

# Heroism and love in the old man and the sea essay sample

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



This essay is a thematic approach to the novel by Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*. It discusses in particular how the author developed the themes of heroism and love in the novel as evident in the characters, dialogues, and imagery. In an attempt to exemplify the themes of heroism and love, this paper shall cite quotations from the novel, and discuss how each of them contributes to the success of the author in magnifying the truths in life that relate to heroism and love.

The central themes of heroism and love in the novel are basically literary themes of power. These two themes are said to be themes of power for “they speak ultimately... to the higher understanding, or reason, but always through affections of pleasure and sympathy” (De Quincey 1848). Reading the novel, the readers are moved to feel what the characters feel.

First, the author is able to move us to compassion for Santiago due to his misfortune, then we share the pleasure when Santiago finally catches the fish with his bait, then finally, we feel sympathy as sharks attack Santiago, and devour the flesh of his catch. Although the two themes are revealed in the novel, the theme of heroism is more emphasized as it is employed in relation to the main character, Santiago who longs to win over his opponent, the fish. Eventually, however, we see that his greatest opponent is not the fish itself nor nature, but he himself—his pride which leads to his defeat.

The theme of love is mostly associated with the character of Manolin. In the novel, we see the love shared between a teacher and a student. In addition, there is also love of nature, adventure, and the unknown which will be explicated later.

### Heroism in the Novel

The main character in the novel is Santiago, an old fisherman who spends eighty-four days initially, waiting for his biggest catch. Hemingway referred to him as one of his code heroes for Santiago displays characteristics of courage and endurance under a tight or even painful event. The code hero, as defined by Hemingway, acts in accordance with the code or the law, always bearing in mind justice and poise. Thus, Santiago tells himself, " But I must have the confidence and I must be worthy of the great DiMaggio who does all things perfectly even with the pain of the bone spur in his heel" (p. 68).

He does not turn away from battles and does not accept defeat. It is of this view that Santiago behaves throughout the novel. He does not give up although tired and weary by waiting, he does not lose his hope of having his biggest catch even though this means sailing an extra mile to the sea. The time he spends waiting for his catch and for it to tarry are scenes portraying the sternness and inability of Santiago to accept defeat. Moreover, he is not disheartened by the painful words from his neighbors who jeer and laugh at him. Instead, he is determined to prove himself and test his will.

However, Santiago does not do all these for anyone in particular. He does this for himself, for his own satisfaction and gratification, for he exists in his own world. As such, we see a character full of pride and self worth. With such great pride, he takes his own battle with nature, and was determined to skill his catch although he feels sympathy for it, thinking, " He is my brother. But I must kill him and keep strong to do it. "(p. 59). However, his battle with

himself—his best and real opponent is not resolved, for his pride endures until the end. Thus, at the end of the story, the old man says, “ A man is not made for defeat...a man can be destroyed but not defeated.” (p. 103)

Santiago is a hero in that he possesses the strength of a hero. Although he is old, he still manages to fight the sharks and capture the fish. At times, the strength of a person comes out under pressure, like when he has to fight the fish and the sharks. However, as many heroes, Santiago has a limitation. As we see in the end, he is defeated in that his catch is consumed by his enemies, the sharks. Aside from strength, Santiago possesses the ability to predict the weather. “ There will be a bad weather...in four days” (p. 80). This ability is only common to wise men or the immortals.

As a fisherman, we expect Santiago to catch fish and sell it to the market. This practically means that he agrees to killing and eating the fish. However, when he catches the fish and struggles with it, a sudden transformation occurs to him and he feels a certain equality with his catch:

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. (p. 92)

In saying these lines, Santiago borders on the ludicrous submission to the sublime. This way, he deconstructs the hierarchy by which creatures live<sup>[1]</sup>. He submits himself to the greatness of nature in front of him, and welcomes the idea of death. He finds a match with the fish, that he is ready to lose his life.

As Santiago's agony is prolonged, he finds himself not above or greater than nature, but one with it, which suggests a person's submission to the realm of nature. This idea of submitting oneself to nature or to its power has its roots in the Romantic period of American literature. Following this idea, we may add that the adventure of Santiago happens in September when "the great fish come[s]." In a similar view, the month of September is the start of autumn, the season often associated with melancholy and death. Therefore, we could say that Santiago sails out bravely to challenge his fate, and on it he is prepared to die.

In another part, we see that Santiago develops the thinking that people are not worthy to eat his catch because they do not know the worth of the fish which involves the vigor and effort of the fisherman who catches it. To illustrate, Santiago says, "There is no one worthy of eating him from the manner of his behavior and his great dignity" (p. 75). Likewise, this statement has a connotation referring to Christ. Santiago uses a metaphor to mean that the people are not worthy of eating him (Christ)—as in the communion—from the manner of Christ's behavior and great dignity.

Even though the old man has become a subject of ridicule in their village, Manolin, his young companion still remains faithful to him for he is the boy's hero and teacher. Manolin looks up to him with sympathy and love.

According to some critics, this image of a teacher is elevated to the image of Christ, and thus discipleship for Manolin. In the novel, Santiago is depicted as a Christ-like hero as he is seen as an outcast, a man who does not share others' regard for material wealth.

