

Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea: Fishing, Work and Irony

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (August 2021)



Autumn Sea, Max Pechstein,

Besides, he thought, everything kills everything else in some way. Fishing kills me exactly as it keeps me alive. –The Old Man and the Sea

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is a unique mid twentieth-century literary masterpiece. The protagonist is a working man of deep-emotion; a man who is content with his lot in life. *The Old Man and the Sea* is a deceptively simple novel that employs a straightforward and uncomplicated narrative. Even so, this short work develops about half a dozen universal, timeless themes that are worthy of comparison with classical epic texts.

Given Hemingway's use of lyrically poetic imagery and his description of the passage of time in one man's life, it is not unreasonable to consider this inspired work an epic tale. *The Old Man and the Sea* can be considered epic due to the existential and lyrical spice-of-life manner in which the author describes Santiago's struggle to avoid objectification by human reality—regardless of its modest length. *The Old and the Sea* is a novel marked by textured nuance. Hemingway waste no time telling the reader about the protagonist and his circumstances.

The Old Man

Consider that Santiago, the protagonist, is an old man. Let us also take into account that this individual makes his living, an honest and dignified subsistence, from deep sea fishing. It is also fruitful to realize that every time that Santiago goes fishing, he is in fact going out for a day's work. Santiago prefers to fish alone. Fish or no fish, success or disappointment, the solitary fisherman embraces work as a form of temporal salvation. Santiago couples the necessity for work with pride and a profound sense for the sublime. Idleness is the devil's work.

Because he has gone eighty-four days without catching a fish, Santiago modifies his expectations; he embraces human reality as the reservoir of contingencies that man cannot

control. One would be remiss to imagine that a man his age, an experienced fisherman who has made his living from the toil of his own hands, would be shocked by the flagrant realization that human life is not a bed of daisies.

Santiago accepts that life is difficult. This is partly why he shows such respect for the marlin, his adversary. Every form of work makes demands on us, whether this has to do with the materials used to earn a livelihood, degree of difficulty or the need to respond to unforeseen circumstances. Fishing for a living presents Santiago with its own form of resistance. In fact, throughout the novel Santiago's existential struggle vindicates his wisdom. He does not succumb to the marlin, the sea or the predatory sharks that attack his skiff. Santiago is a man of deep convictions. That is the point of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Talking to a small bird that lands on his skiff, Santiago tells the bird to get a good rest. Then he tells the bird to go and take his chances, like any other man, fish or bird.

Santiago's struggle with the sea and the marlin informs his character. His daily toil at sea has physically marked him as a man. He is a master fisherman who possesses the required technique to bring in grand fish. Hemingway was himself a champion angler. But we ought not to pay too much attention to the technical aspects of catching large fish, for that would miss the point of the novel.

Instead, *The Old Man and the Sea* is about how an individual embraces some of the problems inherent in the human condition. Most importantly, we should also avoid the reductionist, over-intellectualizing agenda of demythologizers. Men like Santiago have always earned their keep by beating tremendous odds – for as long as man has existed. Santiago is a vivid reminder of this. It is comical for some intellectual critics to debunk Hemingway's attitude toward life and the credibility of the protagonist of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Hemingway modelled Santiago on a real Cuban

fisherman who old fisherman alive today still remember.

Santiago's love of the marlin demonstrates the great bond that exists between him and the fish that drags him dangerously close to the strong current of the Gulf Stream. In a passage that can be construed as Hemingway's rebuttal to his academic critics, the marlin is presented as noble, given its ability to test Santiago's resolve. This is contrasted with the opportunistic sharks.

Hemingway balked at people who failed to give life a good fight. About the marlin, Santiago says, "But, thank God, they are not as intelligent as we who kill them; although they are more noble and more able." [1] Because of the valiant struggle that the marlin puts up, Santiago laments that the fish is much too noble for most people to eat.

