

## PSYCHOSOCIALLY THERAPEUTIC ASPECTS OF HEMINGWAY'S HERO IN *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA*

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### Abstract

As a tribute to the fighting spirit of man, *The Old Man and the Sea* appears in 1952. Here Hemingway is concerned with life's struggle against undefeatable odds. The protagonist has to pay for going far out into the sea, for aspiring to be more than the common lot. The victim, the Old Man, fails to bring the prize he wins back to the shore. Sharks eat away the marlin. The Old Man, the fisherman par excellence, takes nothing except the psychoanalytical satisfaction that he has tried his best. He bears the loss boldly without feeling that he has lost. His courage and endurance raise him to the level of Hemingway's code and he attains moral triumph thereby. This study, however, aims at presenting upon these victims the status of winners which they rightly deserve.

**Keywords:** endurance, psychosocial, struggle, the old man, therapeutic, triumph.

### Introduction

Ernest Miller Hemingway (1899-1961) survives in the annals of literary history as one of the major figures in the twentieth-century American fiction. Indeed, it was a time of unparalleled violence born of the horrors of the First World War and the intellectual as well as spiritual disillusionment followed it. Most of its inhabitants lead a life of sensation only, usually mistaking sexual desire for love, devoting themselves to excitement rather than positive achievement. For this disillusionment brought about by the First World War the sensitive man in America as well as in the world came to the realization that the old concepts and values embedded in Christianity and other ethical systems of the Western world had not served to save mankind from the catastrophe inherent in this world war. Consequently, after the war many sensitive writers began to look for a new system of values, a system of values that would replace the old received doctrines which had proved to be useless. Hemingway is one of them who being endured the great calamity of World War 1, could no longer accept those values that had previously dominated all of America. Instead, he searched for some principles based on a sense of order and discipline that would result in any situation. In his writings, especially through Santiago – the hero of the novel *The Old Man and the Sea* (1953), Hemingway asserts emphatically that courage, endurance and love are the only sustaining factors in the world wherein man is invariably destined to be trapped and broken, wherein life can only end badly. He tactfully bears out the tale of a spiritual victory through victimization by agents: social, political and providential as well. 'Struggle of living' has been Hemingway- hero's code of life that is adaptive to any particular situation through which they defeat the defeat and deny the denial of life.

### Characteristics of Hemingway Hero

In order to define Hemingway's Hero properly we can broadly divide Hemingway's major characters into two categories: the 'Hemingway hero' and the 'code hero'. They also called them the 'tyro' and the 'tutor' respectively. Hemingway hero (tyro) is a young

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man (or a young boy) who learns to live in the world where there is chaos, violence, uncertainty and anxiety. He learns by receiving wounds and by being victimized. The code hero, (tutor) on the contrary, is usually an older person who has become what he had to become. He has realized his potentialities and has known the area of his operation. He is usually a professional – a bull-fighter, a fisherman, a veteran soldier or a prize fighter. He is sure to excel in his pursuit and he does not step out of that before the end. He possesses, as the code prescribes, immense resources of courage and endurance which will enable him, despite all pressures, to confront destruction and death with boldness and dignity. He is the symbol of the fighting spirit of man. Both ‘Heming way hero’ and the ‘code hero’ are destroyed or mangled in the course of the gratification of their passion – physical or social or spiritual. All of them are subject to the same process of victimization culminating in graceful victory. When we meet them bearing the scars of life, it is possible of measuring the degree of their victimization and the height of dignity, with which they bore it. The genesis of ‘Hemingway hero’ lies in Nick Adams who first appears in the author’s collection of short stories, *In Our times* (1952). When Nick attains manhood he is introduced to the violence and evils of the world. As a result, he is wounded and crippled both physically and ultimately falls out with society.

#### **Existential challenges the hero faces**

Of the two categories of Hemingway protagonists: (1) Tyro (hero) and (2) Tutor (Code hero) Santiago belongs to the second one and as such has mastered the Hemingway code of courage, endurance, and love. He is supposed to excel in the struggle that life must throw on his way. In contrast to this veteran figure, therefore, the forces and ambience of victimization in *the Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway’s most successful and talked about novel, become more prominent and ultimately assume more of a metaphysical nature than those are in *A Farewell to Arms* or in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. It is evident, as we shall see, that *The Old Man and the Sea* is more symbolic in its treatment of the protagonist, the locale, and the action than any other of the Hemingway novels. In steering clear from machines and arms and social issues in *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway sticks to the first things of life and in the four days action of the novel dramatizes the existential challenges that man inevitably faces. The sea in the novel is a microcosm which shelters both Santiago and his adversary. It is a source of both sustenance and annihilation. It represents the moral universe in being merciful and minatory; bountiful and unconcerned; and in offering and withdrawing favour without reason. In containing both the marlin and sharks it embodies the eternal cycle of life and death. Santiago is well aware of the vitality and secret of the sea:

