positions himself to get a few minutes of sleep without losing his hold on the fish, determining that the marlin must “pull until he dies” (P.66). Santiago knows it is nearly time to kill the fish and again reassures himself by thinking “if the boy was here he would wet the coils of line, he thought. Yes. If the boy were here, if boy were here” (p.71). Santiago time of triumph quickly nears, yet the old man realizes that even if he catches the marlin his ideal is not over, as he thinks, “Man is not much beside the great birds and beasts. Still I would rather be that beast down there in the darkness of the sea. ‘Unless sharks come,’ he said aloud. ‘If sharks come, God pity him and me’ (p.57).

Parallel Suffering

Santiago awakes from his quick nap to the marlin jumping from the water more than a dozen times. As the sun rises on Santiago’s third day fish finally begins to circle the boat. Although the marlin has weakened, the old man is also suffering from fatigue, as he begins to experience faintness and dizziness, feels “tireded than I have even been” (p.76). Yet, Santiago refuses to break down their physically or mentally, and continues working his great marlin closer to the skiff. Finally the marlin circles close enough for the old man to spear it with his harpoon which he drives in with all the strength he can summon. The dying fish musters its final power and “rose high out of the water showing all his great length and width and all his power and his beauty. He seemed to hang to their air above the old man in the skiff. Then he fell in to the water with a crash that sent spray over the old man and over all of the skiff” (p.80). As blood from the marlin’s heart discolours the sea, Santiago attaches the marlin to the outside of the skiff with the rope, and starts sailing for home.

Attack of Sharks

As the old man's worst fears begins to come true, it is only "an hour before the first shark hit him" (p.85). A mako shark, attracted by the trail of marlin blood attacks the attached fish ripping out forty pounds before Santiago kills it with the harpoon. With the Marlin bleeding again , and without his harpoon which went down with the bleeding again and without harpoon which went down the shark Santiago realize that his great prize , won after two long days of struggle may be destroyed much quicker. After the first attack the old man's hope begins to diminish, and "he did not like to look at the fish any more since the he had been mutilated. When the fish had been hit it was as though he himself were hit" (p.88). This continues to recall the parallels made earlier in the novel between Santiago and his marlin.

Two more sharks arrive to feed on the Marlin, only to be killed by Santiago. Who ties his knife to an oar to make substitute harpoon. The old man's knife snaps when he kills the next shark leaving him with a club to use against the ceaseless barrage of sharks. As the sun goes down on Santiago's triumphant and tragic third day the old man recognizes the sharks is useless but continues clubbing them until they take the club from his hands. Santiago resiliently uses his boat's tiller as a weapon until it breaks the when he kills his last shark , and he realizes , "That was the last shark of the pack that came. There was nothing more for them for them to eat" (p102-03).

Imagery in the Defeat

With all 1500 pounds of Marlin meat stolen by the sharks Santiago acknowledges defeat and sail for the harbour, ignoring the sharks still hitting the bare carcass. "Upon arriving in the middle of the night Santiago, pulls his boat and puts the mast on his shoulders and burdened with his particular cross and makes the slow walk back to his shack . Christian imagery returns near the ends of the novel when Santiago shoulders his mast after returning, and climbing towards his shack (p.55), it was only then that he knew the depth of his tiredness. As the old man stumbles home he falls, and finds the mast on his back too heavy to rise with. The

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:10 October 2013

Dr. P. K. Debata

Theme of Heroism in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*

373

imagery of Christ carrying his cross continues as Santiago “put the mast down and stood up. He picked the mast up and put it on his shoulder and started up the road. He had to sit down five times before he reached his shack” (p.105) . Even after his three days of suffering the old man dutifully carries his burden on his back , Christ –like before falling into the a well- deserved sleep.

The boy arrives at Santiago shack the morning after old man returns, as he has each of the previous morning, Manolin has already been to the harbour, and has been Santiago’s skiff and the 18 feet long marlin skeleton. When he sees the sleeping old man, he goes to obtain coffee for Santiago, he did not care that they saw him crying. The old man finally wakes up with the boy by his side and they talk briefly. Santiago learns that the coast guard and airplanes had been searching the ocean for him during his three day absence. In addition the boy informs Santiago that they will fish together again in spite of Manolin’s parents order. When old man protests that he is not lucky any more, the boy replies, “The hell with luck will bring the luck with me” (p.108). After Santiago reveals that the he suffered plenty, Manolin leaves –crying again – to bring food, newspaper and medicine, for Santiago’s hands.

Down at the harbour several tourists see the marlin’s long whit spine, in the water among the empty beer cans and dead barracudas. When they ask a waiter what it is, the man replies ‘Eshark’ (p.109). Trying to explain what had happened. The tourists misunderstand, believing they are seeing a shark’s skeleton and remains oblivious to the three day saga that destroyed but did not defeat the old man.

