



# Stoicism, Code Hero And Epic Battle In Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man And The Sea

Dr H K Jha

Amity School of Liberal Arts

Amity University Haryana

## Abstract

This paper is a study of Stoicism, Code Hero and Epic Battle in Ernest Hemingway's celebrated novel *The Old Man and the Sea* published in the year 1952. The study is based on the argument that Santiago, the protagonist in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* represents Hemingway's concept of stoicism and code hero. The study examines the trials and tribulations of Santiago and confirms the Hemingway's concept of a masculine hero who can be destroyed but cannot be defeated.

**Key Words:** stoicism, code hero, epic battle, argument, protagonist, vision

## Introduction

One of the most celebrated American writers of the 20th Century, Ernest Hemingway got the prestigious Nobel Prize in 1954 for his epic novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. The narrative is "a short heroic novel about an old Cuban fisherman who, after an extended struggle, hooks a giant marlin only to have it eaten by the voracious sharks during his long voyage home." ([britannica.com/biography/Ernest-Hemingway](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Ernest-Hemingway)). Hemingway, in *The Old Man and the Sea*, has introduced an archetypal hero Santiago, an ageing fisherman, who relentlessly fights a fierce battle against the mighty forces of nature. Though highly skilled, Santiago, has not been able to catch any big fish in the last eighty-four days. Nevertheless, he has not lost his hope to catch a giant Marlin. Though considered unlucky by the other fishermen of the community, Santiago meticulously keeps his routine and goes to the high sea with his fishing net and all other equipment. The narrative is about "an old man who struggles through days and nights with an enormous fish, bigger than his boat. He has it in the end, but his victory passes to the sharks, which devour the carcass as he is towing it home." (1.theguardian.com/books/2022)

The concept of Hemingway's code hero and stoicism is manifested in the daily routine that Santiago painstakingly maintains and goes out to the sea with a hope to catch some big fish. Every day, Santiago leaves his bed early and rows out into the Gulf Stream. "Why do old men wake so early? is it to have one longer day?" (Hemingway, P.26) In his day to day struggle, often the boy Monoline is there to provide him the much-needed companionship. In the evening, Santiago eats stale rice and fish and goes to sleep. It is there in his sleep that he dreams of his young days, and of lions on the beaches. Hemingway would prefer to have something concrete like a big fish. He says, "Now is the time to think of only one thing. That which I was born for." (Hemingway, P.44) A Hemingway hero is the one who has acquired the high level of skill and self-discipline that serves him in earning his bread, and also in proving his worth. A typical Hemingway character is a man who is always in control of the situation and has the discipline to handle any given circumstance. "It

is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes, I would be ready." (Hemingway, P.35-36)

## Stoicism

A stoic is a person who possesses a deep-seated belief that one is not solely tied to fate. He has the choice to exercise his free will. A stoic withstands adversity and continues doing the job without being emotionally involved. A stoic is resolute even in adverse circumstances. A restless man, Santiago has endured many hardships in his life and eventually has become indifferent to the hardships of life. A highly skilled and resolute person, he claims, "I know many tricks and I have resolution." (Hemingway, P.25) Santiago never accepts defeat in his life as he says, "man is not made for defeat." (Hemingway, P. 114) Throughout his life he has fought against the odds, and most of the time he is not successful. Yet, every morning he goes to the sea with the same enthusiasm. As a stoic hero, Santiago's main attribute is self-control, fortitude and not being emotional during the moments of struggle.

One of Santiago's role models is the baseball champion Joe DiMaggio, also, the son of a fisherman. DiMaggio goes out to play the professional game even though he has severe pain in his bone. Santiago admires the professional approach of DiMaggio. Like DiMaggio, Santiago never hesitates in meeting the challenges of his job. Hemingway's concept of 'grace under pressure' denotes an ability to control one's feelings to endure in the face of adversity. Santiago has the tenacity to stay for eighty-four days without catching any big fish. His resilience is apparent in his never-ending battle with the sharks.