*He always thought of the sea as la mar which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her. Sometimes those who love her say bad things of her but they are always said as though she were a woman. Some of the younger fishermen those who used buoys as floats for their lines and had motor-boats, bought when the shark livers had brought much money, spoke of her as el mar which is masculine. They spoke of her as a contestant or a place or even an enemy. But the old man always thought of her as feminine and as something that gave or withheld great favours, and if she did wild or wicked thing it was because she could not help them. The moon affects her as it does a woman, he thought (Hemingway 1952: 26-27).*

He, however, does not disturb natural harmony by sailing out to the high seas beyond the traditional fishing grounds. In aspiring for a prize catch, not within the can of common mortals, Santiago puts forth a life struggle against unconquerable natural forces in which a kind of victory is possible. When odds are too heavy against him and such victimizing forces as the sense of nothingness, despair, moral conflicts and doubts are bent upon entrapping him Santiago not only survives as a victorious but also grows in stature as a code hero by gaining greater wisdom and insight into the secret of creation from his lone encounter with marlin and sharks upon the vast, infinite, ongoing reality of the sea.

### **Winning spirit of the hero**

Before we enter into the arena and watch closely the winning struggle of Santiago against his dear foes let us deal shortly with the origin of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Hemingway, after giving vent to his anger and frustration in his novel *Across the River and into the Trees* (1950) at the aftermath of the Second World War comes once again to take shelter among the simple folks of Cuba. It is here that he writes the tale of the legendary old fisherman Santiago. Before that, in April 1936, Hemingway records the simple outline of the story in an article entitled "on the Blue Water" in *Esquire*:

*An old man fishing alone in a skiff out of Cabanas hooked a great marlin that on the heavy sash cod hand line 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 marlin lashed along side. What was kept of the fish, less than half, weighed 800 pounds. The old man had stayed with him a day, a night while the fish swam deep and pulled the boat upon 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 when he was exhausted and the sharks had eaten all they could hold. He was crying in the boat when the fishermen picked up him, half crazy from his loss, and the sharks were still circling the boat (Hemingway 1936: 184-185).*

It is obvious that the idea lies dormant in his mind for a period of about twenty years. In 1952, he lands his great marlin, *the Old Man and the Sea*.

In developing the character of Santiago, Hemingway attributes many qualities of a real old man, long since dead, who lives in Casablanca on the eastward side of Havana harbour where many commercial fishermen made their headquarters. On 7 February, 1939 he tells Maxwell Perkins of his wish to write the story of the old fisherman. "The book is a fiction", says Hemingway, based on many actual occurrences. In an interview to *Time* he says, "I tried to make a real old man, a real shark" (Hemingway 1954: 72).

Extreme old age notwithstanding Santiago is, perhaps, the most heroic of Hemingway heroes testing the upper limits of man. He has gone eighty-four days without taking a single fish. He is called "Salao" which is the most form of being unlucky but he does not suffer from any expression. He does not surrender himself to his bad luck by putting an end to his endeavour on the eighty-four days. He also does not surrender his independence by going to another boat and sharing other fisherman's luck. He continues his fishing operation alone and takes his failure as an existential challenge. He must accept the challenge no matter what the end brings – success or destruction.

### **Struggling against adversary**

Santiago must sail out into the strange and powerful sea to test man's destiny set against the unconquerable and now unconcerned nature. In their ignorance other fishermen may call him unlucky but so far as the sea is concerned every man is sure to be broken and destroyed. Yet Santiago must set out on his mission to prove that mere destruction is not defeat and that man is a permanent fighter not made for defeat. How, then, does he equip himself for this battle predetermined? As we are told at the very beginning: "He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish" (Hemingway 1952: 1) His old age, poor health, loneliness added by his long term failure are likely to deepen a sense of despair to us. Santiago fishes in a broken skiff whose sail when furled "looked like the flag of permanent defeat" (ibidem: 1). Yet we need not have to despair. The old man is enriched with wisdom and experience. The tremendous courage he has is his main source of inspiration: "Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same colour as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated" (ibidem: 2). As the Champion fisherman he is well aware of his ability. He suffers from no false humility but is rather ready to prove his mettle once again: "I hope no fish will come along so great that he will prove us wrong" (ibidem: 14). The memory of his youth brought back by the recurrent dreams of lions rejuvenates him for the great task ahead. Above all it is the love the old man has for the boy who accepts him as his mentor and godfather that won't allow him to let the boy down. The boy loves and respects Santiago as his idol, the greatest among the fishermen, and for the sake of the boy Santiago cannot bear to break this image of himself. Moreover he wants to work out the example of Dimaggio, the old baseball champion who does "anything perfectly even with the pain of the bone-spur in his heel" (ibidem: 66.) These are the factors which boosts Santiago's morale to venture out to face squarely the furies that wait for him in high seas. To assume that he is a victim of his inordinate aspiration is to miss a vital point. Santiago is no heaven stromer like the mythical Prometheus or the more humanized Ahab of Melvil. He loves his work. He loves to test his potentialities and perfection of skill in the context of existential challenge. It is important to note that in the face of the inevitable destruction Santiago makes the fateful decision of sailing out for the marlin.

