

# Professionalism in Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea

**Mohammad Ehsanul Islam Khan**

Lecturer (Undergraduate Section), Department of English,  
Dohar-Nawabganj College, Dhaka  
Nawabganj, Dhaka-1320  
Mobile no. +88 01911-76 97 84  
E-mail: [asad.helloteen@gmail.com](mailto:asad.helloteen@gmail.com)

## Abstract

*Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea is a simple story on the surface, but in fact a tale with a deeper message and a relevance that transcends time and place. It speaks to the universal truths of a man's existence within this world, where pride, respect, tenacity, and dreams fuel a man in his quest to thrive in the face of professional struggle. It is a story about the indomitable spirit of man's competence. Here the predominant theme is "grace under pressure" which is clearly developed in the old man who fought the giant fish and killed it against all odds. Hemingway's protagonist Santiago represents the attitude towards practical life, and his fight with the mighty marlin offers numerous lessons to the multitude. The honor in struggle, defeat, and death depicts in the mainstream of the story. Pride becomes the source of greatness and determination of professionalism though Santiago briefly wonders if pride is a problem, if killing the fish for pride makes the act a sin. The knowledge that a simple man is capable of the decency, dignity and even heroism that Santiago possesses is itself the victory of professional endurance with physical struggle, fatigue, solitude, old age and impending death.*

**Key Words:** Expertise, Positivism, Boldness, Fortitude, Sanguinity, Optimism, Stimulation

## 1. Introduction

The foremost theme of *The Old Man and the Sea* is man's capacity to withstand and transcend hardships of time and circumstances that represent the intense professionalism indeed. The idea is conveyed through Santiago's adventures with the marlin and with the sharks. Hemingway depicts the physical, mental, spiritual and professional endurance through sufferings in the novella.

After eighty-four successive days without having any fish, Santiago goes 'far out' into the ocean. A giant marlin takes the bait, but the old man is unable to reel him in, that leads to a three-day struggle between the protagonist and the fish. The marlin circles the skiff while Santiago slowly reels him in. Santiago nearly passes out from exhaustion but gathers enough strength to harpoon the marlin through the heart, causing him to lurch in an almost sexual climax of vitality before dying. Santiago sails back to shore with the marlin tied to his boat. Sharks find the marlin's trail of blood and attack it.

Santiago fights them and arrives home toting only the marlin's skeletal carcass. The village fishermen respect their formerly ridiculed peer, and Manolin pledges to return to fishing with the greatest professional fisherman Santiago.

Santiago is adept in his profession, has proved his aptitude several times before, but that is not adequate. He has to prove it every day, for every day is a new day. Santiago's suffering is akin to artistic creation, which is never an easy task.

## 2. Objectives

The prominent modern novelist Ernest Hemingway is versatile and universal in professionalism of his writings to present the universal needs of people not only of his contemporary age but also of all ages. His novella keeps a great impression on modern people. This work will find out the intense professionalism reflected in his novella

## 3. Materials and Methods

Based on the criticism of Ernest Hemingway, enough critical essays and analysis were published in the shapes of different books and in many literary journals which are very useful as the supporting materials for further study of the research work. To develop this hypothesis, the primary idea is found from the study on the English novels of Ernest Hemingway in the different level of academic study and several critical studies on Hemingway. In fact, the only helpful method was 'Observation Method' for this research study. By using this method, the researchers has gone through literary articles, critical compositions, and websites to find related study materials, in

order to be acknowledged in the related topic and will also collect critical journals from different libraries to have specialized information on the author and compose the work in a more credible way.

## 4. Background

### 4.1. Definition

Professionalism is the level of excellence or competence that is expected of a professional. Webster's Dictionary defines it as, "the conduct, aims, or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person."

There is much more to being a professional than simply acquiring the best training and skills. Becoming an expert in any field is only one part of gaining the respect of clients and colleagues. A large part of achieving gratitude as a professional has to do with the way that one present one's self to others. It is a mindset that becomes easier to apply as anyone progress further and becomes an inspiration for others to follow.

