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Trabajo de Fin de Grado

The Construction of Santiago's Identity
through Nature in Ernest Hemingway's
The Old Man and the Sea

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Abstract

This dissertation aims to examine the heroism of the old fisherman presented in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. The protagonist, Santiago, experiences a process of self-fulfillment that will require his determination and humility to achieve dignity. The fishing of the marlin produces the creation of a brotherhood between the fisherman and the fish in the sea of the Gulf Stream, a place that will pose a challenge in itself, since every living being can kill or be killed. Hence, in this dangerous atmosphere, Santiago manages himself to catch the marlin and guide what remains of him after several struggles with the sharks towards his town in Cuba. When he eventually returns, the old fisherman is recognized as a hero for most of the people, because of the great size of the marlin; and for Manolin, his friend and pupil, due to his demonstration of courage of spirit and his mental and physical stamina.

Keywords: dignity, identity, Nature, heroism, struggle, humility.

Resumen

En esta disertación tenemos como objetivo examinar el heroísmo del viejo pescador que se nos presenta en *The Old Man and the Sea*, del autor Ernest Hemingway. El protagonista, Santiago, experimenta un proceso de realización personal que requerirá de su determinación y humildad para alcanzar la dignidad. La pesca del marlín produce la creación de una hermandad entre el pescador y el pez en el mar de la corriente del Golfo, un lugar que supondrá un reto en sí mismo, puesto que cada ser vivo puede matar o ser matado. Por lo tanto, en esta peligrosa atmósfera, Santiago logra pescar al marlín y guiar lo que queda de él tras varias peleas con los tiburones hasta su pueblo en Cuba. Cuando finalmente regresa, el viejo pescador es reconocido como un héroe por la mayoría de la gente, debido al gran tamaño del marlín; y por Manolín, su amigo y aprendiz, por su demostración de valentía de espíritu y a su aguante físico y mental.

Palabras clave: dignidad, identidad, Naturaleza, heroísmo, lucha, humildad.

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Introduction

The celebrated American author and winner of the Nobel Prize in 1954 Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) claims in his article “On the Blue Water: A Gulf Stream Letter” that “there is great pleasure in being on the sea, in the unknown wild suddenness of a great fish; in his life and death which he lives for you in an hour while your strength is harnessed to his; and there is satisfaction in conquering this thing which rules the sea it lives in” (Hemingway 92). He portrays his passion for fishing in his last major novel before committing suicide in 1961, which is titled *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952). In this work of fiction, Hemingway recounts the fishing of a marlin in the Gulf Stream by an old fisherman named Santiago and the physical and psychological challenge that it poses to him. His close communion with the sea and his persistence resulting from his condition and experience as a fisherman trigger his decision to go further in the sea after being eighty-four days without success in fishing. As he finds himself in the loneliness of the sea, he has the opportunity to observe the magnificent yet cruel Nature that allows him to establish a deep relationship with the marlin that is later going to be a victim of the appetite of the sharks. Nonetheless, the pride that he obtains from the rest of the people remains unchangeable. All these factors contribute to a greater or lesser extent to Santiago’s self-understanding and self-assertion as a fisherman, although his true worth is going to be especially recognized by his fellow friend Manolin, who is the person that Santiago loves the most and acts as his apprentice in the practice and way of life of fishermen. Therefore, by examining, first, the personal affinity of Santiago with the sea and second, the strong brotherhood of Santiago with the marlin; and by analyzing the victory of the old fisherman consisting in being undefeated despite the adversities that he faces, this dissertation asserts that, through this experience, Santiago lends meaning to his life and becomes the hero of the novel.