On the morning of the fishing expedition, Manolin, the boy, arranges the simple breakfast of coffee. On the previous night he brings Santiago a supper of black beans and rice, fried bananas, stew and two bottles of beer. The boy won't have the old man fish without eating while he is alive. It is on the eighty-fifth day of Santiago's being a "Salao" the boy sees him off into the sea. The boy wishes the old man's good luck after helping him launch the skiff.

In catching the big fish and fighting with the sharks, says Carlos Baker, "the gallantry of Santiago is defined in parts by the gallantry of adversary" (1952: 296). When the old man feels for the first time the slight nibbling on his line, he at once knows that something is in the offing. Marline is eating the sardine below six hundred feet in the darkness. The huge fish swims off with the bait in his mouth. After four hours the fish is still swimming steadily. Like other Hemingway protagonists, Santiago is trying "not to think but only to endure". He only needs to know what he has against him. Towards midnight Santiago

knows that he and his adversary are “joined together and have been since noon and no one to help either of us” (Hemingway 1952:55). He cannot apprehend what their fight implies or what waits for them. But all the possibilities of suffering can be smelled easily. He is to pass through of suffering in order to prove his courage and endurance.

### **Courage and endurance – source of inspiration**

Near the noon of the second day the great fish surfaces. It is two feet longer than the skiff and obviously no less powerful than the Champion fisherman. Here, one may point out, is a suggestion of victimization when the old is pushed to the limit and pitted against heavy and nearly insurmountable odds out in the unknown waters of the sea. But Santiago is, in fact, Hemingway's code hero well versed in courage and endurance and hence eligible to be released from the trap of victimization and to achieve the dignity of a victor. The boat is towed for about forty-eight hours and the old man can hardly afford to relax the pull of the line. His hands are cut, he has no sleep and has survived on raw fish and bottle of water. Yet pain does not matter to him. A parallel situation is noticed in Hemingway's *The Undeclared* where Mannel is shown charging at the bull six times with a broken wrist. The qualities of a victor become yet more formidable to Santiago when he rises beyond his physical pain and the immediate concern of killing the Marlin to realize a kinship and interdependence with the objects of nature. Who could but a victor marvel, in the thick of danger, at the size, strength, beauty, endurance, and nobility of the Marlin, his adversary? The sight of the fish inspires the old man to achieve the goal he has set himself for. He is resolute now to prove himself against his worthy adversary:

“Let him think I am more man than I am, and I will do so... I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures” (ibidem: 67).

Before the fish starting to circle on the third day Santiago cannot see clearly. During the night he is frightened, but assures himself: “you better be fearless and confident old man” (ibidem: 103). And when the fish finally begins to circle he pierces the harpoon into its heart. Santiago wins the battle but his painful ordeal is not yet over. He has already learned how to suffer and endure. So when the sharks come, he is but little perturbed. In his fight with the sharks the old man suffers to the extreme. He loses his harpoon in killing the sharks. His hands are in the process. When sharks come in packs, he breaks his knife and loses his improvised harpoon in fighting them. He strikes at everything that is visible in the darkness. The sharks eat away the marlin and the old man sails on ignoring them. He behaves perfectly and honourably while losing his prize catches to the sharks. Nothing is left for the sharks at the end of his home bound journey and he is wounded in his chest.

Santiago's fight against the sharks is a nightmare. Yet he wants to carry the spoils of his victory to the shores of civilization. He has firm faith that Manolin would believe him. In his fight with the marlin and the sharks the old man is completely destroyed. At the end of a great expedition, before the dawn of the fourth day, Santiago stands on the rock alone, wounded and exhausted. Shouldering the mast he climbs the hill and reaches his shack to sleep on his bed of newspapers. His mission done the old man feels contented and assured that life would be easier now with Manolin. After all, he is not so unlucky and can leave his legacy with pride and satisfaction. He becomes an object lesson for Manolin

who could learn how to fight against odds with courage, determination, endurance, and the same time, love for the adversary. Man can only be a victor, as *The Old Man and the Sea* establishes through the struggle of Santiago, when he faces the challenges of life with courage in his heart, smile on his lips and compassion for his fellow beings.

