



## Heroic impulses in Ernest Hemingway's the old man and the sea

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### Abstract

It is an established fact that Ernest Hemingway occupies a prominent and towering place among the twentieth century novelists. Hemingway's novel, *The Old Man and the Sea* has been considered as one of the prominent works of fiction that powerfully explores the heroic impulses through the central protagonist, Santiago who is an epitome of courage and determination. Santiago, through his heroic struggle against the natural forces, proves the idea that a man should not lose hope in the adverse circumstances even in his or her solitariness and alienation.

**Keywords:** Ernest Hemingway, alienation, protagonist, prominent

### Introduction

*The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway is generally considered as one of the best classics of world literature, which won Ernest Hemingway the Nobel Prize. The story is a mixture of indolence, pride and patience. Critics have dissected *The Old Man and the Sea* many times; still it remains an enigma- Who is the old man? Why is he so indifferent to earthly losses? And what about his relationships—with the boy, with the fish, with the sea? It is he, not any of the other fishermen, who make them all so important and different, so huge and beautiful. Without him, we would never have noticed the relationship between the sea and a human. The article mainly works on the relationships—between and among these four—the old man, the sea, the boy, and the fish. The authors have taken help from other references, but the main research is based on the text. The work at the end tries to bring out the very philosophy that was so vital in the old man's character, which made him so separate from the commonplace.

Ernest Hemingway occupies a prominent and towering place as a twentieth century novelist, as an artist per excellence because of his enduring popularity and supreme excellence. *The Old Man and the Sea* is Hemingway's short, but dexterously handled parable which may fairly be called a saga of endless human courage and endurance. There are many critics who disagree as to whether *The Old Man and the Sea* is a tragedy or not; it should be difficult for the average reader to settle the problem because the average readers are not to be led by subtleties or by abstruse considerations.

Hemingway's Santiago shares some grounds with Tennyson's Ulysses in more than one way as he is not an ordinary fisherman, but a superb craftsman who knows his business thoroughly, and always practices it with great skill. Except for some occasions, but short lived fumbles, he shows a good ability to undergo the trial and tribulations boldly.

Unlike Santiago of *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway's other characters like Bret Ashley and Robert Cohn in *The Sun Also Rises*, Frederick Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, and

Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, have been seen by critics as lost generation as is remarked by Dr. Varshney "alienated from the American society and try to abandon it." Unlike Henry and Jake, who are not sure of their aims, the old man, Santiago, is somewhat less disillusioned and sure of his aim, but, no doubt, he, too, feels sad and is aware of his old age. He acknowledges that the old people lose physical strength, and also know how coldly the world treats him as he says to himself: "one should be alone in his old age, but it is unavoidable."

Santiago does not look to any outside agency to come to him rescue, and provides him with physical strength. He draws moral strength by his own utterance addressed to himself while he is fighting with the unconquerable forces of nature after killing the fish, Marlin, he gets worried about its safety, and neither loses confidence nor overpowers himself by a pessimistic outlook of life.

In fact, *The Old Man and the Sea* is a representation of life as a struggle against unconquerable forces in which a kind of victory is possible. Santiago goes on striving positively and, thus, makes his failure a thing to be produced of; it is a defeat in one sense, but victory in another. His unflinching struggle, first with the fish and, then, with the sharks, and his surprising endeavour that he maintains passing through the ordeal, makes one to call him 'a strange old man.'

Thus, Santiago's reputation as a memorable heroic figure chiefly rests upon his uncompromising attitude even in the odd circumstances. Although, physically he has grown old, yet his resolution or will power is still undiluted even in the adverse circumstances. Santiago's endeavour to kill the fish parallels the struggle contained in the story of a spider and King Bruce, because like Bruce, he tries again and again without yielding to the adverse circumstances and hard times. He has an optimistic outlook and a positive approach towards life which are quite indispensable qualities for heroism. Like Santiago, the heart-rendering struggle for existence between man as an individual and the natural forces are found in indispensable expressions in John Keats' poetry

“Then on the shore of wide world I stand alone”

In modern fiction, it is Melville, Fitzgerald, Faulkner and Conrad who put considerable attention on the themes presented in Hemingway’s fictional works. Like Lord Jim, Santiago is also pitched into the dangerous ocean all alone and solitary pitted against the cruel forces of nature represented by fish the shark and in the bird who comes as a temptation to create some slackness in his concentration. The sharks are the symbol of evil representing evil forces against which man is always pitted.

Unlike Hemingway’s other protagonists, Santiago suffers neither illusion nor disillusion in the course of the novel, e.g., Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, is, no doubt, honest and bold, but he is disgusted with the war and, as a result of that, he bids farewell to arms in despair. On the contrary, the old man in *The Old and the Sea*, seems to be in no mood to compromise at all and, thus, never thinks of bidding farewell to the fish at any stage.

Fearlessness comes out of its own when one is free from attachment to wealth, reputation, health and so on, but true fearlessness comes when one is free from superstitions and delusion, pursues his formidable assignment whole heartedly, and his hopeful stances really amazing as S.T. Coleridge also points out:

“Where no hope is, life is a warning that only  
Serves to make us grieve when we are old”

Of all Hemingway’s fictional works, love occupies a pivotal place, and the present novel is no exception because like other characters in Hemingway’s novels such as Henry, Robert Jordan, Santiago and Mandolin, the love between Santiago and Manolin is of a special kind as many times, love in Hemingway’s fiction becomes a strength and acts as a fillip to cope with and also an ameliorating force.

The unrelenting courage, endless hope and fierce daring that Santiago exemplifies may seem to be unbelievable, but to those who are susceptible to intimidation and short sightedness, and the view that Santiago gets defeated is untrue. It appears difficult to rule out the view that Santiago’s struggle is itself greater than victory and, thus, like Ulysses, Santiago is an epitome of positive attitude.

In this way, through the present novel, Hemingway seems to say that man, in his individualism, his pride and his need, inevitably goes beyond his true place in the world and, thereby, brings violence and destruction on himself.

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