

# Perseverance and Determination in *The Old Man and The Sea* by Ernest Hemingway

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## Abstract:

*The Old Man and the Sea* is an extraordinary novel that has attracted the attention of a huge number of readers and writers all across the globe for decades because of its profound exploration of resilience, and the great spirit of perseverance. This article aims at exploring the themes of perseverance and determination, which are among the main ones developed in Ernest Hemingway's masterpiece entitled *The Old Man and the Sea*. Through a close reading approach, this article will analyze the key passages and character interactions to clarify the multi-layered narrative of Santiago, the protagonist, who is described in the book as an old Cuban fisherman. Through his fierce pursuit of the marlin, a giant opponent, the author delves deep into the themes of perseverance, determination, endurance and the human capacity to overcome adversity.

In fact, Santiago's determination to catch the marlin serves as a metaphor to human beings' ability to cope with various ordeals of life. It highlights the physical and psychological dimensions of Santiago, the main character, putting the focus on his unwavering force and extraordinary positive spirit in the face of adversity and physical isolation.

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## Introduction

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is an extraordinary book which is a popular subject of study. This novel is considered as one of Hemingway's greatest works and a reference in American literature. Published in 1952, this novel was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1953, and played a significant role in enabling Hemingway to win the Nobel Prize for Literature. The novel is rich in terms of symbolism and allegory, which provides researchers with a fertile ground for analysis.

Set on the Cuban coast and in the vastness of the sea, the novel describes the harrowing journey of Santiago, an old fisherman, confronted by the merciless forces of nature and his own inner struggles. The book explores a sizeable number of universal themes such as suffering, pride, friendship, destiny, lack, respect, struggle against nature, self-confidence, the dignity of labor, the human spirit's resilience, and above all the theme of perseverance and determination which is under study in this article.

Considered as his masterpiece, this book offers us a profound exploration of the importance of perseverance and determination, which are essential traits that individuals should acquire in the face of adversity. Through the protagonist, Santiago, the author presents a depiction of human resilience, and the great spirits that human beings have to embody in order to cope with the profound challenges and ordeals of life.

The protagonist, Santiago is described as a symbol of resilience and hope before the existing challenges of life. The book highlights his unwavering courage, determination and patience, which lead to his triumphant victory over the Marlin at the end of the novel. Through his stunning use of characters, the author, Ernest Hemingway demonstrates the necessity of determination and perseverance for survival.

However, for a good analysis of this theme, we will delve deep into the key passages of the book in an attempt to show the importance granted to determination and perseverance by the author.

### I. Determination through Santiago's Restless Pursuit of the Malin

Throughout *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago, the protagonist embodies unwavering traits of leadership and determination which eventually helped him win his battle over the marlin. Santiago's restless pursuit of the marlin shows his refusal to succumb to defeat, thus, making his journey a metaphor for human beings' struggle against the ordeals of life. The protagonist's commitment to catch the marlin does not only derive from his need of validation from his fellow fishermen who consider him as a "*salao*", meaning the worst form of unlucky, but also from his own desire to put an end to his long lasting setback.

In fact, Santiago's determination is reflected in his inner struggle. He constantly converses with himself, reaffirming his will to continue fighting. He refuses to give up, even when the odds seem insurmountable. His inner dialogue shows a man who, despite recognizing his old age and the impossibility of his task, refuses to succumb to despair. This internal determination is not just about catching the marlin, but about maintaining his sense of dignity and purpose. In fact, as a man filled with dignity, Santiago realizes that he has to be able to get a good catch in order to prove that he is a good fisherman as shown through his following statement:

Christ, I did not know he was so big."

"I'll kill him though," he said. "In all his greatness and his glory."

Although it is unjust, he thought. But will show him what a man can do and what a man endures.

"I told the boy I was strange old man," he said. "Now is when I must prove it."

The 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, p. 48)

The first sign of determination shown by the protagonist can be read when he decides to take risk by sailing farther out. In fact, Santiago usually stays near shores like all the other boats, but one day, he decides to reach beyond man's reach by going "*too far out*" where the biggest fishes promise to be. Despite his old age, his fragility and his recent streak of bad luck, the protagonist, Santiago shows sign of determination to prove himself and gain back the glory he lost. Hemingway's description of Santiago's physical and mental struggles shows the importance of resilience and the indomitable spirit of human.