Fishing is Santiago's form of subsistence; this is hardly an easy living, a quiet day out in the sun. Some of Santiago's neighbors in the small fishing village refer to him as "salao." [2] In Cuban Spanish, this word depicts a profound sense of bad luck, an unbecoming destiny. Salao suggests bewitched determinism. More so, salao also symbolizes a form of fatalism that paralyzes a person's capacity for action. Santiago does not believe he is salao. The protagonist confronts the many difficulties and dangers that fishing alone poses for him. He fishes in a small skiff that he rows perilously close to the Gulf Stream. Santiago is a rugged individual. We can liken him to a rancher who must mend fences and do battle with coyotes on a daily basis. Fishing, Santiago shows us, requires perseverance and imagination. His meals consist of a bottle of water and some raw fish, preferably tuna. The sail of his skiff is made from sacks of flour, which the narrator describes as a flag denoting permanent defeat.

It is a critical aspect of the story that Santiago does not think that he is salao. It is the narrator that makes this observation. In fact, it is the parents of his young

fishing mate and apprentice, Manolin, who are the fatalists. The boys' parents order him to go fishing with other fisherman, on luckier boats. One condition of being salao that the boys' parents are concerned about is that bad luck can also turn fatal.[\[3\]](#) They are simply protecting the boy. This is understandable. The boy recognizes that his father does not have much faith in Santiago. Santiago first took the boy fishing when he was five years old. The boy has learned much from him and loves the old man for teaching him. The boy is sad to see the old man come in empty handed after a long day at sea. Santiago's friendship with the boy is important because the boy enables Santiago's wisdom to become manifest.

The boy is the beneficiary of heuristic lessons. Besides teaching the boy about reaching old age with dignity, Santiago also imparts a great respect for work on the young boy's work ethic. The boy loves Santiago not only because he has taught him how to fish, but because he helps the boy become useful to society and to have a purposeful life. Manolin repays Santiago handsomely with genuine and lasting fidelity, as only children can do.

Santiago is a practical man. He mentions this at the height of his struggle with the marlin. Like any truly self-respecting outdoorsman and naturalist, Santiago teaches Manolin to respect the sea and its bounty. Santiago demonstrates profound respect—even love—for the marlin that he wants to catch. He considers the mammoth fish his friend and equal.

Santiago struggles with the sea in the same manner that everyone must do battle with their respective existential situation. Santiago's circumstances include advanced age, his minuscule skiff and his willingness to fish by himself. The old man willfully accepts his circumstances. This is a form of tacit consent that the old man welcomes: "His hope and his confidence had never gone. But now they were freshening as when the breeze rises."[\[4\]](#) Santiago is a free man,

existentially speaking. The narrator adds: "The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck." [5] The old man, the reader is informed, also had deep-creased scars on his hands, cuts made by the fishing line.

Santiago accepts the difficulties he encounters while fishing alone. When he gets a strong cramp – a *calambre*—in one of his hands, he utters: "But a cramp, he thought of it as a *calambre*, humiliates oneself especially when one is alone." [6]

This signals the capacity for reflection and monologue of a solitary sojourner.

The Sea

The sea has served as the backdrop of countless literary and artistic sagas that showcase man's battle with the human condition. The sea has served as the arena for the struggle between man's intrinsic worth, as an existentially autonomous entity, and the demands made on us by chance and destiny. We encounter this theme in Odysseus' encounter with the six-headed Scylla and the whirlpool, Charybdis; Melville's mythic white sperm whale in *Moby Dick* and the hubris of Captain Ahab; Samuel Taylor Coleridge's depiction of the Albatross as the cross that everyone must carry in *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner* and William Carlos Williams's poem "Seafarer." Pictorially, the sea has perhaps never seemed so awe inspiring, freighted, yet sublime as painted in J.M.W. Turner's *Fishermen at Sea* and Winslow Homer's *The Gulf Stream*.