An ageing man, Santiago is fully aware of the challenges of his age. Without airing grievances, he suffers physically as well as mentally. It is because of his high level of commitment to his skill and trade he goes out in his tiny boat to catch a fish. Sometimes he sleeps without eating anything, but again the following morning, he leaves his bed early and goes to the sea for fishing. Though old and weak, he has the confidence and spiritual strength to capture the giant marlin and bring the boat back to the shore. Santiago is a frail old man, but his frailty doesn't deter him. Hemingway's concept of stoicism has been well represented in Santiago's love for his trade. Santiago personifies stoicism, perseverance and resolution in the entire narrative.

## Code Hero

A Hemingway code hero is a fictional character who demonstrates courage, honour, and endurance in difficult situations. A typical Hemingway hero is involved in drinking, love affair, hunting, and bullfighting, or in some other masculine activity like mountaineering and fishing. A code hero endures pain and overcomes it. Santiago who is highly skilled in his trade of catching fish, behaves like a hardcore professional. Even his opponents in the village agree to the fact that Santiago is a skilful practitioner of his trade. A Code hero's mastery over his craft gives him an edge.

A code hero doesn't need anyone else to help him; he carries himself alone through all his endeavours. The reason why Santiago is extremely tough in the testing times, lies in the fact that not everyone has the courage that Santiago possesses. Santiago is portrayed as a man who has control over his feelings evident in his struggle on the boat and later, in his battle with the sharks. His hope and determination in the face of destructive forces symbolizes his attitude towards life and its challenges. Santiago says, ".... I will show him what I can do and what a man endures." (Hemingway, P.73.) Santiago is indeed the epitome of what Hemingway would call a code hero. A code hero is the one who must conduct himself with honour, courage and dignity, a set of principles known as "the Hemingway code." Staying cool in the face of a losing battle is what Hemingway calls 'grace under pressure' a theme adequately exhibited in *The Old Man and the Sea*. ([britannica.com/biography](https://www.britannica.com/biography)).

## Epic Battle

On the eighty fifth day Santiago decided to go far off in the sea with a hope to catch a big fish. When he reaches on the high sea, he finds slight movement in his harpoon lying deep in the dark sea water. Santiago, instinctively, understood that his harpoon seemed to have caught something big. He knew that eventually, he got a big catch, a substantially big marlin. This not only made him feel triumphant but also enabled him to regain his pride and confidence. Now, he was determined not to let this opportunity go out of his hands. He made all the efforts to maintain his hold on the big catch. During this difficult moment Santiago wished the

boy to be by his side helping him in this great adventure. He cried aloud, "I wish I had the boy to help me." (Hemingway, P.52)

Unfortunately, along the way, sharks smelled blood and started chasing the marlin. Santiago knows that the sharks have attacked his catch, and to protect his catch he keeps fighting the shark till the end. "By the time Santiago returns to the shore, his hands are covered with dried blood and there were two heavy sacks of something that the man carried behind his boat" (Hemingway, 127). The old man knew that "the shark was not an accident", and he was also aware of the fact that "this was a shark that had no fear at all and would do exactly what he wished." (Hemingway, P.110-111). With his steely resolve, Santiago fought the sharks, but to his dismay, he found that the huge fish had been devoured by the sharks, and he was left only with the skeleton of the fish. Santiago measures himself not by his efforts to save the marlin from the clutches of the sharks, but by the inexplicable agony he endures. Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is "the story of an elderly Cuban fisherman, with little but hope to sustain him through a punishing life, tells a fundamental truth about life." (2.theguardian.com /books/ booksblog/2016/aug/24/)

For a moment, the old man felt defeated, but he didn't lose faith in his conviction. "A man can be destroyed but not defeated." (Hemingway, P.114) In the climactic fight between a man and the mighty forces of nature represented by the powerful and cunning shark, Santiago shows a combination of courage, patience, and determination, the hallmark of a Hemingway code hero. Santiago's catch, the big marlin also signifies interaction between the code hero and nature. 'Fish', he said, 'I love you very much.' (Hemingway, P.60) When marlin was caught in his harpoon, the old man apologizes to the fish because he observes it as his brother who is suffering from the same kind of fate. Hemingway's attitude towards birds and fish establishes a kind of relationship between man and nature.