Santiago takes a remarkable decision. Not only does he refuse to give up despite his lack of success for so many days, but he maintains a thoughtful philosophy regarding his relationship with success, life and death. His devotion toward the marlin is not out of ego, but rather respects and honor for the great fish. Santiago is aware of his own pride, but gives a deep respect to creatures in general, and the fish in particular. He shows a profound respect for the sea, for his relentless opponent, the marlin. This respect does not derive from fear, but rather from an understanding of the power of nature. It is this respect that allows him to remain focused and determined in his challenging journey.

Although the sharks try to take away the prey that Santiago has fought and bled for, he keeps showing determination until he achieves his goal. His determination to bring the marlin home can be read through his following discussion with the fish: "*Fish,*" he said softly, aloud, "*I'll stay with you until I am dead.*" (Hemingway, p.33) here, the determined protagonist speaks to the marlin after the latter lurches and causes him to cut his face on the first night at sea. Rather than considering giving up and going home after being hurt, Santiago vows to have victory over the marlin or die: "*Fish,*" he said, "*I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends.*" (Hemingway, p.35) this statement does not only show the fury of the protagonist, but also his determination and trust.

His desire to catch the marlin leads him to become careless about his own life, for his life would be meaningless if he does not go home with the marlin. After having reached the peak of his efforts in his struggle with the marlin, Santiago says that he does not care about anything. It does not matter who kills who between him and the marlin, he is almost desperate. He does not care if it is himself who will be killed by the fish because he greatly admires it. He says in this regard: "*You are killing me fish, the old man thought. But you have a right too. Never have I seen greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble than you, brother. Come on and kill me, I do not care who kills who.*" (Hemingway, p. 68)

His aching body and injured hands do not hinder his commitment and determination to let go the fish, even though it requires a great deal of sacrifice as shown: "*When he saw the shark he leaned over the side and punch at him. He hit only meat and the hide was set hard and he barely got the knife in. The blow hurt not only his hands but his shoulders too.*" (Hemingway, p.100) although he is severely wounded and blood flows on his body, he keeps defending his fish against the sharks stating that a man is not made for defeat, "*a man can be destroyed, but not defeated*" (Hemingway, p. 61) he said. His determination is not driven by material gain, but by the need to reaffirm his identity as a skilled and capable fisherman. He sees the marlin as a worthy opponent, a test of his strength and endurance, and a symbol of his lifelong dedication to his craft.

Thus, when the sharks take away some part of the fish, Santiago becomes furious and begins regretting this so much. He says that they must have taken a quarter of him and the best meat, he wishes it were a dream and that he never looked at him. He feels very sorry about it. "*I am sorry that I killed the fish though, he thought. Now the bad time is coming and I do not even have the harpoon.*" (Hemingway, p. 61)

Despite his injury, he no longer feels concerned with his own health and safety, but remains deeply committed to bring home the marlin in order to put an end to his long unlucky fishing streak. Bringing home the giant fish would mean to overcome adversity, regain hope and confidence, and above all, put an end to his long standing streak of bad luck. The protagonist wants to prove that the negative perception that his community, and above all his fellow fishermen have about him is wrong, and wants to be given full recognition as a normal fisherman and as an individual worthy of respect.

In fact, in the beginning of the novel, Santiago is described as a character that is the laughing stock of all his fellow fishermen and the entire community. He lost respect and credibility as a human being and a fisherman, and this deeply affects him. But his humility, courage, and sense of commitment are among many others, what have kept Santiago alive, hopeful and optimistic about his goal:

They sat on the Terrace and many of the fishermen made fun of the old man and he was not angry. Others, of the older fishermen, looked at him and were sad. But they did not show it and they spoke politely about the current and the depths they had drifted their lines at and the steady good weather and of what they had seen. (Hemingway, p. 3)

It is because of his unluckiness and his failure to catch fish that Santiago has lost the respect of the entire community and become a figure of fun. In fact, people do not realize that Santiago is a fisherman endowed with impressive fishing qualities because of his long streak of bad luck, but thanks to his self-confidence, the protagonist himself has never doubted his abilities to make the difference.