Most of *The Old Man and the Sea* is a soliloquy. What else can one's man's fishing adventure be? Santiago's sense of self is communicated to the reader mostly through his actions. The inherent problem "with show me, don't tell me" philosophy in literature and life is that in order to convey one's virtue to another, both parties must possess the same values. This means that both parties must be equals. Otherwise, one might as well bark at the moon. For instance, the narrator tells us much about Santiago: "He was too simple

to wonder when he had attained humility. But he knew he had attained it and he knew it was not disgraceful and it carried no less of true pride.”[\[7\]](#) Santiago heads out to sea on his eighty-fifth day without taking in a fish with enthusiasm and hope. When Manolin reminds him that his personal record without a fish is eighty-seven days, Santiago is optimistic that won't happen again. This resoluteness allows him to secure the massive marlin that he eventually catches, even though at great cost to his health.

Regrettably, the violence that a lot of twentieth-century literature does to human reality, post 1960s, is motivated by social-political demands on reality. Hemingway's work is untainted by this fashionable, ideological malaise. Ironically, the man of action, whether depicted in Hemingway's fictional characters or the author's own life, has not been improved upon by the modish social-political caricatures that have come to dominate western culture.

The Old Man and the Sea is a sincere slice-of-life look at human life from the only perspective worth writing about: engaging life from the concrete and existential reality of individual persons. Action and reflection are synonymous in Hemingway's view of human reality.

The Old man and the Sea explores several dominant themes that make it an inspired work of literature. Hemingway achieved this without the affected fanfare that one encounters in bestsellers, and regrettably, many books that are awarded the Noble Prize for their “commitment” to this or that popular cause. There is nothing phony or affected about Santiago going out to sea by himself in a tiny skiff in order to earn a living. The most innovative of Hemingway's literary devices is clarity and readability. Hemingway writes for vibrant readers, not committees responsible for dispensing literary awards. This is one reason that Santiago's ordeal resonates with thoughtful readers who read for enjoyment.

Santiago's nobility and embrace of work is a form of temporal salvation. We must not forget that he is not a sports fisherman. Santiago fishes for a living. During one of the monologues that enable the reader to penetrate into the essence of this man, Santiago reflects on the dollar amount that his marlin will fetch in the marketplace. He also thinks about how many people the fish will feed.

There are several reasons why *The Old Man and the Sea* can be considered an epic work. For one, the novel explores universal human concerns: facing strife, old age, the passage of time, heroism and the nature of friendship, are a few of these. Friendship is particularly important to the novel because Santiago serves as a mentor to Manolin. More importantly, Santiago is a friend to the young boy. Manolin looks up to Santiago, much as Santiago looks up to Joe DiMaggio. The friendship between Manolin and Santiago keeps Santiago rooted in the kind of innocence that only a child can supply. On the other hand, the boy views Santiago as a model of manhood, good will and virtue.

While Manolin has fished with fishermen on other boats, he respects Santiago's irresolute commitment and responsibility in taking care of himself. The old man is a widower who lives alone in a very modest seaside shack. Curiously, Hemingway's hero has no contact with the other fisherman throughout the novel. Santiago's solitude falls in the category of the hero as a rugged, silent type. Santiago's main concern is not the brightness of the sun, the dangerous current of the Gulf Stream or the possibility of being capsized, for he is not afraid of the sea. What he fears most is to remain clear-headed. This is the prerogative of one who has been responsible for himself throughout his life.

Santiago's epic heroism is self-contained. Only the boy knows Santiago's battles with the sea, and the life and death ordeal that fishing large fish in a tiny skiff present him with. His greatest pride is reserved for the events he

experiences alone. His fight with the gigantic marlin is more ironic than it is cathartic. Santiago's fight with the marlin must not be seen as cathartic.

Santiago's condition is heroic because it is dominated by irony. He has no fish tales to tell; Santiago is a man of few words. Yet he does have a fish to display, if only the skeleton that the sharks leave him with. Lost to the townspeople, upon his return, is the grandeur and scale of his fight with the marlin. The novel ends with the skeleton of the marlin left on the beach. The indecipherable remains of the animal can't even be called a carcass. The large fish skeleton incites the imagination of casual onlookers. Passersby can only imagine the size of the mammoth fish. Santiago takes solace in the tremendous odds he overcame during his two-day sojourn at sea.

