

The Relevance of the Major Themes of Earnest Hemmingway's Novel "The Old Man and the Sea" to the Modern Man: A Critical Perspective

Shridhar Bhat*

Assistant Professor of English, Dr. G. Shankar Govt. Women's First Grade College & PG Study Centre, Ajjarkadu, Udupi, Karnataka

Abstract – This paper intends to throw light on the relevance of the major themes of Earnest Hemmingway's famous novel "The Old Man and the Sea" to the modern man. Santiago, the protagonist of the novel who displays great power to withstand hunger, pain and isolation, succeeds in hooking a marlin and fights with it in spite of his old age, exhaustion and pain. Unfortunately, he has to fight with the sharks as well. Finally, when the sharks eat away the marlin and leave him nothing but its carcass as he returns to shore. But still he displays a sense of contentment and shows the readers how they have to tolerate odds and despair in life. The novelist uses splendid imagery to show that unlike any other fish, the marlin was not just a fish but rather a spiritual entity from Santiago's point of view. Marlin is depicted as his worthy opponent. Eventually, he kills the marlin considering that they are now equals and that the marlin is just like his brother. He suffers from a sense of guilt and loneliness for sailing farther into the deep sea, just to kill fish that he somehow loved closely. The novel's punch line is that "a man can be destroyed but not defeated".

Key Words: Courage, Defeat, Heroism, Marlin, Odds, Positivity, Rejuvenation

-----X-----

1. INTRODUCTION

Santiago, the protagonist of the novel, has not been successful in catching any fish for eighty-four days and hence suffers from hunger, pain and isolation in the beginning of the novel. As a fisherman who has caught nothing for eighty-four long days, Santiago is desperate to prove his ability. He does not yield to his old age or any other odds but he moves farther into the vast sea to try his luck one day. He succeeds in hooking a marlin and fights with it in spite of his old age, exhaustion and pain. Unfortunately, he has to fight with the sharks as well. Whenever he is threatened with despair in a tough situation, he rejuvenates himself by praying God and recollecting memories of his youth. Thus he displays great courage and positivity even in dark and utterly terrible situations. So finally, when the sharks eat away the marlin and leave him nothing but its carcass as he returns to shore, he does not blame the sharks for it. He admits the fact that it is his mistake to have gone beyond the limits, far away into the blue sea. He only claims that it is not important that he brings the marlin home but that he wins the battle, which is more significant. Santiago's fight with the marlin and the sharks represents every man's battle to survive. No man can avoid struggle but how he fights against the odds threatening him is what defines his calibre.

2. DISCUSSION

Santiago, as a fisherman regards the sea as a woman who is kind enough and presents great favours. Hence he adores all creatures in the sea which lead dangerous and uncertain lives. His love for the marlin can be felt when he asserts that he must capture it for his pride, and not for satisfying his physical need.

The novelist uses splendid imagery to show that unlike any other fish, the marlin was not just a fish but rather a spiritual entity from Santiago's point of view. Marlin is depicted as his worthy opponent. Eventually, he kills the marlin considering that they are now equals and that the marlin is just like his brother. He suffers from a sense of guilt and loneliness for sailing farther into the deep sea, just to kill fish that he somehow loved closely. Baskett gives a detailed analysis of *The Old Man and the Sea* and highlights how Santiago is rarely referred to as "Santiago" but often referred to as "the old man" (Baskett, 1975). He finds several biblical allusions in the novel. Many comparisons are made between passages in the bible and Santiago's dreams and his thought-processes throughout the novel.

It is noteworthy that the protagonist often dreams of lions on the beach. The first time he has such a dream

is on the eve of his fishing expedition. Again, it happens when he sleeps amidst his fight with the marlin. Again, it occurs at end of the novel as the lions appear as cubs, which symbolizes his youth. The lions signify nobility and great strength. The dream of lions fills Santiago with motivation and vitality which push him forward to accomplish his goal. Santiago's dreams signify life's recurring nature, existence of opposing forces of nature indicating co-existence of love and hate, life and death, and destruction and regeneration.

The crucifixion imagery lifts up Santiago to the level of Jesus Christ. Santiago is just as patient and humble like Christ. The image of Santiago struggling uphill with his mast on his shoulders reminds us of Christ's walk towards Calvary. Similarly, when Santiago eventually lies down on his bed, with his bleeding arms stretched apart, we see the image of Christ on the cross.

The novel centres around the main theme of heroism. Santiago shows us how to withstand hunger, pain and isolation. Even when the sharks eat away the marlin he had caught, he does not blame them; he acknowledges that he was at fault to have ventured far into the sea and gone beyond his limits. Santiago displays unlimited potentialities when faced with danger. His potential is proved when he hooks the giant marlin. However, the outcome is less significant as things were out of his control. Finally, it is not really important that he brings the marlin home; the important thing is that he emerges as the winner of the battle, and after the great struggle he is hailed as a hero.

Santiago's struggle symbolizes every man's fight for survival. Death is the inevitable end and no man can escape death. It is notable that through Santiago's struggle, the author illustrates that escaping from death is not the prime concern. Santiago utters the words, "a man can be destroyed but not defeated" towards the end of his deadly fight with the marlin. To put it in other words, it is not the victory over the unavoidable that defines a man. Rather, it is his struggle against the inevitable that defines him (Clinton Burhans, 1960).

3. CONCLUSION

The novel "The Old Man and the Sea" is a compelling story with a powerful message for modern man. It explores the significance of a man's existence and the factors which make his life worth-living. It brings out the vital importance of qualities such as tenacity, pride, self-respect, determination and dreams which come a long way in materialising his goals even in the face of inevitable struggle (Philip Melling, 2006). Santiago's indomitable will and unconquerable spirit serve as an example of the mind-set towards life expected of every human being on earth- a mind-set which is ready to accept challenges in life and never to yield to obstacles. The conclusion is that victory over the inevitable odds does not define a man; it is his

indomitable struggle against the inevitable that defines him.

REFERENCES

- Baskett, Sam S. (1975). "Toward a 'Fifth Dimension' in the Old Man and the Sea." *The Centennial Review* 19.4: pp. 269-286.
- Burhans Clinton S. (1960). "The Old Man and the Sea: Hemingway's Tragic Vision of Man." *American Literature* 31.4: pp. 442-448.
- Melling, Philip (2006). "Cultural Imperialism, Afro-Cuban Religion, and Santiago's Failure in Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea." *Hemingway Review* 26.1: pp. 8-28.

Corresponding Author

Shridhar Bhat*

Assistant Professor of English, Dr. G. Shankar Govt. Women's First Grade College & PG Study Centre, Ajjarkadu, Udipi, Karnataka

sridhargbhat@gmail.com