## II. Self-confidence as source of Determination and Perseverance

Santiago's self-confidence has also been a key-element that helps him thrive. One cannot deal with Santiago's determination and perseverance without tackling his deep sense of self-belief, for the latter has been the foundation of his success at the end of the novel. Through *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ernest Hemingway has offered a profound exploration of self-confidence and its significance through the protagonist. In fact, Santiago is described in the novel as a character overwhelmed with a sense of self-confidence which has been determinant throughout his hard journey. Despite the different ordeals and challenges that he faces throughout his life, Santiago keeps being self-confident.

Santiago's confidence derives from the different experiences and ordeals he has gone through. His years of experience as a fisherman have enabled him to possess a profound understanding of the sea, nature and creatures. That experience has helped him master a great deal of fishing arts, skills and competences. Moreover, the protagonist's past successes such as his victories in arm-wrestling also reinforce his confidence. In fact, Santiago's victory in a 24-hour arm wrestling against the great Negro from "Cienfuegos" (Hemingway, p. 69) has greatly helped raise his level of confidence. After that grueling battle, he was called the champion of arm-wrestling:

For a long time after that everyone had called him The Champion and there had been a return match in the spring. But not much money was bet and he had won it quite easily since he had broken the confidence of the negro from Cienfuegos in the first match. (Hemingway, p 46)

In addition, despite the fact of having stayed over eighty-four days without catching the slightest fish, his streak of bad luck, his setback among many other woes, Santiago never doubts his abilities and competences. He does not allow these hard times to define him, or put into question his ability to overcome adversity. He instead decides to go beyond man's reach, thus, demonstrating his remarkable determination thanks to his self-confidence. His strong self-assurance can be read through his resolve to overcome the immense mental and physical challenges of his struggle against the marlin, the giant fish.

Santiago is a man with a high sense of self-confidence. He is proud of his condition despite the fact that people look at him in disgust. The protagonist believes that he is endowed with fishing skills that can help him overcome all the tricky situations of his journey:

But you went turtle-ing for years off the Mosquito Coast and your eyes are good."

"I am a strange old man."

"But are you strong enough now for a truly big fish?" "I think so. And there are many tricks. (Hemingway, p. 6)

This shows once more that Santiago is a man who undoubtedly has a strong sense of self-belief, and that confidence is what makes him get engaged in this tough and lonely journey.

Throughout his tough journey, and above all through his arduous battle with the marlin, Santiago constantly engages in an internal dialogue which keeps empowering him at every stage, reminding him of his prowess, analyzing his actions. This internal resilience can be seen as the evidence of Santiago's deep self-assurance. In fact, through memories of his past triumphs, and his mastery of nature and creatures, Santiago keeps pushing even though he faces an unbearable pain. Thus, he successfully puts an end to his long-lasting bad streak by surprising his fellow fishermen who were making fun of him, and considered him as a "*salao*".

In addition, one can see that Santiago's mental strength and self-confidence have empowered his aging body. Naturally, a man in his eighties is weak, but Santiago does not show a sign of weakness of any kind during his harsh battle with the marlin. Despite his age and physical appearance, Santiago shows strong willingness to persist in spite of his deep pain, exhaustion and injury.

## III. Santiago's psychological strength as the foundation of his success

Psychological Strength can be defined and measured differently. It can be defined as the mental or emotional ability to endure hardships. The protagonist's psychological strength is a key element that eventually led to his victory over the giant marlin, and his success in putting an end to his long standing streak of bad luck. Santiago's triumph is more based on psychological prowess than physical resilience. As shown above, the idea of giving up has never come across the main character's mind despite endless setbacks, unmeasurable exhaustion and deep pain due to his restless and tough battle with the marlin. This sense of determination is the evidence of his deep psychological strength, pride, humility and love for creatures and nature.

The psychological prowess of the protagonist helps him cope with immense physical and mental pressures which allow him to become victorious at the end of the novel.

In *The Old Man and the sea*, there are many different elements that exhibit Santiago's psychological strength. Santiago's experience is the proof that psychological strength may be more important than physical strength when it comes to facing difficulties.

Despite his deep injuries following his battle with the Marlin, Santiago's mind never let his aging body give in even though it pushes him to do so. His mind always keeps him from surrendering, which is why whenever his body is about to give up, his mind does not allow him to do so.