There are five important keys to being a true professional: Character, Attitude, Excellence, Competency and Conduct. These five keys again cover some important concepts, such as being accountable and liable, developing admiration, doing what is right, and learning how to scheme a professional icon. [3]

### 4.2. Professional Autobiography Reflected in Santiago

Hemingway was an expert at deep-sea fishing and had won several prizes in various competitions, sometimes catching giant marlin. When he lived in Cuba, he acquired a house, nine miles outside

Havana, and often fished in the Gulf Stream, much like Santiago. The background in *The Old Man and the Sea* is derived from real-life Cuban fishing villages near the Gulf Stream. The subject of the luckless Old Man who caught a giant fish also came from personal experience. In an essay on deep-sea fishing published in 1936, Hemingway had written of an old man who had caught a huge Marlin weighing nearly eight hundred pounds. With the fish tied to his skiff, he had bravely tried to fight off the sharks and was picked up by some fisherman in a state of half craziness with the sharks still circling his boat. When Hemingway met this old man, he promised to write a book about his experiences. It was more than twenty years before he turned the story into a book called *The Old man and the Sea*; it was to be Hemingway's final novel. Many critics see in it a comparison between Santiago, an old man fighting to master the fish and maintain his reputation, and Hemingway, an old man fighting to retain an active lifestyle. Even if the novel is not partially autobiographical, the novel proves Hemingway's abilities as a novelist, for the book expertly blends facts and fiction to produce one of the most moving, poignant tales ever written.

#### 4.3.The Double-Allegorical Novella

Hemingway sets the action of the novella not in abstract terms of expertise- gain and loss, strength and fragility, youth and age. Rather the novelist puts vivid images such as the marlin and the sharks, the right hand and the left hand, Manolin and Santiago.

*The Old Man and the Sea* is a double allegory. There is an abundance of meaning in the story. His protagonist,

Santiago has a message for us that a man may grow old and be wholly down on his luck, he can still dare to the rules, persist when he is defeated and thwarted, and thus by the manner of his losing win a moral victory. On the other side, the novella can be read as an allegory entirely personal to the novelist as an account of his own struggle, his determination and his literary vicissitudes. Here is a distinctive autobiographical element in the novella. At the time of its inscription, Hemingway was himself an old man, confronted by the struggles of age, much like Santiago. Prior to the publication of *The Old Man and the Sea*, he had been having difficulty with his writing. Between 1940 and 1950, he published no novels. When he finally published "*Across the River and into the Trees*" in 1950, Hemingway was criticized severely for falling below his usual standards. [4]

It was obvious he was in a "literary drought," much like Santiago's own round of bad luck in fishing. When he published *The Old Man and the Sea* in 1952, it was his prize, his giant fish. It was never a simple task. Even if and when a masterpiece is achieved, there is no assurance that critics, who are no less than the killer sharks, will not tear it to pieces.

Like Santiago, Hemingway is a master who sets out his lines with more care and precision than his competitors. In his writing, emotion is always held at a distance; only the bare happening is recorded to affect the reader as it may.

Hemingway possesses a classically precise sense of narrative structure. The arrangement of his highly artificial scenes is nicely controlled to appear natural. His diction is terse, concrete and colloquial and simple. His dialogues are pared of the

usual speech tags and explanations. It is spare, short respired, prone to sarcasm and at times too consciously naïve. His shriveled and emblematic sentences lapse from simplicity into childishness. His most precious gift for writing is his marvelous sensitiveness to impressions. These features prove author's expertise to attract his readers. Ernest Hemingway won the 1953 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and Nobel Prize in 1954 for this immensely successful novella *The Old Man and the Sea* that confirmed his power and presence in the modern literary world. Thus Hemingway was awarded for his intense professionalism. [2]

## 5. The Professional Protagonist

### 5.1. The Old Cuban Fisherman

The old man of the novella's title, Santiago is a Cuban skilled fisherman who has an extended run of bad luck. Despite his professionalism, he has been unable to catch a fish for eighty-four days. He is modest, yet exposes a defensible pride in his abilities. His profound knowledge of the sea and its creatures, and of his craft, is consummate and helps him preserve a professional sense of hope regardless of circumstance. Throughout his life, Santiago has been presented with contests to test his working strength and serenity. The marlin with which he struggles for three days represents his greatest professional challenge. Paradoxically, although Santiago ultimately loses the fish, the marlin is his victory.

