
Autobiographical Element in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952)

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ABSTRACT

Hemingway, for most of his stories, has borrowed material from his own life. The books are therefore autobiographical in nature. *The Old Man and the Sea* is based on Hemingway's experience of fishing in the Gulf-Stream. The identification between the author and the code hero Santiago is complete in this novel. The story is an interesting personal allegory. In Santiago's story, Hemingway has fictionalized his artistic goals, its difficulties, its torments and its challenges. Santiago, the old fisherman who sets about his business with care and precision, represents Hemingway. The conquest of the marlin is the victory of Hemingway's creative genius and the sharks are the critics who maul it. The book is a triumph and assertion of Hemingway's own work as a writer in the face of all obstacles and problems.

However, by making use of personal experience, Hemingway gives a universal message that it is not achievement that matters but aspiration. Santiago's message to the world is that while a man may grow old and lose his luck, he can still dare and keep on striving even in the teeth of opposition and thus make his failure a thing to be proud of – a kind of victory.

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Ernest Hemingway is a major American novelist of the 20th century. He was a remarkable man as well as a remarkable writer. He drew considerably from his own experiences for writing his novels and short-stories. Hemingway laid stress on experience for the purpose of creation. He told A.E. Hotchner: "You invent fiction but what you invent it out of is what counts. True fiction comes from everything you've ever known, ever seen, ever felt, ever learned" (112). So, most of Hemingway's novels are based on his experience and response to life.

The Old Man and the Sea is undoubtedly the most moving and heartening of Hemingway's novels. It is regarded as Hemingway's masterpiece and he got Nobel Prize for literature for this novel. The protagonist, Santiago, is a fisherman by profession and lives in a small village in Cuba. Geographically, Cuba is an island in the Caribbean whose main industry is fishing. Hemingway himself had lived in Cuba for a few years before the Fidel Castro Revolution obtaining intimate knowledge of the places that are described in *The Old Man and the Sea*. The story is based on an incident which Hemingway had described in *Esquire* in 1936.

Another time an old man fishing alone in a skiff out of Cabanas hooked a great marlin, that on the heavy sash-cord handing pulled the skiff far out to sea. Two days later the old man was picked up by a fisherman sixty miles to the eastward, the head and forward part of the marlin lashed alongside. What was left of this fish, less than half, weighed eight hundred pounds. The old man had stayed with him a day, a night, a day and another night while the fish swam deep and pulled the boat. When he had come up, the old man 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 until he was exhausted and the sharks had eaten all that they could hold. He was crying in the boat when the fisherman picked him up,

half-crazy from his loss and the sharks were still circling the boat. (White 253-254)

This account is the basis of Hemingway's masterpiece *The Old Man and the Sea*. This incident of an old man fighting a huge marlin alone on the vast sea kept developing in Hemingway's mind (when the *Esquire* article had appeared) till 1952 when the novel *The Old Man and the Sea* was finally published. A picture of Hemingway also appeared in an issue of *Life* magazine in September 1952. This picture showed Hemingway with a 'marlin' he had caught which was also destroyed by the sharks. All these formed an effective background to the development of the story of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

The hero Santiago, an old man Cuban fisherman, has spent a life-time struggle against a fierce sea. He gives an impression of strength and ruggedness.

The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck....and his hands had deep creased scars from handling heavy fish in the cords. But none of these scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert. (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 1)

The old man seems to have run out of his luck. For the last eighty-four days he has gone out in his boat but has not caught any fish. Santiago's sail was like the old man himself - patched with age and furled with use.

Santiago may be luckless, but he is not defeated. "Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same colour as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated" (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 1). A young boy named Manolin is Santiago's comrade and best friend. For the first forty days, Manolin keeps the old man's company. Then the boy's parents forbid him to accompany Santiago because he (Santiago) has become *salao*, the worst kind of unlucky man. So, Manolin stops going with the old man on his fishing expeditions. He tells the old man:

'It was papa made me leave. I am a boy and I must obey him.'

'I know,' the old man said. 'It is quite normal.'

'He hasn't much faith.'

‘No,’ the old man said. ‘But we have. Haven’t we?’

‘Yes,’ the boy said. (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 2)

Thus, the boy has faith in the old man. The old man also knows that the boy has tremendous faith in him.

