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Theme of Endurance, Inspiration, Suffering and Triumph in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*

Ram Janam

(Research Scholar)

Department of English & MEL
University of Allahabad, Allahabad.

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Abstract:

The Old Man and the Sea is a novel by American novelist Ernest Hemingway. The novel deals with man's struggle with the natural world. It tells the noble courage, struggle and endurance of the Cuban fisherman Santiago who for eighty- four luckless days has rowed his skiff into the Gulf Stream in search of fish Marlin. At first accompanied by the boy Manolin with whom he had talked of better days and about the great sport of baseball but now he is alone. Aged and solitary, he goes far out and hooks a great fish that tows his boat all afternoon and night. At last he was able to kill the Marlin. After getting victory over Marlin he had to struggle with sharks. In the combat between Santiago and sharks Santiago did not lose his patience and fought bravely. At last Santiago was victorious. When he makes land, his Marlin's skeleton was left. Seeing 18 feet long marlin, all the fisherman were amazed. After going through the novel it can be said that if we have patience and we work hard sincerely in right direction then victory will always be with us.

Keywords: Endurance, struggle, hope, victory.

The story of an old fisherman Santiago's single-handed fight with a huge fish in the Gulf Stream north of Havana is a wonderfully written in narrative form. There are various allegorical meanings have been read into this novel. It has, for instance, been regarded as a Christian allegory. It has also been treated as an allegory of an artist's struggle with his material. But the story is capable of a much wider interpretation covering all humanity and all of man's life on earth. From this point of view the story is a parable on the theme of fighting the good fight. The novel thus becomes an epic metaphor for life, a contest in which the great thing is the struggle and in which even

the problem of right and wrong occupies a secondary place. Human life is here represented as a struggle against the unconquerable forces of the world in which a kind of victory is nevertheless possible. In this respect the mood of this novel differs greatly from that of the pessimism and despair of the earlier works of Hemingway. Hemingway here shows a reverence for life's struggle and for mankind. He here portrays a simple man who is capable of an extraordinary dignity and heroism by means of which he wins a moral triumph in the midst of what is otherwise a heart-breaking defeat.

Santiago was an old fisherman by profession. He used to fish in the Gulf Stream. This time he was unable to catch any fish for eighty four days. For the first forty days a boy named Manolin was with him. After forty days when the old man was without any fish, the boy's parents told his boy that the old man was certainly unlucky. So Manolin's parents attached the boy to other fisherman. The boy had no choice in this matter, although he felt sad on leaving the old man. But the boy Manolin's heart remained with Santiago and he continued to serve the old man in various ways. On this day he took the old man to the town restaurant called "The Terrace" and entertained him by giving him some beer. The old man said that the next day would be a favourable day for his fishing.

Now the boy is still attached to the old man not only because of old man's skill in fishing but because of the old man can talk to him on the subject of baseball and baseball champions like DiMaggio. If fishing is Santiago's profession, reading news of baseball matches is his hobby. These all about may be symbol of Santiago's youth and youthful strength. On the eighty fifth day he went to fish very hopefully. His each hook was covered with a bait that was sweet smelling and good testing to any good fish. The son was hot now, and the old man was felt himself perspiring. It was the eighty fifth day and the old man wanted to catch a big fish. Just then watching his lines, he saw one of the projecting sticks dip sharply. The old man reached out for the line and held it softly in his right hand. He could judge that one hundred fathoms down a marlin was eating the sardines that covered the hook. It being the month of September, the marlin must be a huge one. Santiago was happy that a marlin of a big size was nibbling at the sardines covering his hook. A few moments later however, it seemed that the marlin had moved

away from the sardines. Santiago wondered if the marlin had gone away altogether. Then he felt that the gentle pulling touch on the line again and he was happy that the marlin had not gone away after all. Santiago now felt a heavy pull on the line. Now Santiago was sure that the marlin had got hooked. Now the combat began between marlin and Santiago. The old fisherman wished that the boy were with him. Some of the flesh of his hand had been cut when the fish had suddenly pulled the line but the old man did not lose his patience. After a great struggle Santiago was able to kill the marlin. But the fish was too big to be pulled aboard.