Hemingway gives incidental detail rudimentary tests of endurance of distresses to which Santiago is subjected, and also his courageous reaction, beckoning both physical energy and

imaginative vision to pledge the forces challenging him. When the marlin takes out line Santiago pulls in. When the environment is surrounded by the darkness of night, Santiago dreams of golden and white beaches. This represents his strong optimistic mind. When he is threatened by the fragility of old age, he summons visions of his own youthful strength. This is indeed a technique to cope up with the condition of a professional fisherman in any unease or danger.

### 5.2. Code Hero

The protagonist, Santiago is perhaps, the finest and best known code hero of Ernest Hemingway. The function of the code hero is to balance the hero's deficiencies, and to correct the hero's stance. He in fact, offers and exemplifies certain principles of honor, courage and fortitude which in a life of tension and pain make a man a man, and enable him to conduct himself well in the losing battle-that is life. [7]

The principal point about Santiago is that he behaves perfectly- honorably, with great courage and endurance- while losing to the sharks, the giant fish he has caught. This is life: such is the message the code hero always brings; one must lose, of course; what counts is how one behaves while one is being demolished. It reflects a professional viewpoint of Hemingway.

## 6. Discussion

Ernest Hemingway depicts professionalism through his central character Santiago. The competency and tenacity of the protagonist become the examples of his professionalism. The author gives message in several ways. His expertise lies in the characteristics of his protagonist:

## 6.1. Positivism

Santiago is always positive to his profession. Positivism is the pre-condition of the success. The old man's battle with the fish is not only a battle of strength, but a battle of wills. He makes up for his old age with incredible endurance. He is willingly progressive to withstand hunger, physical pain, and isolation from the rest of the world while combating the marlin. Santiago remains positive in every step. He never underestimates his rival and never gives concession to it as we find in this line,

*"But, thank God, [the fish] are not as intelligent as we who kill them; although they are more noble and more able."*

### 6.1.1. Isolation

The old man has become isolated from people and indeed from the world of humans completely during the time on the sea. His isolation delineates who he is, and highlights the unique nature of his character. Isolation becomes both a feebleness (he undergoes from solitude), but also a crucial element to his scuffle with the marlin. Although the old man accepts and admits help from others, it is alone that he does battle with the marlin, that he must be positive to prove himself and his capabilities.

He is very positive to his luck and his own attempt. He says in the novella,

*"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."*

### 6.1.2. Self-belief

Anyone can have luck of course, but not everyone one can have willpower, skill and diligence. Santiago knows this and therefore believes in his ability rather than chance. As he says,

*"To hell with luck," he thinks. "I'll bring the luck with me."*

## 6.2. Human Nature Relationship

Hemingway exposes an intense relationship of human and natural realm. Santiago is inimitable in his affiliation to and understanding of the natural world. He talks about the sea as though it were a woman. The birds become his friends in his loneliness. He considers the sharks as personal rivals. He tests the connection between turtles and jellyfish, between fish and birds. The beings and the natural world become a lens through which we can scan the positive attitude of the protagonist being alone in a vast ocean. [10]

### 6.3. Great Regards for Profession

Santiago is a fisherman and he loves his job of fishing. He never, not for once disregards his profession. Rather in the dark, unsafe and hazardous condition while doing his job he remembers his birth for fishing as he says,

*"Perhaps I should not have been a fisherman, he thought. But that was the thing that I was born for."*

Though frustration seems to appear but it is defeated to the strong professional attitude of the old fisherman. We have also got another proof of his intense professionalism from these lines,



*"You did not kill the fish only to keep alive and to sell for food, he thought. You killed him for pride and because you are a fisherman. You loved him when he was alive and you loved him after. If you love him, it is not a sin to kill him."*

He praises his rival and exposes his premeditated desire to have it finally,

*"He is a great fish and I must convince him, he thought. I must never let him learn his strength nor what he could do if he made his run."*

#### **6.4. Boldness**

The boldness of the old fisherman is also depicted in the novella. The giant marlin which is the symbol of the mysterious world of the anonymous challenges everyone. For a large slice of the novella, Santiago is dragged by this giant, mysterious creature, and yet he does not know what it is or even what it looks like. The old man only imagines its strength, size, power, and determination; yet he still ascertains with it, considering a part of the natural order of existence. When the old man actually sees the fish, he is even more astonished at its grandeur and size. This event shows the boldness, bravery and audacity of the protagonist. He also applies tricks to win as he says,

*"I may not be as strong as I think, but I know many tricks and I have resolution."*

With the mystery elucidated, Santiago is determined to show what a man can do and what a man endures. In the text, we also get a glimpse of the deterioration of strength over time, and

how a man who relies on strength in his profession can fight against this.

