

The Code of the Hero in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*

In Ernest Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea* the protagonist Santiago has chosen to dedicate his life to the art of fishing and to the art of living. The novel focuses on the hardships which the old man has to endure since he is forced to face the most serious challenge of his life: to overcome a potentially overwhelming run of bad luck. The portrayal of the protagonist, his role models and his struggle are created by the author according to a special hero code. And indeed Ernest Hemingway is known for his use of what has come to be called the *Hemingway code*. Hemingway heroes stand for "courage in midst of danger, grace under pressure, competence in and dedication to one's job, integrity, self reliance, and stoicism of the sort that is embarrassed by emotional sloppiness" (Hovey 4). This is reflected in their life style; like Santiago, they neither care about pleasure nor pain and always finish what they started, no matter what consequences it might bring (*Ptypes.com*). However, Santiago does not come across as a typical hero. He is an old, poor man with bad luck whose life is cut to the minimum. "Santiago...is himself depicted as a natural phenomenon, a strange old man..." (Weeks 34). By examining the depiction of Santiago, his actions, life style and role models as well as his close resemblance to the author, I will show how Santiago grows from an old worn out man into a true hero by not relinquishing his approach to life: his code.

As I have noted, Santiago is a penniless old fisherman who leads a simple life with only one task and that is to fish. The simplicity of his life is noticeable in the way he lives, as his cabin lacks nearly all furniture or decorations. He owns only what is necessary to him. This also goes for his social life since the old man has very few friends, having devoted his whole life to the art of fishing and gradually losing all other social contact. He is focused on the art of living and does this by doing what he has chosen to do. As Leo Gurko notes, for

Santiago "life is more than an endurance contest. It is also an art, which rules rituals and methods that, once learned, lead on to mastery" (Gurko 68). Santiago's way of living has led him to become a master of his profession. "Santiago is not just a fisherman, he is The Fisherman – the one chosen from all others because of his superior merits of skill and character" (Rovit 103). The old man's body may be old and weak but he still possesses skills that no other fisherman has.

The most serious challenge of his life arises when Santiago has a serious run of bad luck. He has been extraordinarily unfortunate and for eighty-four days he has not been able to catch a single fish. This has made others doubt his capacity as a fisherman: "But after forty days without fish the boy's parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally *salao*, which is the worst form of unlucky..." (3). The old man himself is not seriously bothered, since he does not believe in being dominated by bad or good luck. For him, luck is a part of life, he accepts it, still putting his faith in his skill and seeing it as stupidity to rely upon something that is as irregular as luck bad luck: "Only I have no luck any more. But who knows? Maybe today. Every day is a new day. It is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready" (26).

The old man has not always been seen as unlucky. When he was young he lived his life without confrontation. He was "El Campeón", a man who was undefeated. Hence, as Katherine Jobes notes, Santiago has a title to defend. "His bad luck jeopardizes a prized championship defined by communal values" (15). Others in his community have seen him as the champion. Thus, when his bad luck appears he is forced to defend the way he has been seen by them. To provide himself with more confidence during the battle with the fish he remembers his former title. Back then the old man was strong, even stronger than the great Negro from Cienfuegos who he beat in an arm-wrestling match. Now, the old man may be

weaker but he has his wits to depend upon. "And there are many tricks"(7). Santiago is a craftsman and he relies upon his expertise to guide him. After many dedicated years as a fisherman he has gathered enough knowledge about the profession to know every trick in the book.

