

The old man and the sea: a man can be destroyed, but never defeated

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The Old Man and the Sea

“ A man can be destroyed but never defeated”. That was what Ernest Hemingway, one of the most popular writers in the twentieth century, said in his long nights at a bar. And it is precisely the motto of his novella *The Old Man and the Sea*. Santiago is an old and poor fisherman in a small Cuban town called Cojimar. For a long time, for longer than he can even remember, he was not able to catch a fish. He lives in a little shack, sandy floor, no kitchen. Every day he goes out to sea in his little sail boat and every day he returns with nothing. But one day he decides it is enough. He packs his little boat with a few gallons of water, his line and goes off to sea at dusk. He plans to go far out to catch a big fish.

Santiago soon hooks a marlin, which initially he thinks weighs over 1, 000 pounds. Then starts an epic fight between man and beast, between an old man and a powerful fish.

The Old Man and the Sea is not a story about an old man fishing a marlin. It is a story about how a man can be destroyed, but never defeated. A man like Santiago will prefer to be killed before being defeated, be that hunger for not catching a fish in a long time or by a fish, whom although he thinks is more powerful, he knows is less intelligent. Santiago is a hero not because he catches a big marlin, but because he goes beyond.

This novel is a parable of the macho man Hemingway always wrote about. In Santiago one can see Robert Jordan, the main character of *For Whom the Bell Tolls*; Jake Barnes, of *The Sun Also Rises*; Harry Morgan, of *To Have and*

Have Not; and Frederic Henry, of *A Farewell to Arms*. In fact, Santiago and all these characters are Hemingway, or at least the public image Hemingway wanted to show the world.

The Old Man and the Sea is a story about manhood as it was interpreted in the twentieth century. It is a manhood that is broken inside, that is dark, but callous on the outside, where men apparently are big machos, but on the inside as soft as a baby.

One can see that on the letters Hemingway sent to his friends. He was sensible and sensitive and suffered of mood swings that made him vulnerable. In Mary Welsh's autobiography (she was Hemingway's fourth and last wife), she narrated all Hemingway's personality problems and his mental illness.

It seems as if *The Old Man and the Sea* was Hemingway's last effort to show his alter ego (Hemingway killed himself ten years after writing this book, and critics argue it was the last great book he wrote). Santiago was a fisherman, just like Hemingway, and Santiago fished in the same sea than Hemingway.

Death is a vital part of the story and of the Hemingway literature. All his books have death somewhere: a good friend of Robert Jordan dies, Frederic Henry's wife and child die, Harry Morgan's skipper dies. Santiago does not die (at least the open ending does not lead to that), but the struggle between him and the marlin does lead the reader to think that Santiago will eventually die in the struggle. Eventually Santiago kills the marlin and drags him down to the beach, but another death menace reappears: sharks.

Santiago fights the sharks, but they eat the marlin and leave only the skeleton. The skeleton interestingly resembles Santiago's old body, shattered by a hard life in the sea.

War is another important characteristic of Hemingway's life and literature. He was a soldier during World War I and was hurt in the Italian front. He then worked as a journalist and reporter in the Spanish Civil War and the World War II. As with his personal life, Hemingway's characters have also been surrounded by war. *The Sun Also Rises*, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and *A Farewell to Arms* all occur during war or post-war periods. Even though *The Old Man and the Sea* does not, the struggle between the old man and the marlin resembles war. It is a war between a man and an animal, between a man and his fate.

This brilliant novel is a perfectly balanced story, where Hemingway's terse prose shines. There is nothing extra, nothing misses, both in respect to the story and to the craftsmanship of the writing. *The Old Man and the Sea* has won the Pulitzer Prize and probably made Hemingway en route to winning the Nobel Prize in 1954. This is a book for kids, teens and adults. Every time there will be a different meaning.