He believes that a man continues to do whatever he must do to the best of his ability, no matter what trials befall upon him. While contests and impediments can shred a man of all outward signs of success, still his spirit can remain undefeated. For this a man should never give up trying. He should keep on trying and continues his journey until the triumph sparkles. As he says,

*"But man is not made for defeat," he said. "A man can be destroyed but not defeated."*

We another time find his idea of 'destroyed but not defeated' afterwards while talking to the Marlin,

*"Fish, you are going to have to die anyway. Do you have to kill me too?"*

#### **6.5. Fortitude**

Santiago has a great power of endurance. He is never frustrated and fatigued during his fishing job. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, the ability to withstand somatic pain is one of Santiago's outlining individualities. Suffering is an obligatory step in his battle with the fish. It adds intensity to the struggle and fortitude. The psychological agony of losing the fish to the sharks is startlingly minimized; this is a type of pain, it seems, that can be meticulous by absolute self-control. We can realize his power of patience by this line,

*"Fish," he said softly, aloud, "I'll stay with you until I am dead."*

Afterwards intensity finds the place,

*"Fish," he said, "I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends."*

At the end, Santiago becomes a Christ symbol in the novella. Like Christ, he is filled with goodness, patience, and self-effacement. The forces of malevolent, however, are against Santiago, as seen when he battles the sharks; similarly, Christ had to fight the wicked in Jerusalem. Both men's scuffles end with shame and mortification. Christ was betrayed, trodden, forced to carry his own cross, and is crucified, with arms outstretched and bleeding hands.

Santiago is also deceived by the sharks and feels beaten. Carrying his cross across his back, much like Christ carting the cross Santiago returned home as a dejected man. When he finally lies down in his bed, his arms are stretched straight out with palms up, and his hands are bleeding. It is an obvious reflection of fortitude.

### 6.6. Sanguinity

Santiago never thinks about his return without being succeeded. He is always optimistic to get the fruits of his industry. Optimism is one of the important features of professionalism. We find the old man dreams of white beaches in the darkest night with the marlin that proves his sanguinity.

We find his strong optimistic idea from the line,

*"My big fish must be somewhere."*

Santiago soothes himself that he should complete his job whether there is any strain in the midst of the success because this is not, at least, impossible to complete. So he says in the novella,

*"I have never seen or heard of such a fish. But I must kill him. I am glad we do not have to try to kill the stars."*

In one place of the novella we find the marlin becomes inaudible and serene. The fright of losing sparkles for once but immediately the old man gets strength and self-confidently religious. He then enthuses and comforts himself saying,

*"He can't have gone, he said  
"Christ know he can't have gone. He's making a turn. Maybe he has been hooked before and he remembers something of it. Then he felt the gentle touch on the line and he was happy."*

### 6.7. Firmness

Santiago knows when many more sharks do come he has to club and assault them with all of his strength. During the battle, the sun goes down and Santiago wonders, "What will you do now if they come in the night? What can you do?" He digs deep. "Fight them," he says,

*"I'll fight them until I die."*

Though the sharks slash Santiago's marlin apart at the end, they do not setback him as a man, and he never gives up. Propelling in, he tastes blood in his mouth, so he spits into the sea and says,

*"Eat that galanos. And make a dream you've killed a man."*

Every man has sharks that circle him; they gather when they bouquet the blood of real attainment and Santiago is never too old to put up a fight. He never quits his troublesome journey.

### 6.8. Stimulations

Inspirations and incentives can bring success in professional life. In this novella the partially handicapped baseball player DiMaggio is the source of encouragement for Santiago. He often figures in the old man's stirring thoughts, as well as in his dreams.