1. The love and respect of Santiago for the sea

The identity of Santiago is highly linked to the sea, due to his condition as a fisherman. From the beginning of the novel, the old man feels a deep connection to the sea and does not view it as a place in which he can simply catch the animals that will provide him with economic gains. In fact, his relationship to this natural element is sentimental, for “[h]e always thought of the sea as *la mar* which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her” (Hemingway 15). “*La mar*” is feminine and therefore, the sea is referred as if it was a woman and it is considered to have the same beauty by those fishermen that name her with this connotation. By contrast, those men that perform the same trade as Santiago and mention the sea with the masculine name “*el mar*” regard this element as an enemy that is feared but to which they present an unavoidable economic dependency. As a consequence, these men do not show the same degree of respectability towards the sea as Santiago, as their adversity towards it prevents them from considering it beautiful. Hence, Santiago is different from the majority of the fishermen of the Cuban town that is portrayed by Hemingway, since his love for the sea is disinterested, real and passionate. Furthermore, “[e]verything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea” (Hemingway 1), thereby being this relationship so intense that it is physically reflected in Santiago, for the water of the Gulf Stream constitutes a fundamental part of his inner self. The reader can appreciate how Santiago tries to convey with dedication his singular appreciation for the sea to Manolin, the boy with whom he spends numerous days in this natural space and who is delighted to be participant of the fishing days of the old protagonist. In addition, Santiago’s affection towards the sea is expanded as well to most of the different animal creatures that live in it, for the flying fish that he finds while looking for a big fish is considered as the presence that replaces Manolin in his role as a partner in the solitude of the immense sea of the Gulf Stream.

Thus, the strong love for the sea that Santiago expresses is a factor that separates himself from the rest of the fishermen of his Cuban town, since it is contrasted passion and devotion with economic interest.

In line with this argument, the title of the novel highlights the connection of the old man with the sea and gives a notion of the presence of the sea as vital to the novel's development, since Santiago's remarkable feat takes place in the violent yet charming sea of the Gulf Stream. Most of the novel is set in this natural space in which Santiago's loneliness is relieved thanks to the different animals that he encounters during the days that he spends fishing and then returning to his town with the marlin. When departing, he decides to go further in *la mar* than he usually does in his little skiff, being aware of the fact that "[s]he is kind and beautiful. But she can be so cruel" (Hemingway 15). His experience due to his profession makes him knowledgeable of the dangers that the sea may hide, although he never stops loving her. In Santiago as a character, it is underscored "his epic individualism and the love he feels for the creatures who share with him a world of inescapable violence" (Burhans 446), since neither him nor any animal escapes from the possibility of death. This feature increases not only his respect for the sea and the natural elements that surround it, but also the heroism of Santiago throughout this adventure. The aggressiveness of the sea for a man alone is made tangible for the reader by Hemingway, and hence, this novel "is remarkable for its stress on what men can do and on the world as an arena where heroic deeds are possible" (Gurko 377). In the particular case of this old fisherman, his challenge consists in surviving alone with almost no food and water, fishing the marlin in spite of his big and unusual dimension and bringing it to his town after the successive fights with the packs of sharks that reduce the body of the marlin to its skeleton. Thus, in an atmosphere that is presented as adverse to humans, Santiago gets to survive and proves his internal strength, inasmuch as "[t]he

thousand times that he had proved it meant nothing. Now he was proving it again. Each time was a new time and he never thought about the past when he was doing it.” (Hemingway 40). Moreover, he obtains his objective, which is the marlin, thereby being a champion for those who value his material reward. As Bickford Sylvester points out in his article “Hemingway’s Extended Vision: The Old Man and the Sea”, “Santiago’s reward comes, not on land but at the farthest point in his circular voyage, at the moment of his greatest isolation from other men” (132); and thus, the sea is a space in which he can be fulfilled. Hence, the title of the novel that we are analyzing brings forward the relevance of the sea for this old fisherman, as it is a place compounded by all the creatures that intervene in his process of fulfilment and greatness, despite the fact that his humility prevents him from consciously intending to do so.

2. The equality between Santiago and the marlin

The relationship that is established between the marlin and Santiago is central to the novel and to the enrichment of the life of the protagonist. We are shown an old fisherman whose appearance seems weak, since, as Ridgely Cummings points out in “Man of Many Parts”, “[a]s Hemingway grows older, his heroes age with him” (Ridgely Cummings 495). However, his determination is fundamental for him to start this adventure in pursuit of the reaffirmation of his fishing skills after eighty-four days dominated by the absence of luck. When he locates the marlin and it eats the fish bait, Santiago prioritizes it to the other fishes due to its enormous size and the strength that it exerts. At this moment, their link is reduced to the simplicity of hunter and prey. However, when Santiago lets the marlin guide the skiff offshore and he takes conscience of the active role of the marlin in his own life, he calls him “fish” and he affirms that “[he]’ll stay with [him] until [he is] dead.” (Hemingway 31). At this point, Santiago treats the