Santiago's heroism is instructive because it is replete with hope. Throughout his struggle with the marlin, the lines cutting his hands, his drifting out to sea and concern not to run out of drinking water, Santiago tests his skills as a fisherman and his will to outlast the marlin. Not content to simply cut the line and return home, he does not allow his fight with the marlin to diminish his will to live. Because Hemingway's protagonist in *The Old Man and the Sea* does not have much interaction with people other than the boy, the hero of the story has a great deal of time alone to contemplate his station in life.

The Old Man and the Sea is not a tragedy, though. Santiago is not defeated by the marlin; he is not destroyed by his experience. Santiago does catch a prize marlin. His long spell of eighty-four days without catching a fish is broken. However, sharks, those hyenas of the sea, shamelessly steal his hard-earned pay. The sharks remind Santiago of at least one aspect of the human condition: parasites abound. Santiago is not caught by surprise.

After landing the marlin, Santiago hopes that the sharks stay away. Santiago knows that he hopes against hope. Doing sincere battle – that is what is at stake for Santiago. *The Old man and the Sea* is not a tragic story, rather an honorific tale. Santiago cannot be defeated as long as he remembers that he met his objective – to catch the marlin – with honor and courage.

Because Santiago does not share the events of the last two days with others, except the boy, his tale remains pure as lived-experience. Hemingway takes the reader on a journey that requires diligence on the reader's part. How many readers of *The Old Man and the Sea* have reflected on the task that Santiago set for himself? Readers are made to visualize the ruthless sun and Santiago with nowhere to hide, the vast ocean from a small skiff, with no land in sight. None of these considerations faze Santiago. The latter would mean, as W.B. Yeats writes, to dwell on pointless, "foolish things that live a day." [8]

Santiago embodies a quiet, timeless form of heroism that is best characterized as the unity of understanding and life. His life is not fragmented by abstractions and false notions of reality. Santiago's life retains the purity and simplicity of life that people enjoyed a long time ago. Elements of the continuity of life are plenty in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Santiago's life is felt as continuity, what philosophers of existence refer to as the lived-experience. Because he lives his life with great regard for the natural rhythm of a twenty-four-hour period, his life is framed by vital possibilities. Santiago enjoys the unity of life. This enables him to better understand human contingencies. He does not make demands on reality; having learned his craft well, he is mindful that life can be agreeable.

Santiago's lived-experience is an important aspect of the novel. This is why it is left up to the narrator and Manolin to offer the reader a more comprehensive picture of

the man, his dreams, fears and aspirations. The author tells us that Santiago is too simple and noble to do so himself. Perhaps this is why Santiago places so much stress on the inspiration he receives from Joe DiMaggio. To Santiago, the game of baseball reads like the book of life. There are the heroes, the fallen men, crushing surprises and unsung players who rise to the occasion. Santiago looks up to DiMaggio, even though the Yankee Clipper is a much younger man. He tells Manolin, "The Yankees cannot lose...Have faith in the Yankees my son. Think of the great DiMaggio." [9] DiMaggio serves as inspiration for Santiago because the baseball player went about his business with a reserved and dignified demeanor.

Santiago highlights the reality of the external world through the use of an internal monologue. This is another example of Hemingway's use of irony in the story. *The Old Man and the Sea* puts on display the author's conviction that it is more important to make readers see and feel the story than tell them about it. The experiences that the protagonist lives are made doubly real through internalization that pays tribute to objective reality. The difficulty of fishing alone makes Santiago's life more fluid than the life of people who merely theorize about living. This is Santiago's form of *Quijotismo*.

Santiago's struggle with the marlin is a vital example of life-in-a-flash. His fight is as colorful and lyrical in scope as it is in content. This is gallantry at its best. It is also an example of the hunt displaying its most primal and raw reality. There are passages in *The Old Man and the Sea* when the hunter becomes the hunted. Santiago's epic fight with the sharks, *galanos* he calls them, is hair-raising. Between the weight of the marlin, which is estimated to be over 1,000 lbs. and the sharks that tug on it, Santiago is in imminent danger of capsizing. His fight with the sharks turns out to be a street fight—everything is allowed. After a while of fighting the sharks, the focus of the old fisherman turns to his wellbeing. To capsize means certain death. Santiago does

not want to lose his life to predatory and parasitic opportunists.