DiMaggio inspires him with leadership qualities and the determination to win, in spite of handicaps. When his left hand cramps and he feels drained of his strength, the old man reminds himself of the painful bone spur that handicaps the great DiMaggio. The image of the baseball hero playing in pain gives Santiago renewed vigor and stamina to bear his own pain. We find the old man gets inspiration from DiMaggio in this line,

*"Have faith in the Yankees my son. Think of the great DiMaggio."*

Memory is another inspiring theme in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Because of his old age, the hero recalls a strength and dexterity of his youth. We at first wonder if such essentials have faded from his character over time, but are left with a suspicion that Santiago in his forte and abilities has lived up to heroic image we see portrayed in his memories of his younger self. The old man's memory of the lions is a constant motif, as he tacitly compares his own abilities to their prowess and pride. The sober promise of the

conquest and regeneration with which the novella closes is supported by the final image of the lions. Because Santiago associates the lions with his youth, the dream advocates the spherical nature of life. Santiago imagines the lions, fierce predators, playing, his dream suggests a harmony between the opposing forces—life and death; love and hate; destruction and regeneration—of nature. [6]

### 7. Findings

The killing of the marlin that occurs on the fourth day of the narrative marks the climax of the novella. The end of the marlin's life is the most vital of moments. The fish seems to surpass his own death, because it invests him with a new life. This notion of transcendence is important, for it resounds within Santiago's story. Like the fish, the old man suffers something of a death on his way back to the village. He is exposed of his twist and, given his age, will likely never have the opportunity to land such a magnificent fish again. This incident, especially, exposes intense professional attitude of the old man because a professional expert never wants to go back with empty hand. Finally, the protagonist returns to the village with his strength of mind and his status rejuvenated.

### 8. Conclusion

Hemingway exposes the basic theme that life is an endless struggle with deceptive rewards in his novella *The Old Man and the Sea*. In order to gain nobility in life, a person must show positivism, bravery, confidence, audacity, persistence, optimism, and intelligence during the struggle all of which are the features of



professionalism. Then, even if the prize is lost, the person has won the battle, proving himself as capable of retaining grace under pressure, the ultimate test of mankind. The subject matter of *The Old Man and the Sea* is the dignity of human endeavor in the face of severe odds. Santiago faces every plausible obstacle: he is old, wretched, and ailing from the start as the novel begins. Besides, he had to fish by himself, for no one will provide him a helping hand because of his misfortune. As Santiago gets the marlin, he clutches to the line for a valued life, despite the fact that his right hand is incised and other is cramping, and his shoulders burn with pain. He continues with the fish for three long days notwithstanding his overall psychological and bodily weariness. When Santiago finally masters and kills the marlin, he tries to force away the blood-enthralled sharks. Even with the adversities, the old man never relinquishes. It is the dignity of the Hemingway's protagonist whether Santiago is trying to master the marlin or fighting the vicious sharks, that triumphs with approbation for him.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Hemingway, Ernest. *The Old Man and the Sea*. New York: Simon & Schuster, (1999).
- [2] Lal, Ramji. *Hemingway: The Old Man and the Sea*. Rama Brothers: India; (2004).
- [3] Online document. Article: "What is Professionalism"; Available at: <http://www.goalsinstitute.com> (July 16, 2013)
- [4] Online document. Available at: <http://www.pinkmonkey.com> (August 03, 2013).
- [5] RHSCheerCutie63. Article: "Symbolism in The Old Man and the Sea". At URL address <<http://www.studymode.com/essays/Symbolism-Old-Man-Sea-54764.html>>
- [6] Shmoop Editors. *The Old Man and the Sea* Themes. Shmoop.com. (28 June 2013).
- [7] Online Article: "*Santiago as a code hero in Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea*". Web. 123helpme.com. (21<sup>st</sup> July 2013).
- [8] Schatz, Bryan. Article: "*Lessons in Manliness from The Old Man and the Sea*". Web. [www.artofmanliness.com](http://www.artofmanliness.com). (10<sup>th</sup> June 2013).
- [9] "Symbolism in the Old Man in the Sea" StudyMode.com. (04/10/2013). Available at: <http://www.studymode.com/essays/Symbolism-Old-Man-Sea-54764.html>.
- [10] SparkNotes Editors. "SparkNote on *The Old Man and the Sea*." SparkNotes.com. SparkNotes LLC. 2002. Web. (18 Jul. 2013).