Although the boy doesn’t accompany the old man on fishing trips, he cares a lot about the old man and is devoted to him. He brings him food and bait, and is always ready to help him. He wishes to serve the old man in any way he can. He has great admiration for Santiago’s qualities as a fisherman. “There are many good fishermen and some great ones. But there is only you” he says (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 12). The boy became an apprentice to the old man at the age of five. “The old man had taught the boy to fish and the boy loved him” (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 2). The boy is thus a kind of disciple of the old man and feels greatly attached to him. Since he has been with Santiago from the time he was five years old, he views him as his teacher, master, and father-figure.

About this novel, Hemingway remarked: “I tried to make a real old man, a real boy, a real sea, and a real fish and real sharks. But if I made them good and true enough, they would mean many things. The hardest thing is to make something really true and sometime truer than true” (Carlos Baker, *Writer as Artist*, 332).

So, the relationship of Santiago and Manolin may be interpreted as father-son relationship. Santiago is Dr. Hemingway and Manolin is Ernest. Dr. Hemingway also had taught Ernest Hemingway some important lessons regarding the appreciation of nature and art of fishing and hunting -- interests which were to be the sources for the rest of the son’s life. Miller writes: “Dad particularly enjoyed Ernest’s companionship, especially teaching him about folk lore and the fine points of swimming, fishing and hunting as well which they did a lot of together up at Wallon Lake during the summer” (19). Hemingway worshipped his father like a hero and was very much attached to his father right till the end. Baker, writing of Ernest’s last visit to his father in the year 1928, remarks: “He was worried about his father who had seemed worse than ever, depressed in spirits and grey in the face in Oak Park in October. On the north bound train he wrote him an encouraging letter....” (Carlos Baker, *Life Story*, 198).

Similarly, in the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, the boy feels quite solicitous about the old man's welfare and attends to his physical needs. "Keep warm old man" he said. "Remember we are in September" (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 8). The boy is anxious to make sure that the old man does not remain hungry. He says to the old man, "You will not fish without eating while I'm alive"(Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 9). Early in the morning when the old man is preparing to leave for his fishing trip, the boy gets some coffee for him. Then he goes to get sardines and other fresh baits for the old man. Finally, he wishes the old man good luck. Later, when the old man returns, the boy sees his wounded hands and begins to cry. He urges the old man to get well fast "for there is much that I can learn and you can teach me everything" (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 92). Thus, here the boy wants to learn everything from the old man.

In the novel, Santiago also enjoys Manolin's company very much. When Manolin brings food and drink for Santiago, the old man accepts them gratefully. During his fishing expeditions the old man thinks of the boy a number of times. Indeed, the boy is never absent from the old man's thoughts for long. The old man thinks of the boy when the huge marlin he has hooked begins to tow his boat. "I wish I had a boy," the old man said aloud (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 29). When the fish starts jumping and making more trouble, the old man realizes still more keenly how useful the boy would have proved to be: "If the boy were here he would wet the coils of line, he thought. Yes. If the boy were here. If the boy were here" (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 59).

At last the old man's battle with the marlin ends and during the course of his return voyage, he thinks of the boy before thinking of anybody else. "I hope no one has been too worried. There is only the boy to worry, of course. But I am sure he would have confidence" (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 84).The boy might worry, but he will not worry too much because of his confidence in the old man's capacity and skill.

Thus, the relationship of Santiago and Manolin proves that both are attached to each other in the same way as Dr. Hemingway and Ernest Hemingway were. The love of Manolin for Santiago is that of a disciple for a master teaching the art of fishing. It is also the love of a son for an adopted father.

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway has, fictionalized his own position as a writer. When Hemingway began writing this novel, he attempted the difficult task of proving himself the champion he had been when he had written *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. Ten years had passed before he could write *Across the Rivers and into the Trees*. But the novel did not prove a great success. Now he could not depend on his past successes. He had to prove himself again and be the champion. Philip Young rightly says: "It is not so much that Santiago was a fisherman in whom the writer saw himself; rather that Hemingway was a writer who thought he could disguise himself as Santiago" (275).

In the novel, Hemingway writes: "The thousand times that he had proved it meant nothing. Now he was proving it again. Each time was a new time and he never thought about the past when he was doing it" (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 46). These words about Santiago are fully applicable to Hemingway himself as a writer.