There is a clear autobiographical presence of the author in the story as presented by the narrator. "By 1952, when *The Old Man and the Sea* was published, Ernest Hemingway needed to make a big catch. He had not made one since *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in 1940. Much of his literary reputation rested on work written between 1924 and 1933" (Jobes 1). This is to say that Hemingway himself was fighting against the same force that his protagonist Santiago fights in *The Old Man and the Sea*; he needed to prove himself worthy of his past successes. Not only were they both fighting for their title and identity but also against age and luck. After *For Whom the Bell Tolls* Hemingway did not succeed in creating a successful follow-up. "When at last we get his next novel, it turns out to be his worst failure" (Hovey 173). It seemed like Hemingway had lost his touch and he was getting old; he was seen as a beaten man. The parallel between Santiago and Hemingway is even more apparent, as the line, which Santiago uses to catch the marlin, is described by the narrator as being thick as a pencil. This shows that the creation of the fish is the same for the old writer with bad luck, as it is for the old fisherman fighting his bad luck. Both are also examples of following the code. "Hemingway was narrowing the gap that had always existed between him and his code heroes. Actually he narrowed it to the point where it is possible to show that on one level *The Old Man and the Sea* was wholly personal...*The Old Man and the Sea* is, from one angle, an account of Hemingway's personal struggle, grim, resolute and eternal, to write his best. With his seriousness, his precision and his perfectionism, Hemingway saw his craft exactly as

Santiago sees his" (Young 20-21). The general view of the narrator is also what makes the connection between the old man and Jesus, as I later will explain.

In addition, the old man (just like Hemingway) not only has to face bad luck, but he is also forced to face the inevitable: growing old. The old man used to dream of storms, great occurrences, great fish, fights and contests of strength but that has all changed and now he only dreams of places and the lions on the beach (16). The playing lions are a symbol of youth and playfulness. "... Santiago dreams of golden and white beaches; when he is threatened by the weakness of old age, he summons visions of his own youthful strength" (Jobes 2). The lions also represent behaviour that fits the code which Santiago lives by. A lion is an animal that is strong, brave and noble, similar to the features of the great marlin, which Santiago struggles with for three days at sea. As Santiago had aged a change has occurred. He has turned from being a man of strength into an old worn out man with only dreams and memories of youth. When Santiago was young and his luck was good he could easily live by his code. There were no real confrontations during this period but now as he has grown old and his luck has changed, both his body and spirits are affected by it. Due to his bad luck, Santiago is regarded as defeated. In spite of this, the old man accepts his bad luck. He takes it calmly though he understands what the challenge may signify. He embraces his bad luck with stoicism.

Santiago not only possesses stoicism but also great respect, particularly for the sea and its creatures. According to the old man, and his way of living (the code), everything in nature has its place and he sees himself as a participating part of it. The old man's respect for and bond to nature are depicted in the way he is described and how he describes himself. The old man identifies with what he sees as heroic aspects of nature. As an example, Santiago

draws a parallel between his and a turtle's heart: "Most people are heartless about turtles because a turtle's heart will beat for hours after he has been cut up and butchered. But the old man thought, I have such a heart too and my feet and hands are like theirs" (37). Not only is his heart described as undefeated, but one can also notice his high spirits in his eyes. They are described as cheerful and undefeated, looking just as blue as the ocean; the old man sees himself in terms of undefeated nature. The way the old man's eyes are described by the narrator confirms his own self-evaluation and that is why we trust him. This also goes for his sight which is mentioned to be very good for a man of his age. The old man's body has scars, reminding him of past successes; he has been engaged in battles before and won. The scars illustrate that the old man has in fact been lucky before. Santiago has been victorious but that does not help him now "...none of the scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert" (3).

When Santiago's greatest struggle begins and he has caught the fish on his line, he creates the fish without having seen it. He imagines the fish which, like the lions and other heroic creatures, confirms his code in his own image. This accounts for the fishing-line described as being thick as a pencil. Santiago creates the fish just like the author creates it; he too is aged and trying to defend a claimed championship. "I wish I could see him only once to know what I have against me...He is wonderful and strange and who knows how old he is, he thought" (35). He points out that the fish is strange, just as he describes himself, to make the fish different and unique. The old man senses a brotherhood with the fish as he tells him that he will stay by his side until he dies. They are both equally mortal, trying to live life the best way they can: "All the qualities which Santiago sees in the great fish...are the qualities which he values most...and they are qualities that Santiago wishes to confirm in himself" (Wells 60). By catching and killing the fish, Santiago wishes to confirm his selfhood: to prove his own

strength, nobility and bravery. A victory would provide Santiago with the qualities he so much admires in the marlin.