After his time of suffering, Santiago finally rests, and the novel ends how it began as “up the road, in the shack and the old man was sleeping again. He was still sleeping on his face and the boy was sitting by watching him. The old man was dreaming about the lions” (p.109).

Fishing for Secondary Meaning

‘The old man and the sea’ is a story told so simply and precisely that it invites the reader to fish for secondary meaning, the after the novella was published, Hemingway urged a friend against such readings, insisting “I tried to make a real old man, a real boy a red sea and a real

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:10 October 2013

Dr. P. K. Debata

Theme of Heroism in Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*

fish and real sharks”. Yet this seems their disingenuous especially given the famous “Iceberg principle” that governed Hemingway writing for decades. The very simplicity of the story suggests that it is a parable meant to illustrate a moral lesson. But the nature of the lesson is not obvious. The Hemingway scholar Philip Young in his ‘*E. Hemingway*’ offers a compelling answer to this question when he suggests “the novel is a parable but one for life itself, and thus readers who search for other allegorical meanings inevitably reduce the grandeur of the text. But of course alternate readings, persists (p.42).

Extending Beyond All Limits

Still reading from the critical thrashing of his previous book, *Across the River and In the Trees*, Hemingway constructs an allegory about the struggle of a writer who extended himself beyond all limits, only to have the resulting work picked apart by critics. Placing the novella in the context of Hemingway resentment towards his critics the parallel, become quite obvious the sharks are the sharks are the critics Santiago is lonely as the writer, the marlin, magnificent and elusive and inextricably bound and to the man who hunts it represents the Art of the novelist, Santiago is a former champion who wants to be champion again. Hemingway is in the same position.

Hemingway seems to have believed that his writing exceeded his critics, ability to understand it. In an interview conducted after the publication of *Across the River and in to the Trees*, he claims to have more compelling evidence for this reading that comes from the text itself. Santiago is the consummate craftsman. As a writer might aspire to do, he keeps his lines where he wants them ‘With precision’. In fact he keeps them “straighter than any one did”. As the double meaning of ‘line’ the writer and the fisher man, so does Hemingway’s description of Santiago’s line being thick as a ‘big pencil’

Christian References

The Christian references in *The Old Man and the sea* are inescapable. Manolin sails with Santiago for forty days, which is the same amount of time Christ was in the wilderness.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com ISSN 1930-2940 13:10 October 2013

Dr. P. K. Debata

Theme of Heroism in Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*

Santiago's trial with the fish lasts for three days; a crucial number in Christian theology for it makes the Trinity as well as the interval between the death and resurrection of Christ. The scars of Santiago trail - his cut hand, for instance - unites him with the crucified Christ as he does his posture when he returns to his village. Santiago reminds the readers of Christ as he bears the mast upon his shoulders and further he collapses with his arms out and palms up in the pose of crucifixion. Moreover, one could say that Santiago exhibits essential Christian traits of humility and charity. Like Christ he also undergoes a great trial and return to society having experienced something others cannot and like Christ the fisherman is a martyr of sorts.

Coherent Symbols?

The question is whether these accumulated symbols amount to anything coherent. Viewing the novella through the lens of Christian allegory is useful in that it provides a context for understanding some of the work's dominant themes. For example, by linking Santiago to Christ, Hemingway strengthens the reader's sense that a terrific and profound triumph has come from the old man's defeat. One critic, at least sees *The Old Man and the sea* as a religious allegory, but a decidedly non-Christian one. The novella is the clearest expression, of what Joseph Waldmeir refers to as Hemingway's 'Religion of Man' (p.45). This is a religion without an afterlife, in which spiritual completion is achieved through physical action. It is the cult of manhood. If anything counts meaning and moral significance, it is how one does whatever one does. This is especially true of solitary individuals in life –and – death situations. One must kill to live, one must die and these actions have no other worldly importance. Their meaning resides in how they are enacted. Because there is no eternal salvation all meaning and purpose are derived from earthly experience, from doing one's deeds well and bravely and truly - from being, in short, a man.

Santiago acts bravely and truly and kills like a Man which gives meaning and purpose to his struggle. The final material outcome of the struggle – that is, whether he returns home with the fish – becomes irrelevant, the fish too, has acted well and bravely and truly. It has been a brother to Santiago, and it has died like a man (indeed Hemingway tells us the sex of the fish). There is thus meaning and purpose in the fish's death. This reinforces the male –dominated

world view that Hemingway creates in the novella too: it is no mistake that there are no notable female characters in *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Dr. Pradeep Kumar Debata, Hons, M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.
Head of the Department of English
Kalinga Polytechnic
KIIT
Bhubaneswar 751024
Odisha
India
debatapradeep@yahoo.com