marlin with the respect that he deserves as an animal but with a determination that is not diminished by an emotional connection. Therefore, they are united until one of them is dead but, as the days go by, Santiago acknowledges that “[t]he fish is [his] friend too,” (Hemingway 46) and he becomes surprised by the fact that “[he has] never seen or heard of such a fish. But [he] must kill him.” (Hemingway 46). The use of diverse strategies so that the fish gets tired and rises to the surface of the sea are effective and the old man is forced to put all his effort into winning the battle to the fish, which is now called brother. Hence, Santiago, struggling with maintaining the line, says to the marlin: “Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than you, brother. Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who” (Hemingway 58), thereby being bound together by the equality that brothers enjoy. The intensity of their relationship is not going to be decreased throughout the upcoming events but, by contrast, it is reaffirmed and reinforced, even when the marlin is dead. Thus, although being both of them abode by the laws of life and death between fisherman and fish, “[a] sense of brotherhood and love, in a world in which everyone is killing or being killed, binds together the creatures of Nature, establishes between them a unity and an emotion which transcends the destructive pattern in which they are caught” (Gurko 11-12). Therefore, in the deep waters of the Gulf Stream, Santiago finds not a trophy meant to be sold, but a brother with whom he feels identified and that loves in life and death.

In addition to this idea, after being equated as brothers, Santiago attempts to justify his brother’s death and subsequently understands his identity as a fisherman. The marlin is constantly praised by Santiago due to its magnificence, but, given that it was a fight in which one of them necessarily had to die, Santiago partly accepts its death and “[w]ith his mouth shut and his tail straight up and down [they] sail like brothers” (Hemingway 63). In their way of return, the blood of the marlin’s heart spreads along the water and

attracts the hungry packs of sharks to their location. As a contrast to the love shown towards his animal brother, Santiago expresses aversion towards the sharks that attack the glorious marlin and he boasts about his defense of the fish, since “[he] killed the shark that hit [his] fish” (Hemingway 66). All the same, as the body of the marlin is being eaten by the predators with a helpless Santiago watching the scene and with almost no weapons, he starts to feel guilty for his decision. In this sense, he questions if he was worthy enough to kill the big fish that now swims along the skiff, but at a certain point he becomes aware of the fact that it is inherent to his identity as a fisherman that loves nature; hence, “[he] killed him for pride and because [he is] a fisherman. [He] loved him when he was alive and [he] loved him after. If [he] love[s] him, it is not a sin to kill him. Or is it more?” (Hemingway 67). His sense of doubt grows as the body of the marlin devoured and the reader becomes aware of “the old man’s human consciousness of his guilt, his awareness that in order to be right he must also be wrong” (Sylvester136), for he considers that “[he] shouldn’t have gone out so far” (Hemingway 71). Thus, he apologizes to the marlin and assumes the responsibility of having faced numerous obstacles together and having driven the fish almost completely eaten. As a result of Santiago’s humility, the blame originated at this moment results in a sincere lament for killing the marlin, for “[h]e is not a scavenger nor just a moving appetite as some sharks are. He is beautiful and noble and knows no fear of anything” (Hemingway 68), thereby creating a categorization of animals organized according to their dignity and nobility of spirit. Furthermore, regretting killing the marlin accentuates Santiago’s heroism, since “[t]he virtues of the Hemingway hero had always been the virtues of the young: to kill ‘cleanly’ and risk being killed; ... love beautifully (and briefly), and to avoid all entanglements of either responsibility or complexity” (Cooperman 217). Therefore, the love for the fish expressed by Santiago that originates a devaluation of the self when compared to this animal highly contributes to

the heroism of the old fisherman, which is understood as the performance of a heroic feat of survival accompanied by the truest humbleness.

3. Victory as a result of being unconquered

At the beginning of the novel, we are presented a Santiago that is being consumed by the fact of not being able to fish; hence, in order to prove himself as a fisherman, he needs to test his limits and his stamina, and unconsciously become a hero. Santiago is depicted as weakened by the lack of fishes in eighty-four days, but the reader is shown his internal identity through his eyes, which “were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated” (Hemingway 1). Thus, the vigorous and strong essence of Santiago is known by the reader and by Manolin, who affirms that “[t]here are many good fishermen and some great ones. But there is only [him]” (Hemingway 11). As a consequence, Santiago is given a sense of uniqueness that he does not acknowledge, but that admires in the figure of DiMaggio, who is a player of baseball that mirrors Santiago’s attitude without both of them being aware of it. Just as this iconic player ““makes the difference”” (Hemingway 10), the brotherhood that Santiago reaches with the marlin and his bravery when deciding to follow the fish and fight the sharks can only be conducted by Santiago himself. As asserted by Clinton S. Burhans in “*The Old Man and the Sea: Hemingway’s Tragic Vision of Man*”, “[i]n searching for and in catching his big fish, Santiago gains a deepened insight into himself and into his relationship to the rest of created life” (Burhans 448), since the marlin is the element that he needed to recover the lost meaning of his life and identity as a fisherman. Fishing the marlin is not an act that measures its relevance in the size of the fish, but in the difficulties that they have to cope with together. The fish acts as a guide that draws the path for Santiago to find himself again, for he feels that “that was the thing [he] was born for” (Hemingway 30), thereby