### Grace Under Pressure

Santiago's encounter with the giant marlin in such unbearable condition, demonstrates one of the Hemingway code hero's principals 'grace under pressure'. From the beginning to the end of the story, problems never left Santiago. However, Santiago never gets irritated, rather he endures all hardships gracefully. He wanted to prove that although he was an aging old man, he was still a highly skilled fisherman. Santiago believed that every man is born to succeed in life, and nobody should accept defeat. He felt extremely sorry for the fish because like him, it too, should not experience defeat. He treats the sea and the fish with humility and mutual respect. Santiago's attitude towards life and its challenges was his defining trait that elevates him to the level of an epic hero. It is a story of courage and endurance in the face of a gigantic struggle. The story of Santiago's epic battle signifies an old man's indomitable spirit and heroic endeavour. "The old man thinks that most of the creatures of the sea are brothers and to kill them is justifiable if there is a need. This romantic attitude towards animals lets his fishing not for money but for his own mission and reputation, his fight against the shark not for defending his hard-earned gains but for his own grace and dignity." (Wan, 2019)

### Conclusion

Hemingway often places his characters in the difficult situations, either in war, in bullfighting rings, or on the plains of Africa where he must face an animal determined to kill him. It is during the moments of crisis, the Hemingway hero exhibits and maintains his real worth and stamina. A Hemingway hero undergoes through tough circumstances. It is only by testing, by undergoing through difficult circumstances, by coming into confrontation with something dangerous that man lives with his intensity. In the presence of death, man can discover his true potentiality. Santiago has the guts, determination and right attitude to fight his battle against the unbeatable forces of nature. Hemingway, in his magnum opus, *The Old Man and the Sea* has "glorified courage in the face of danger .....for the old man is the very embodiment of dogged courage." (Prescott, 1952)

Hemingway emphasizes over the fact that a hero does not need to be someone special or strong. He can be someone like Santiago, old and physically weak, but is strong enough to have inner qualities, like honour, courage, and faith. Santiago's struggle demonstrates cosmic relationship between man and the forces of nature. Santiago is a Hemingway code hero who believes in the power of his conviction. Although living in a brutal and difficult era, the traits of Santiago's "personal code" and respect for "the dignity of a man" enable him to find the deeper meaning of life. Santiago has affirmed that even though he is momentarily defeated, he is still "resolute, unyielding and unchanging. This is what it means to be a man." (Chiba, 2019)

The Hemingway Code Hero is a masculine ideal that embraces tough, macho qualities like patience under extreme pain. Throughout the narrative, Santiago continues to exhibit the traits of a code hero. His solitude, his determination, his fortitude to confront the sharks elevate his status to that of an epic hero. "A compassionate, humble and noble individual, Santiago endures adversity with dignity and never gives up on his quest." (Blue Gum, 2017) In the worldly sense Santiago has lost the incredible marlin, but he kept fighting the sharks. He never lost his will to fight. Santiago is "a symbol of an attitude toward life. He often thinks and talks poetically and symbolically and so artificially." (Prescott, 1952) Santiago endures the agony and threat of existential crisis and establishes himself as an epic hero. Santiago's struggle defines an attitude of life in which fighting and struggling is more important than winning. His faith, optimism and resolution teach us the lesson that one must not surrender before the odds. Santiago's triumph lies in his refusal to surrender before the testing times of life. Santiago's defining attitude and his unique human quality matches with Hemingway's concept of masculinity and stoicism

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