Shortly afterwards the sharks begin to attack the dead marlin. The old man got ready with his harpoon, and made the rope fast while he watched the sharks coming to attack the dead marlin. The old man's head was now clear and he was full of resolution. He kills several of them but more appear. He is eventually left only with a broken tiller to fight with the sharks. The fight is an unequal one. The sharks eat away almost all the flesh of the marlin leaving only the skeleton which the Old man tows home, half-dead with exhaustion. On reaching the shore, he goes to his humble shack, falls asleep, and dreams of other days.

Santiago is meant to be a master fisherman. This is the reason why Hemingway chose an old man as his hero. If he were a young fisherman, there would always be the possibility that he relied on his muscle rather than his art, even he were highly competent. It does not require much thinking to perceive what Hemingway had in mind while writing this story. Santiago is Hemingway's code hero who illustrates the values of life that Hemingway cherished and glorified all his life—courage, dignity, honour, conscientiousness, dedication and endurance. A man may grow old and be wholly down on his luck, but he can still dare, persist when he is defeated or thwarted, and thus by the manner of his losing win a victory. And the "rules" must not be lost sight of the procedure, the technique, the craft and the skill. All this is applicable to life as a whole, to man's earthly existence, to the heavy odds which a man has to face and which he must not shrink from even in the sure knowledge of losing the fight. In human experience there are many forms of both marlin and shark. Much is to be endured, and perhaps relatively little is to be

enjoyed, but the fact of having endured is itself a source of much satisfaction despite the defeat. Life may prove to be a tragedy, but the consciousness of heroism enables a man to face the tragedy and prevents him from sinking into a state of despair. From this point of view, Santiago attains the moral stature of Hamlet, Lear, Tess, and other tragic heroes and heroines in literature, though on a literal level Santiago's experience is much more limited in scope and range than theirs.

Santiago is a humble fisherman who believes in his work and in his discipline, performing what he is born for. He demonstrates the necessity and the reality of heroism in his everyday work. He has no glamour of war, love, and death about him. If there is any glamour about him, it is the glamour of the unglamorous. He has to rely on nothing but his own resources of patience, hope and bravery. He is alone, and he ventures beyond the normal boundary of safe fishing. He fights the biggest fish he has ever encountered, and he fights determinedly for hours, summoning all his strength and all his will. He speaks to the fish of his love and respect. "Fish", he said, " I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends" (*The Old Man and the Sea*,46). It is his wish to prove his worth against a worthy adversary, which sustains him in his time of distress. The sight of the fish, is a further spur, for here at last, before his eyes, is the enormous quarry. "I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures." (*The Old Man and the Sea*,56). If the Old Man wins, he will have proved his worth to himself once more which is the proof men need in order to continue the endurance contest; that is life. As the struggle grows more painful, the Old Man says: "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 more noble thing than you, brother. Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who. (*The Old Man and the Sea*, 82) Though his hands are sore and he is utterly exhausted, he does not give up the fight and ultimately succeed in harpooning the fish. The prize is his.

On a symbolic level, the killing of the giant marlin means attaining one's goal in life, a goal that may be very distant and the way to which is fraught with many hardships, obstacles, and dangers. The journey towards the goal causes the wayfarer much distress and

much pain. But the quest is a noble one and the seeker after the prize is fired by a Mighty purpose. The lacerated hands symbolize the rebuffs that a man suffers in the course' of his efforts to attain his ambition, while the prolonged resistance of the marlin shows that gaining a high objective is no easy a task. The Old Man wins a victory over the marlin by means of “resolution (will-power and persistence) and “tricks” (technique and strategy), and these are the means any man must adopt in order to attain any high objective.

The Old Man admires the behaviour and the dignity of the marlin, and this admiration is symbolic, of the fascination which the high objective of a man exercises upon him. In some ways the Old Man becomes identified with the marlin: certain common qualities bind them together. His quest of the marlin has no touch of enmity in it. Then there are certain sources of strength which the Old Man draws upon thoughts of the boy Manolin, recollections of the lions on African beaches, memories DiMaggio, the baseball champion, his, own exploit in defeating a negro at hand-wrestling. All these have a symbolic significance, A man has to fight the battle of life alone, but there are certain props he needs. No man can lead a life of complete isolation or alienation. Santiago is no Lieutenant Henry making a separate peace. Santiago needs the company of the boy and he needs the memories of, his own, youthful days. We must not forget the role that religion plays. Several times Santiago invokes the help of the Virgin and promises to say “But I will say ten our Fathers and Hail Marys that I should catch this fish and I promise to make a pilgrimage to the Virgin de Cobre if I catch him. That is a promise.”(The Old Man and the Sea,56) This must be regarded as a basic inner urge in every human being even though Santiago is not a “religious” man in any formal or dogmatic sense.