Instead, he behaves in an opposite way in relation to other fishermen who are after material gains. For him, the prize is to be able to find adventure in what he does. Similarly, Christ, behaved in opposition to men in his time. He mingled with the outcast, the sick and the poor while he was expected by the Jews to reign in a palace as how a king would have ruled. Furthermore, we see Hemingway's Christ-like hero in Santiago as he elaborated it in the scene where the old man's hand is cut with the fishing cable during his battle with the fish—reminding us of the nailing of Jesus on the cross.

While a lot of criticisms in our times mention about the Christ-like hero in Santiago, it is also important to look into the archetypal images that make up this hero[2]. According to Carl Jung's archetypes, the hero is a person who bravely overcomes great difficulty in order to realize his destiny. He could be described as a role-model, urging each of us to go ahead and pursue our own quest. In the novel, Santiago's quest for adventure and greatness is established. He accomplishes this with the help of Manolin who believes in what he can do. Also, the consequences that he encounters lead to his self-realization of his place in the world.

In dreaming about the lions on the beach, we may think that the hero in this novel, just like Odysseus, Oedipus, or Hercules has shortcomings. In the novel, Santiago dreams thrice of lions on the beach, and he expresses the fear he had when he was a child. Thus, he tells Manolin, " When I was your age I was before the mast on a square-rigged ship and that ship ran to Africa and I have seen lions on the beaches in the evening" (p. 17). Indeed, there are no lions on beaches, thus the lions could be a metaphor for people who

are trying to test their courage in the middle of the sea. Then we may also opine that the hero refers to himself as one of the lions who sail out to the sea, unmindful of the danger their journey could bring.

The time element “ evening” could likewise suggest his own adventure which will occur later in his lifetime, when he has grown old waiting for the biggest catch of his life, his greatest achievement. Africa could mean home or paradise to the lions, thus it foreshadows Santiago’s going back to dust (dying) and coming home to paradise (heaven). Although in the end there is nothing left of Santiago but Manolin’s friendship, within himself, Santiago is still full of hope, and still dreaming of other adventures, or “ lions on the beach.

Just like other heroes in epics, Santiago possesses the quality of immortality. He is made immortal in Manolin, for his legacy lives in the young man through the old man’s teachings.

### Love in the Novel

The theme of love is more evident in Manolin, the boy who serves as a companion to Santiago, who remains faithful to him although reprimanded by his father due to the misfortune of the old man having no catch for eighty four days. Although Manolin appears only in the beginning and at the end of the novel, his presence is important in suggesting the theme of love. In the story, he makes sure that the man has some food to eat, and takes some rest without being disturbed.

Manolin presents the image of a loyal follower whose presence fills the emptiness in the old man's life. They share a God-disciple relationship where one benefits from the other—Santiago serves as an inspiration to Manolin, that one day the old man may be able to attain greatness by having a big catch. Similarly, the disciples of Christ awaited the day when he would rule. Until that time, the disciples had to abandon their loved ones to follow Christ, so does Manolin when he decides to sail with the old man despite the consequences.

In the same way, the existence of Manolin in Santiago's life creates in the old man a responsibility to prove his worth, be courageous, and continue with his struggles. In doing so, the boy serves as the force that binds Santiago with life, the fulcrum that pulls him to reality for he seems to be lost in his own affairs:

He no longer dreamed of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor of his wife. He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach. They played like young cats in the dusk and he loved them as he loved the boy. He never dreamed about the boy. (p. 25)

#### Love of Nature, Adventure, and the Unknown

Together with the love of a student to his teacher, there are also traces of the love of nature and the unknown in the character of Santiago. He beholds the unseen beauty of the fish he has caught, although for him, its beauty is actually his own taste of triumph over his opponent:



Then the fish came alive, with his death in him, and rose high out of the water showing all his great length and width and all his power and his beauty. He seemed to hang in the air above the old man in the skiff. Then he fell into the water with a crash that sent spray over the old man and over all of the skiff.

Overall, in the descriptions Hemingway used, we see the incredulous love of nature vividly explored in the novel. His descriptions of the beach and the sea which are typified also in the eyes of Santiago present the beauty of nature and the old man's love for it. Thus, he says, " Fish, I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends." (p. 54)

If there is anything common between the two characters, it is their love for adventure and triumph. Santiago dreams about the lions on the beaches of Africa while Manolin shares the journey of the old man in trying to find a good catch. Certainly, the need for adventure of the young boy is satisfied not with the " lucky boat" but with the adventures afforded by Santiago. The boy tells him, " There are many good fishermen and some great ones. But there is only one you." The adventures we refer to include the misfortunes of the old man—the times when they did not have any catch, and all the waiting.

As a young lad, Manolin's curiosity is more fed by the mystery that he perceives in Santiago and their journeys, and not only by earning a living from a day's fishing. Also, just like any boy, as Manolin grows up, he tries to find someone he can mostly identify with and in the journey he makes, his

imagination is more challenged by the adventures of the old man whom he considers his teacher. In the end, we see that Santiago will still live in the eyes of the boy and his adventures will continue.

Moreover, with the way Manolin serves Santiago, it is assuring that the image of Santiago to Manolin creates in the boy the identity he longs to attain when he grows old. The boy identifies more with him than he could with his father or any teacher. As he grows older, he shares the attitude of Santiago as he utters, "The hell with luck ... I'll bring the luck with me ... I still have much to learn" (p. 125). In taking with him the identity and thoughts of his teacher, Manolin immortalizes the character of Santiago.

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[1] See Gen 1: 28.

[2] See also Carl Jung's archetypal heroes.