Santiago remains psychologically strong despite the fact that his spirit is hurt by all the injustices inflicted upon him by the other fishermen and by Manolin's father who sent his son to another fisherman because of the fact that he stayed over eighty four days without catching the slightest fish: "*He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four*

days now without taking a fish” (Hemingway, p. 5)

As shown above, another example that illustrates Santiago's psychological strength is his hand injury. In fact, the line burn had cut his flesh. “*The cut was in the working part of his hand.*” (Hemingway, p.57) Following this cut, his hand began to cramp. Thus, instead of giving up, Santiago tells his hands: “*Cramp then if you want. Make yourself into a claw. It will do you no good.*” (Hemingway, p. 58) So he makes sure he does not use his cramped hand until it fully recovers. Thus, if Santiago has been able to defeat the Marlin and take it home, it is thanks to his unwavering mental resilience and endurance.

In addition, it is important to show that different things have participated in strengthening Santiago's psychology. The latter is partly built by his reference, the great DiMaggio whom he thinks about whenever he is tempted by the idea of giving up. He thinks of him and asks himself: “*Do you believe the great DiMaggio would stay with a fish as long as I will stay with this one? ... I am sure he would*” (Hemingway, p. 68) and this gives him more courage and confidence to keep up his struggle despite the hardships he faces. Moreover, Santiago's psychological strength is in part due to his faith. The protagonist is a man who believes in God. In fact, Santiago is a true believer, a religious man. This can be seen through the picture of Jesus and the Virgin stuck to the wall of his guano: “*On the brown walls of the flattered, overlapping of the sturdy fibered guano there was a picture in color of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and another of the Virgin of Cobre*” (Hemingway, p. 10)

There are also lots of passages that illustrate Santiago's belief in God. During his entire journey at sea, Santiago never loses faith, on the contrary, he always keeps praying God to make the giant fish take the baits:

“He'll take it”, the old man said aloud. “God help him to take it,” He did not take it though. He was gone and the old man felt nothing. “He can't have gone,” he said. “Christ knows he can't have gone. He's making a turn. May be he has been hooked before and he remembers something of it. (Hemingway, p. 30)

He has a strong belief that God will help him catch the fish by making it jump. He also asks God to help him recover from his cramped left hand so that he could be able to keep up struggling with the marlin. He said in this regard: “*God help me to have the cramp go,*” he said. “*Because I do not know what the fish is going to do.*” (Hemingway, p. 39) His faith in God can be further read through the promise he makes if he catches the marlin. In fact, he promises to praise God if he succeeds in catching the giant fish: “*I will say ten our Fathers and ten Hail Marys that I should catch this fish, and I promise to make a pilgrimage to the Virgin of Cobre if I catch him. That is the promise.*” (Hemingway, p. 47)

Santiago has been very optimistic during his entire journey, and that optimistic spirit is in part due to his faith. Even though he feels exhausted whenever he pulls the line, but he still remains optimistic that God will save him:

I could not fail myself and die on a fish like this,” he said. “Now that I have him coming so beautifully, God help endure. I'll say a hundred our fathers and a hundred Hail Marys. But I cannot say them now.” Consider them said; he thought I'll say them. (Hemingway, p 50)

This shows once again that the protagonist's faith in God has also contributed a lot in shaping his mental strength.

## Conclusion

In a nutshell, we can say retain that *The Old Man and the Sea* is a book that extraordinarily explores a huge number of themes, and above all, the theme of determination and perseverance in the face of the adversity. Through the character of Santiago, and through the hardships he has gone, the author, Ernest Hemingway delves deep into the role that perseverance and determination should play in helping people cope with the sizeable ordeals of life. In this article, we have gone through the various aspects of the protagonist's challenges in an attempt to show the significance granted to determination and perseverance by Ernest Hemingway. This novel still continues to attract readers and researchers all across the globe, and sheds light on Santiago's unwavering resolve in front of the insurmountable obstacles of nature and the lack of consideration from his own community.

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, determination and perseverance are both personal virtues and universal themes. Santiago's determination is revealed through multiple fights he is in, and among them we can list his fight against the marlin, against his aging body, and against the sharks, his struggle against his fellow fishermen, to name but these. These struggles testify the resilience of the human spirit, making his journey a timeless exploration of struggle, and existential meaning.

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