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Endurance, Dignity and Moral Heroism: Santiago's Existential Journey in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*

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Abstract

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* presents a profound exploration of human endurance, moral courage, and self-realization. Through Santiago, an aging Cuban fisherman, Hemingway constructs a narrative in which existential and ethical triumph outweigh material success. Santiago's eighty-four-day struggle with the marlin, culminating in its destruction by sharks, exemplifies the tension between human aspiration and the indifferent forces of nature. This paper argues that Santiago's journey constitutes a discovery of self through suffering, labor, and moral perseverance. By examining the novella's naturalistic framework, existential underpinnings, and Christian symbolism, the study asserts that Hemingway redefines heroism as ethical resilience, demonstrating that dignity resides in unwavering effort. Close textual analysis, supported by critical scholarship, positions Santiago as both a culturally specific and universal emblem of human fortitude, offering a model for understanding heroism beyond conventional definitions of victory.

Keywords: Santiago, Moral Heroism, Existentialism, Naturalism, Man versus Nature, Christian Symbolism, Ethical Endurance, Human Dignity, American Modernism, Self-Discovery.

Introduction

Ernest Hemingway is widely recognized as a master of twentieth-century American literature. Through his distinctive "iceberg theory" of writing, he cultivated a prose style that is deceptively simple yet morally and psychologically intricate (Baker 305). His novella *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) epitomizes these qualities, presenting an intricate meditation on human endurance, moral courage, and self-discovery. Awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1953 and the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954, the novella captures the existential and ethical dimensions of labor and struggle through the story of Santiago, an aging Cuban fisherman whose life is defined more by perseverance than material success.

The novella recounts Santiago's eighty-four-day streak of unproductive fishing, culminating in the capture of a marlin of extraordinary size and the subsequent destruction of the fish by sharks. While this plot may seem simple, the narrative operates as an extended meditation on moral heroism, ethical integrity, and the meaning of human endeavor. This paper contends that Santiago's apparent failure embodies a profound moral and existential victory, demonstrating that heroism lies not in external reward but in the resilience and ethical resolve of the self.

Santiago exemplifies the existential notion that meaning is generated through action and perseverance rather than external validation. His assertion, "Man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated"

(Hemingway 103), foregrounds an ethic of moral and existential perseverance that parallels the philosophies of Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, though Hemingway did not explicitly affiliate with them. Santiago's identity is forged through isolation, labor, and confrontation with adversity, establishing his worth independently of societal recognition.

Carlos Baker identifies Santiago as a "code hero," a figure whose valor is measured not by conquest but by discipline, resilience, and moral integrity (Baker 312). Unlike conventional heroes who achieve glory through external success, Santiago embodies modern heroism rooted in ethical perseverance and existential determination. His struggle exemplifies the philosophical argument that human dignity is measured through effort and ethical consistency rather than material accumulation or social validation (Meyers 489).

Santiago's relationship with the villagers further emphasizes this existential heroism. They deem him a failure because he has not caught fish for eighty-four consecutive days, equating material success with personal worth. Hemingway critiques this superficial measure of human value, demonstrating that authentic heroism and moral dignity emerge from internal consistency and ethical action, independent of societal judgment (Young 121).

The novella situates Santiago within a universe governed by indifferent natural forces. Santiago's reverence for the sea, whom he calls *la mar*, reflects a sophisticated understanding of humanity's precarious position in nature (Hemingway 29).

The sea functions simultaneously as sustainer and adversary, mirroring the naturalist tradition exemplified by Émile Zola and Jack London. Human effort confronts environmental constraints, yet victory is moral and ethical rather than material.

The marlin, Santiago's worthy adversary, embodies both natural challenge and ethical significance. By calling the fish his "brother" (Hemingway 75), Santiago affirms a moral and spiritual kinship with the natural world. Philip Young observes that the novella's conflict is "less about domination and more about proving worth through ordeal" (Young 121). Santiago's endurance and strategic engagement with the marlin reflect a conception of mastery rooted in ethical struggle rather than conquest.