### **Victory through victimization**

Santiago is the product of Hemingway's search for completeness which has begun with Nick Adams. Nick is a symbol of the twentieth-century disillusionment. He appears, under different names, in Hemingway's novels and reflects the shocked sensibility of modern man. Through various characters and over the space of years Nick grows in stature to ultimately assume the spiritual potentiality of Santiago. Under other Hemingway characters, therefore, he needs not pass through the gruelling phases of victimization, of suffering and endurance, to attain enlightenment. But, in the interest of readers it becomes an authorial responsibility to let Santiago stalk through the harrowing moments of the existential challenge made to encounter. Santiago, as his treatment in the novel testifies, is never a victim in the sense Job, Faustus, Oedipus or Ahab, to take some of the prototypes of victims leaving aside the protagonists of the novels examined so far, are victims. Victim-hood inevitably carries with it a sense of deprivation, loss, anger, and spite – a sense of being double crossed in one's ignorance or impotence. Santiago, on the contrary, never shows up that he is sold out. Although terribly exhausted in body he never feels lost or desperate. In the moments of worst challenges, the memory of lions, the instance of the skilful Dimaggio and his love for the boy make him endure his suffering admirably. Hence, we never see him losing temper or cursing. His equanimity of spirit stands him in good stead all through. Santiago is never victimized; only we the readers are taken into the high seas to partake the cosmic drama with him. The old man knows that getting killed is as much a part of the code of living as chasing the adversary. The question of being defeated, therefore, does not arise. Even while playing a losing game he is convinced that it is a game all the same. Hence the absence of the spiritual agony that we find in a victim, and, hence the old man's endearing conversation with the birds and the fish he must kill in order to live. He might go on and on into the ocean till eternity itself is folded up but never feel broken. Because, it is all the same for him as having a sleep on his bed of old newspapers – living as he exists. Unlike the celebrated victims in recorded literature, he does not throw up his arms into the answering void and cry: cursed be the day when his mother conceived him. Nor does he cry revenge against the ultimate thing that has undone him. Santiago, like the enlightened '*rishis*' of ancient India, has the key to the secrets of the creation. Before him opens the hidden gates of the domain where cohabit the opposing forces. For him the killer and the killed, the prey and the predator, the stability of the land and the uncertainty of the unknown ocean all become same – elements of cosmic drama. Thus he could sail on – without calling help from hope – talking to his cramps, birds, little sardines, and the big marlin that enjoys running with him – all calm and composed just as he used to share beer with the boy, little irritated by the other's talk about his being luckless. Quite the same equanimity of spirit later possesses him when he drops the skeleton of the big marlin and struggles up the shore to home and to rest – perhaps never looking back to assess how much gained or

lost. It is left to the crowd to wonder. Santiago is never entrapped which is a precondition to victimhood. Because, he knows what he does and he never gives life a chance to catch him on the wrong foot. In his enlightenment Santiago moves beyond the polarities of victory or victimization to become a real hero par excellence.

### **Conclusion**

Hemingway's major contribution to the 20<sup>th</sup> century fiction are his creation of heroes like Santiago in a world dominated by mediocrity, his use of the colloquial speech for literary purposes, and his vision which sees man as a solitary figure who has to forge his own values in a valueless world and give significance to his life and actions. A cursory reading of the texts of Hemingway's major novels may miss the fact that though often victims, in a mundane sense, Hemingway's heroes invariably, snatch away victory from the jaws of defeat by their sheer determination and understanding of life. All of them, though pure loser in a material sense, are real winners on a metaphysical plane. Although Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* returns with the skeleton of his trophy, he achieves dignity by putting up a brave fight to the end. Although much has been said about the heroism of these protagonists Hemingway studies so far have not adequately treated them as winners in relation to their victimization. This study attempts at analyzing the various forces as well as the process of victimization of Hemingway heroes and seeks to highlight their eventual emergence as winners. In fact, in Hemingway 'winners take nothing' except the psychosocial satisfaction of having learned the code to have been able 'to live or to die gracefully'. There is a certain pattern of the journey of the Hemingway hero from existential victim-hood, through suffering, endurance and love, to the ultimate victory.

Thus, the exceptional story of "The Old Man and the Sea" by Hemingway might be used as a therapeutic aid for hopeless and depressed people who needed a powerful force for continuing struggles of life against fate. They should say as the boy Manolin, "I'll bring the luck by myself." In the story the old man tells us "It is silly not to hope...besides I believe it is a sin." Hemingway draws a distinction between two different types of success: outer-material and inner-spiritual. While the old man lacks the former, the importance of this lack is eclipsed by his possession of the later. He teaches all people the triumph of indefatigable spirit over exhaustible resources. Hemingway's hero as a perfectionist man tells us: To be a man is to behave with honour and dignity, not to succumb to suffering, to accept one's duties without complaint, and most importantly to have maximum self-control. At the end of the story he mentions, "A man is not made for defeat...a man can be destroyed but not defeated." The book finishes with this symbolic sentence: "The old man was dreaming about lions."

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