This part of the novel deals with Santiago’s fierce battle with the sharks. After Santiago has won the prize, there was an appearance of sharks. An hour later the first shark appeared. It was very big Mako shark which was able to swim as fast as the fastest fish in the sea besides being completely fearless. The old man got ready with his harpoon and made rope fast while he watched the sharks coming to attack the dead marlin. But Santiago full of determination to fight with any hurdle. He did not have much hope because his good fortune could not last forever. The sharks came and tore away a chunk of Marlin’s flesh just

then the old man hit on the sharks's head. Sharks had taken away about forty pounds of the Marlin's flesh and it had taken away Santiago's harpoon too. The old man was filled with deep regret at the loss. He did not want to look at the marlin anymore because its body had been mutilated. When the marlin had been attacked by the sharks, Santiago felt as if sharks had attacked the Old Man himself. It happened so because the old man loved Marlin and he killed it after eighty fifth day after great suffering. Santiago felt some satisfaction in thinking that he had killed that shark which had attacked his Marlin. His good fortune could not last very long. After some time other sharks began to attack Marlin. There was no way by which the old man could prevent other sharks from smelling the dead marlin. He felt that bad time was coming for him. Santiago had identified the new enemies as shovel –nosed sharks known as *Galanos*. They were hateful sharks, bad smelling scavengers as well as killers. After a little struggle the old man was able to kill both of them, but they had succeeded in tearing away a quarter of the best meat of the marlin. The old man thought that he was beaten by sharks because he had gone out too far in the sea. Having no harpoon, the old man now improvised a weapon by lashing his knife to the butt of one of his oars. Now he was not without arms. Sometimes he began to think about sin. But the old man thought that he had killed the sharks in his self –defense. The sharks prove to be an even more formidable enemy than the marlin. But Santiago does not lose heart by being helpless alone in the sea. In fact, Santiago's basic heroism comes out here to an even greater extent than in account of his struggle with the marlin. In his struggle with the marlin he proved himself victorious. In his fight with the sharks he suffers a defeat but it is defeat which, because of the massive and magnificent battle that the old man fights, is no way less than a victory. In other words it can be said that Santiago remains undefeated in spite of his defeat. Santiago's killing the first sharks reminds him again of the great DiMaggio. He wonders how DiMaggio would have liked the way in which he drove his harpoon into the sharks's brain.

When the Old Man reached the shore, the lights of "The Terrace" were out, and he knew that everybody was sleeping. There was no one to help him. He stepped out of the boat and fastened it to the rock. He removed the mast, furlled the sail and tied it. Carrying the mast and the sail on his shoulders he started climbing the rock to reach his shack. It was then he realized how tired he was. On the way to his shack he has to sit down five times to

rest. As soon as he entered his shack, he pulled the blanket over his shoulders and fell asleep. When old man was sleeping, the boy peeped into the shack. The boy had been coming each morning. Now seeing the old man's lacerated hands, he began to cry. Then he went out to bring some coffee for the old man. Many fishermen had now gathered round the old man's boat. One of them measured the length of the Marlin's skeleton. It was eighteen feet long from nose to tail. Nobody had caught such a big Marlin before.

In this way Santiago here again shows an indomitable will by virtue of which alone is he the victor in the midst of defeat. Santiago expresses his very motivational thought, "But man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated," (The Old Man and the Sea, 93). He says, "It is silly not to hope, he thought. Besides I believe it is a sin. I'll fight them until I die." (The Old Man and the Sea, 99) Such utterances of the Old Man shows that his spirit is invincible even though he admits that he has been beaten. The sharks symbolize all those forces which combine (may be, without any planning or designing on anybody's part) to take away from a man the fruits of his hard labour. The fact that the Old Man does not lose hope for the future and still dreams about the lions which is a symbol of his inner youth that is symbolically to be interpreted as Hemingway's assertion of the manliness of the individual. Indeed The Old Man and the Sea is a novel of affirmation, and Hemingway's purpose here is to assert the "Religion of Man" which means the sublimity of the human will and spirit.

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