Other qualities which the old man holds dear and uses as inspiration during the struggle are found in his role models. To begin with, we have the world famous baseball player Joe DiMaggio who plays an important part in Santiago's struggle. DiMaggio is a heroic archetype, a role model for the old man; he had grown old yet still played heroically, even with injuries. Joe DiMaggio was exposed to several of them during his career but never quit playing the game. He had a bone spur in his heel causing him immense amount of pain. He endured the pain and kept on playing until it was hard for him even to walk (*Wikipedia.com*). "But I think the great DiMaggio would be proud of me today. I had no bone spurs. But the hands and the back hurt truly. I wonder what a bone spur is, he thought. Maybe we have them without knowing of it" (67). To Santiago, DiMaggio becomes a symbol for the right way of living, a man who defied pain to achieve greatness. "...in his [Santiago] strained back and his cut and cramped left hand he, too, is an old champion who must endure the handicap of pain..." (Burhans 77). DiMaggio was also a true craftsman when it comes to his profession, just like Santiago. His father was a fisherman, which makes the connection between them even stronger. "The constant association with the king of ballplayers and the king of beasts adds to the old man's heroic proportions" (Burhans 77). Whenever Santiago feels pain he thinks of DiMaggio and uses him as an inspiration for endurance. The image of him provides Santiago with the strength and courage that came naturally in his youth, but now, when he is old and misfortunate, he needs him as a symbol. DiMaggio did the best he though he was injured and knew that his days as a baseball player were numbered. Similarly, the old man's bad luck has for the first time made him doubt his own capacity. "Perhaps I

should not have been a fisherman, he thought. But that was the thing that I was born for" (37). Now that he is being tested so extremely, he needs inspiration to endure.

Another inspiration during the struggle is the boy Manolin. The old man's and Manolin's relationship is complicated since they are in fact both role models and inspiration for each other. At sea the boy is seen by the old man as his apprentice while on land he takes care of the old man. "Keep the blanket around you, the boy said. You'll not fish without eating while I'm alive...where did you wash? The boy thought. The village water supply was two streets down the road. I must have water here for him, the boy thought, and soap and a good towel" (10-12). Manolin looks after Santiago and provides him with food that he himself has stolen or begged for. "At first the food he provides substitutes for that which the old man cannot provide for himself; in the end, it marks the boy's assumption of the responsibility for nourishing the man who had long fostered his spirits" (Rosenfield 43). The boy is giving back the love and nourishment the old man for so long has given him. There is an upcoming change in their relationship, where Manolin goes from apprentice to master. According to Leo Gurko "The master-pupil relationship between them suggests that the heroic impulse is part of a traditional process handed down from one generation to another, that the world is a continuous skein of possibility and affirmation" (Gurko 67). Manolin will take over after the old man has passed away. The transformation from being the apprentice to master becomes complete as the boy receives the spear of the marlin : "Pedrico is looking after the skiff and the gear. What do you want to do with the head? Let Pedrico chop it up to use in the fish traps. And the spear? You keep it if you want it. I want it, the boy said" (97). Symbolically, the spear is the title of being a fisherman handed down from Santiago to Manolin. Both the old man and the boy are in fact dependent on each other. "The old man taught the boy to fish, and the boy loved him" (4). Though their relationship could be seen as a "teacher and student"