Santiago leaves all his co-fishermen way behind and is far out alone on the sea. "The sun rose thinly from the sea and the old man could see other boats, low on the water and well in toward the shore, spread out across the current" (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 19). In Santiago's determination to go far into the sea, we see Hemingway's daring soul seeking new experience, reaching out towards the unknown while other writer's remained satisfied with the region within sight where it is safer and easier to fish. The novel marks "a new beginning where he tries again for something that is beyond all attainment....something that has never been done or that others have tried and failed" (French, 162). Hence the book is a triumph and assertion of Hemingway's own work as a writer in the face of all obstacles and frustrations.

Santiago, like Hemingway, shows himself to be a seasoned and skilful fisherman. His knowledge of the sea and its creatures is vast and he has acquired it first hand. He always insists on technical precision. For instance, the author tells us how Santiago handles the fishing lines: "He kept them straighter than anyone did, so that at each level in the darkness of the stream there would be a bait waiting exactly where he wished it to be for any fish that swam there" (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 19). When something pulls at the line on the eighty-fifth day of his fishing, he can guess that it must be a big catch. "This far out, he must

be huge in this month, he thought” (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 26). One of his comments on the weather is: “If there is a hurricane you always see the signs of it in the sky for days ahead, if you are at sea. They do not see it ashore because they do not know what to look for, he thought.... But we have no hurricane coming now” (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 42).

All this knowledge of sea and weather came from Hemingway’s experience of fishing in the Gulf-Stream.

Santiago is not an entirely new character in Hemingway’s fiction. He is a development of the code hero as depicted by Hemingway in some of his previous novels. In fact, Santiago is the code hero grown older and wiser. He illustrates the values that Hemingway cherished and glorified all his life - courage, dignity, honour, dedication and endurance. Santiago feels isolated and alone on the sea, but he refuses to be defeated. He dreams of lions and of doing heroic deeds in order to restore his respect in the community. When later he catches the giant fish, he is determined to master it to prove his work both to himself and to his fellow fishermen. It is his wish to prove his worth against a worthy adversary which sustains him in his time of distress. He wishes to show to the marlin what sort of a man he is. “But I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures” (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 46).

When the fish has been killed, the old man says, “I think the great DiMaggio would be proud of me today” (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 70). But victory is not completely his, for the sharks set upon him, tear the flesh off his prize. His fight against the sharks coming so soon after his hard-won victory makes him despair for a moment. “It was too good to last,” he thought. “I wish it had been a dream now and that I had never hooked the fish” (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 75). But the real nature of the man asserts itself the next moment and Santiago shows the same quality and capacity for action in dealing with the sharks. He mouths Hemingway’s philosophy: “But man is not made for defeat,” he said. “A man can be destroyed but not defeated” (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 75). This is a remarkable expression of the faith of the old man (and of Hemingway) in the dignity of man. What the old man means is that a man can never be defeated out of his will to go on—until he falls. It is in this spirit that he gets ready to fight more sharks. He says, “I will fight them until I die”

(Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*,8) and he fights on till the marlin is stripped bare of all flesh and there is nothing left for sharks to eat.

The old man has been defeated, but his spirit remains unconquered. He feels no great sorrow. The thought of home now sustains him and wearily he tows his boat home. When he asks himself what has beaten him, his reply is: "Nothing. I went out too far" (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 88).

Reaching his shack Santiago throws himself on to his bed and falls asleep again. "He was still sleeping on his face and the boy was sitting by him watching him. The old man was dreaming of the lions" (Ernest Hemingway, *Old Man*, 92). In other words, the old man is in close proximity with both the boy and the lions which symbolize his youthful strength and which are a source of inspiration to him at difficult times. Thus, the novel doesn't end on a note of gloom and despair, but on a note of hope and optimism. After writing the novel *The Old Man and the Sea* Hemingway remarked: "It is as though I had gotten finally what I had been working for all my life" (Young, 131).

To sum up, *The Old Man and the Sea*, no doubt, is based on Hemingway's personal life and contains autobiographical elements in it. However, through this novel Hemingway has presented his reverence for life's struggle and his faith in the nobility of human striving. Santiago is the mature Hemingway but more than that he represents the man who has manliness. The story of this Cuban fisherman declares to the world that a simple man is capable of decency, dignity and even heroism in the face of suffering and obstacles and frustrations.

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