being the marlin his brother and his destiny. His resolution is vital to conquer the big fish and be persistent when subsequently struggling with the different sharks, which produces the restoration of his self-confidence in his skills as fisherman. Hence, none of his triumphs are determined by material rewards, because this is “the story of an aged champion for whom power of will has replaced the power of flesh, and the wisdom of true pride and humility has replaced the arrogance of either simple pessimism or romantic self-sacrifice” (Cooperman 219). Thus, Santiago creates the conditions that drives him to meet and catch the marlin, although the following events are understood by him as his destiny, and together, they strongly contribute to reassert his fishing ability and his singular humility.

Along with this argument, Santiago becomes aware of his condition as undefeated and his worth is recognized by the rest of the town and by the person he loves the most, Manolin. Despite the fact that Santiago goes back with disillusionment due to the harm caused to his brother the marlin, he is convinced that a “‘man is not made for defeat,’ ... ‘[a] man can be destroyed but not defeated’ (Hemingway 66); and hence, he has succeeded in his quest. However, throughout the days alone in the sea, he deeply misses Manolin and repeats that “[i]f the boy was here” (Hemingway 52), his challenge would have been easier. Consequently, keeping Manolin in his mind in his most difficult moments reflects the attachment that they have for each other. Furthermore, “[h]e is not concerned with being worthy of the boy’s love or with teaching the boy how to live” (Barnes 4), as he simply loves him with the same tenderness that he shows towards the different creatures of Nature and the sea. Nonetheless, the role of Manolin goes beyond his affection for the old man, inasmuch as the boy is the only person that deems his effort as heroic and does not even take into consideration the size of the marlin. Thus, “both characters are admirable: the old man for his courage, the boy for his charity, and both

for their unselfishness” (Bernad 303), since in their relationship of master and pupil they both share a sense of humility that mutually reinforce. Therefore, whilst the majority of the people is delighted by the great size of the marlin caught, Manolin focuses on the suffering that is physically reflected in the body of Santiago, “[b]ut even as he dooms himself to physical deterioration, he opens the way to spiritual enlightenment, which becomes a possibility because of his moral nature” (Stephens 298). Hence, his pride as a fisherman is materially demonstrated through the dimension of the marlin, but the pride that results in the true dignity and greatness of Santiago is only perceived by Manolin, and “[t]he great marlin ... [becomes] a spiritual more than a physical necessity” (Burhans 448).

Conclusion

As a conclusion, in this dissertation we demonstrate that in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, the dignity and the sense of heroism that Santiago gains when returning with the marlin relies on his profound love for the cruel and beautiful sea, his brotherhood with the marlin and his overcoming of the different adversities that appear in his adventure. The old man experiences a process of rediscovery that is deemed as vital for him, since his insecurity towards his fishing skills and his age, coupled with the lack of results that he is obtaining, prompt him to venture into the immensity of the sea of the Gulf Stream in pursuit of the element that will restore his self-confidence. Being the marlin the component of self-identification and revelation that Santiago needs, the sharks act as a living proof of the cruelty that the sea may conceal in its beauty and magnificence. In addition, with regard with the human characters that appear in this short novel, the majority of the fishermen behave as humans without a strong respect for nature, but who are dominated by the value of material and physical prizes. Hence, Santiago becomes their hero due to the magnificence of the marlin that he catches, whilst Manolin is the one who appreciates the resolution, courage and modesty of the old man, which are the traits that mark his true victory. Therefore, Santiago becomes a noble hero that achieves greatness whilst recovering the meaning of his life as fisherman, which was starting to fade at the beginning of the book, and, ultimately, in this novel it is strongly underscored the nobility that humans attain through self-improvement.

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