relationship, they are in fact equal: “Can I offer you a beer on the Terrace and then we’ll take the stuff home” (4). The boy may be young but is treated as an adult because Santiago sees him as a fisherman who therefore should not be treated any different than himself. The boy also plays the role of the hero’s helper, but when it comes to the task itself Santiago rather does it alone. “...several times he wishes the boy were with him to ease the strain, but it is essential that he goes unaccompanied, that in the end he rely on his own resources and endure his trial unaided” (Gurko 68). The paradox here is that, though Santiago may seem totally independent he would not seem to be much more than an old lonely man without Manolin. Just like Joe DiMaggio needs his audience to be what he is, the old man needs the boy to be his audience. Several times during the struggle he wishes the boy to witness his struggle. This happens every time the mission of catching the fish is in danger. Santiago knows that he might not succeed in bringing the marlin home and therefore craves the boy's presence at the actual battle arena, to observe with his own eyes how strong and unique the old man really is. Santiago has the title of a role model to defend. “ [Manolin] There are many good fisherman and some great ones. But there is only you. [Santiago] Thank you. You make me happy. I hope no fish will come along and prove us wrong” (14). There is a constant struggle for Santiago to maintain his position. He sees nobility in actions and deeds and not in what has been done in the past. Santiago needs to prove him worthy of being the role model that the boy so much looks up to: “ I told the boy I was a strange old man, he said. Now is when I must prove it” (49). The old man tells the boy that he is strange because he wants the boy to see him as different and noble, see that there is something that makes him unique; something that distinguishes him from ordinary fishermen.

Another code hero that the old man is described in terms of, by the narrator, is Jesus. Jesus is described in the Bible as a fisherman who made the two fishermen Simon and

Peter into disciples, promising them to become fishers out of men. Jesus never abandoned his mission, or his way of living. Though he had the chance of taking back his assertion of being king of the Jews, he let himself get crucified. This is how Jesus is related to Santiago's code. Jesus conducted his life the best way he could and he held on to his belief to the very end.

"Starting in simple physical pain, he [Santiago] transcends through his agony, his own heroic ideal, personified in DiMaggio, and ends in the attitude of the crucified Christ..." (Wells 59).

The wounds that Santiago experiences during the struggle with the fish stand as a preface to the actual comparison with Christ which emerges later on. "The blood ran down his face and made a cut below his eye. The blood ran down his cheek a little way. But it coagulated and dried before it reached his chin and he worked his way back to the bow and rested on the wood" (38). This is a parallel to Jesus' crown of thorns. The old man spills the first blood drop of the battle and rests his body on wood. The imagery of the crucifixion is cumulative as the story progresses. Later the fish lurches and pulls the old man down on the bow: "He felt the line carefully and noticed his hand was bleeding... You're feeling it now, fish, he said. And so, God knows, am I" (41). The old man endures the pain from the left hand and concentrates by trying to think of nothing. When Santiago falls asleep near the end of the battle with the fish his left hand is cut as he suddenly wakes up and tries to brake the line. The fish forces him down on his knees and then up again. Near the end of the battle when Santiago has given up and the dark has come, he is so exhausted that he wonders if he is dead or not: "He put his two hands together and felt the palms. They were not dead and he could bring the pain of life by simply opening and closing them" (90). Also, his back is injured by the fishing-line, which has made deep cuts into the flesh. The bleeding cut hands and his severely injured back are an indication of the more extensive images of crucifixion.

As the old man eventually ties the carcass to the boat a second struggle against nature arises. The old man is far out at sea with a bleeding marlin tied to the boat, making the fish a prey to nature's scavengers. A shark appears: "The shark was not an accident. He had come up from deep down in the water as the dark cloud of blood had settled and dispersed in the mile-deep sea" (77). Santiago perceives the shark as beautiful and noble, except its jaws. The jaws can destroy everything Santiago has fought for. They can destroy both the marlin and the old man's worthiness. The shark succeeds in tearing away a piece of flesh from the marlin. Santiago faces the adversity with dignity and grace and succeeds in killing it. "He hit it without hope but with resolution and complete malignancy" (79).

After the first shark attack the old man begins to identify with the marlin. "He did not like to look at the fish any more since he had been mutilated. When the fish was hit it was as though himself were hit" (79). The more the carcass gets mutilated the weaker Santiago becomes. After the shark is killed two other sharks emerge. When Santiago spots the two shovel-nose sharks he cries out in agony and the comparison to Christ is reinforced: "Ay, he said aloud. There is no translation for this word and perhaps it is just a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood" (84). The old man understands that there will be no reward for his struggle against the sharks, except for the dignity of knowing that he has done the best he can. As Wells points out, "...the crucifixion is a consuming metaphor for the medium of suffering, endurance and apparent defeat..." (Wells 62). The old man has given all he has to give, to confront life and the imagery of the crucifixion symbolises the price which Santiago must pay for confronting it.