Santiago takes offense at the sharks stealing his marlin, a bounty that they have not worked for and thus have not earned. Indignation brings out the fighter in him. Santiago respects the marlin for its nobility, while he has choice words for the sharks: "They were hateful sharks, bad smelling, scavengers as well as killers, and when they were hungry they would bite at an oar or the rudder of a boat. It was these sharks that would cut the turtles' legs and flippers off when the turtles were asleep on the surface, and they would hit a man in the water, if they were hungry, even if the man had no smell of fish blood nor fish slime on him." [\[10\]](#)

It is significant that Santiago's fight with the sharks take place at the end of the novel. Technically speaking, the encounter between fisherman and predator serves as a resolution to the story. The novel comes to an end with Santiago having to deal with the unexpected. This is a kind of sub-plot to the novel. What would Santiago's epic struggle with the marlin signify in light of what essentially appears to be a distraction—his fight with the sharks – at the end of the novel? The attack that the sharks unleash on Santiago makes him reflect on the reason why he is a fisherman and his stage in life. He tells himself: "You were born to be a fisherman as the fish was born to be a fish. San Pedro was a fisherman as was the father of the great DiMaggio." [\[11\]](#) Santiago's struggle with the marlin is courageous, respectful and elegant in its degree of difficulty, patience and skill the encounter demands. Santiago matches the patience and diligence of the marlin.

Santiago's decisive moment in the fight with the sharks comes when he says that sharks are parasites who would not dare attack the marlin when the latter was alive. Santiago celebrates the marlin's courage by commending it on its resolve to fight sharks: "But you enjoyed killing the dentuso,

he thought. He lives on the live fish as you do. He is not a scavenger nor just a moving appetite as some sharks are. He is beautiful and noble and knows no fear of anything." [\[12\]](#)

Santiago's battle with the sharks is Hemingway's exclamation point as to the meaning of the story: a man struggles valiantly and with little acclaim to earn an honorable living, only to have his livelihood stolen by predators. He fights the sharks with the oar of his skiff and a small knife. The sharks succeed in stripping him of his prize catch. He even apologizes to the marlin for being viciously eaten by parasitic sharks. Santiago blames himself for going out too far. He knows that the return trip hauling a big fish would draw the attention of the hyenas of the sea. Yet he didn't think he would land such a large marlin. Hemingway's answer to this eternal human dilemma – a staple of the perennial philosophy: the more virtuous one becomes, the greater the scurvy that success attracts from the envious and resentful Other.

The most poignant irony in *The Old man and the Sea* that makes the reader admire Santiago's fortitude takes place on the last page of the novel. A group of foreign tourists is sitting on The Terrace, a beachfront eatery, where the skeletal remains of Santiago's marlin is seen gently bobbing up and down in the gentle surf. A woman asks the waiter what kind of large fish that is. In broken English, the waiter tries to tell her that sharks ate the fish: *Tiburón*, "Eshark." The woman instead thinks that the skeleton belongs to a shark, and utters, "I didn't know sharks had such handsome, beautifully formed tails." [\[13\]](#)

The conclusion of *The Old Man and the Sea* enables readers to reflect on the longstanding human tragedy of confusing appearance with reality. Santiago is not a tragic hero, for he sees through the veil of appearances that taint much of the human condition and that destroy so many lives. Santiago struggles mightily not to become objectified and

dehumanized by the daily give-and-take of contingencies.

[1] Ernest Hemingway. *The Old Man and the Sea*. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1952), 70.

[2] Ibid, 9.

[3] Ibid, 10.

[4] Ibid. 14.

[5] Ibid, 9.

[6] Ibid, 68.

[7] Ibid, 14.

[8] William Butler Yeats. *Selected Poems and Three Plays*. Edited and Introduction by M.L. Rosenthal. (New York, New York: Collier Books, 1986), 6.

[9] Hemingway, 18.

[10] Ibid, 119.

[11] Ibid, 116.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid, 139.

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