Sharks, as agents of inevitable destruction, underscore the limitations of human control over nature. Santiago's failure to preserve the marlin intact reinforces the naturalist theme: the universe operates independently of human desires. Yet Hemingway depicts Santiago's moral and existential dignity as intact, suggesting that human triumph is measured in ethical and psychological terms, not material outcome.

Hemingway integrates rich Christian symbolism within Santiago's struggle, linking physical labor and moral perseverance to spiritual dimensions. Santiago's injured palms evoke the stigmata, and his arduous journey mirrors Christ bearing the cross. After returning home, Santiago collapses "with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up" (Hemingway 122), visually reinforcing crucifixion imagery. Santiago's devotions—reciting "ten Hail Marys and ten Our Fathers" (Hemingway 65)—place ethical action within a spiritual context. However, Hemingway's treatment of religion is practical: Santiago's faith manifests through ethical labor, perseverance, and moral contemplation rather than ritual alone. Meyers notes that Santiago embodies "a Christ-like endurance purified through suffering" (Meyers 489).

Santiago's dreams of lions function as symbolic markers of vitality and moral integrity, representing enduring courage and ethical strength despite physical decline (Baker 325). Christian imagery, existential reflection, and naturalistic observation interweave to portray a morally and psychologically resonant hero. Santiago's quest is also an ethical exploration of sustenance and human responsibility. The fish he pursues is simultaneously a source of food and a moral symbol. Calling the marlin "brother" and deliberating its humane death illustrates Santiago's ethical engagement with nature (Hemingway 75).

Santiago's mentorship of Manolin exemplifies the transmission of ethical and practical knowledge. Instructing the boy in fishing and providing sustenance demonstrates that labor is a moral and relational practice (Mellow 542). Hemingway thus situates the human struggle for survival within a framework of ethical responsibility, emphasizing the moral stakes of labor and the dignity inherent in sustaining oneself and others.

Hemingway's narrative techniques reinforce the novella's ethical and existential dimensions. The limited third-person perspective and stream-of-consciousness passages provide insight into Santiago's inner life, revealing moral deliberation, reflection, and memory (Hemingway, *Death in the Afternoon* 192). Santiago's recollections of Manolin, past triumphs, and dreams of African lions sustain his moral and psychological equilibrium during physical trials. These narrative strategies depict the interplay of memory, imagination, and ethical reasoning, illustrating how human resilience is supported by

both intellect and emotion (Young 118–122). Hemingway challenges conventional definitions of success. Santiago's return with only the marlin's skeleton signifies material failure, yet moral and existential triumph is unequivocal. Heroism resides in ethical perseverance, disciplined effort, and moral integrity (Baker 325).

Young observes, "Hemingway elevates endurance above triumph, making the act of striving itself heroic" (Young 121). Santiago exemplifies the assertion that human value is measured by ethical action and existential courage rather than external recognition. The novella, therefore, reframes heroism as moral fortitude in the face of adversity. Hemingway's narrative resonates with broader literary and cultural traditions. Compared to Mark Twain, whose works employ satire and social critique, Hemingway foregrounds existential and ethical inquiry. Santiago's experiences also reflect Cuban coastal life with ethnographic precision, blending culturally specific realism with universal philosophical themes (Mellow 540).

The novella parallels Jack London's maritime narratives in depicting human struggle against natural forces. Yet, Hemingway integrates ethical and spiritual reflection, demonstrating that human resilience entails both physical skill and moral deliberation (Zola 89–92).

The Old Man and the Sea remains a cornerstone of twentieth-century literature, offering a nuanced meditation on human endurance, moral responsibility, and self-realization. Santiago's struggle illustrates that heroism is defined by ethical and existential perseverance, not by external success. Through naturalistic observation, existential inquiry, and Christian symbolism, Hemingway crafts a narrative in which moral triumph transcends material loss. Santiago's eighty-four-day ordeal demonstrates that human dignity is forged in labor, suffering, and ethical decision-making. His discovery of self-arises from persistence, reflection, and moral courage rather than external reward. Hemingway's novella thus provides a timeless model for understanding heroism as the steadfast ethical pursuit of meaning and dignity.

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