Strangely, the two sharks that appears are described as pigs, bad-smelling scavengers. This is the first and only time Santiago shows hatred against the world he has such a strong connection and respect for. This type of shark, which is not at all like the other

kind, is seen as evil because they can attack anything at any time. They represent something that the old man detests since they are unpredictable, not living a noble life, they go against the old man's way of living. "Having lost his fish to the least worthy of opponents, the shovel-nose sharks that are just moving appetites, even the old man is unclear about what he has accomplished..." (Wells 62). The experience of the struggle is in itself complete, what is left of the fish is of no value. After nightfall the old man eventually gives up: "He knew he was beaten now finally and without remedy..." (93). Santiago feels no anger at failing. Instead, he turns his attention to trying to get home. Even if he has been beaten, he acts with grace, making the best out of his situation. He celebrates the wind for blowing in the right direction and he is joyous over his boat being intact. Thus, he stays true to his code. "All this he endures without compromising his code either as a man or a fisherman..." (Wells 59).

Santiago's soul is undefeated. Not once has the old man betrayed his own way of living. He has followed it through to the end and must now pay the price of his actions. "It was then he knew the depth of his tiredness" (93). When Santiago finds his way home and finally arrives at shore, he carries the mast of the boat on his shoulders to his cabin. He falls several times, exhausted by the struggle. It is here that the imagery of the crucifixion culminates. Santiago's walk is similar to the walk of Jesus to *Golgotha* as he carried his cross to his own crucifixion. When Santiago finally enters his cabin, he falls on his bed exhausted with his face down and his body in a position similar to the posture of a man crucified. The comparison to Christ is said to be a metaphor of the human condition: "We are all condemned to suffer and to die. What matters is how we conduct ourselves in the face of the inevitable" (secweb.com).

Santiago has conducted himself in the best possible manner he knows. He leads a simple life and the suffering that he is exposed to is a part of it. "...Jesus merges with Hemingway's 'code hero' —a tough, self-defined individual who rolls with the punches" (secweb.com).

At the end of the novel, a party of tourists look down in the water and they discover what is left of the great fish. The leftovers are just meaningless garbage soon taken care of by the tide. Mistaking the fish for a shark a woman comments that "I didn't know that sharks had such handsome, beautifully formed tails. I didn't either, her male companion said" (99). Ordinary people do not understand the greatness of what the old fisherman has accomplished. Everything the old man has fought for is demolished in an instant. The fishermen are the only ones who have a clue of what proportions the struggle might have had. "The experience has been stripped of its practical and material aspects, and even the great skeleton is at last only so much more garbage waiting to go out with the tide" (Wells 62). All this does not matter for the old man himself. He has followed his code and he has never once strayed from it.

In conclusion, the protagonist's stance to life and being put to the supreme test of overcoming bad luck, through the struggle with the marlin, creates a hero. In addition, the depiction of Santiago in terms of undefeated nature adds to his heroic proportions. The adversity of old age and the recent bad luck forces the old man to challenge and defend his claimed championship. By catching and killing the ultimate opponent he recovers his selfhood. As I have shown, there are two important role models providing the old man with strength and endurance during his battles. Joe DiMaggio gives the old man courage and stands as a symbol for the right way of living, a man who defied pain to achieve greatness. The boy Manolin provides the old man with strength as he plays the role of the observer, Santiago's audience. The boy is also the inheritor of the mastership, given by the protagonist. Both Joe DiMaggio and the boy Manolin fit Santiago's code and are therefore a direct source of inspiration. The conclusion of Santiago's actions, conducted by his code, are illustrated through the ultimate sacrifice: crucifixion. The protagonist follows his code right to the very

end, and is therefore undefeated, though facing physical defeat (loosing the fish to the sharks). The parallel between the old man and Christ's passion is created as a symbol for the inevitable; we are all going to die, what matters is how we live the life we are given. Christ never abandoned his belief and he eventually let himself be crucified. Santiago chooses to stick to his code, and fight death with grace.

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