



## SEEDS OF OPTIMISTIC IMAGINATION IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S "THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA"

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### ABSTRACT

Ernest Hemingway – an American short story writer, novelist and journalist – is a famous figure in the literaristic world of the twentieth century. Moreover, he is one of the most celebrated figures of American English literature. He struggled hard throughout his life, yet he did not lose the imagination of optimization. In fact, he emerged as a promising personality that expounded to fight against the calamities and adversities of human life. In most of his novels, his heroes are seen charged with high intensity of optimistic attitude which provides them energetic strength to strive with the calamities. As a matter of fact, his most famous novel, *The Old Man and the Sea*, is sprouted from the seeds of optimistic imagination that is a guiding principle of human circulation. Undoubtedly, optimism is a sort of positive characteristic that is having a source of living for each and every human being. It is a universal fact that people become less optimistic in the later period of their life. On the contrary, Santiago, the protagonist of the novel – *The Old Man and the Sea* – can be observed with the vision of optimism even in his later span of life as he is astonishingly light-hearted and high-spirited but undefeated. Thus, this paper throws light on the seeds of optimistic imagination on which Ernest Hemingway lay the foundation of his last major work – *The Old Man and the Sea*.

**Keywords:** Seeds, optimism, imagination, struggle, sea and sharks etc.

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### INTRODUCTION

Ernest Hemingway—an American author and journalist – is one of the most daring and bearing writers of the twentieth century. Moreover, he is confessed to be the most significant writer of the twentieth century American literature. Most of his creative writings are world-famous and display the discourses of hopeful and forceful life though it may be running under the impact of adventurous strife. Ernest Hemingway emphasises the fact that life is nothing but a mixture of two attitudes – positive and negative. Positive attitude is the

foundation of the worldly formation while negative attitude refers to the hopeless destitution. His heroes like Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, Harry Morgan in *To Have and Have Not* and Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* undergo numerous mental and physical agonies but they are neither frustrated nor defeated and try to overcome all the adversities. Finally, they become victorious though their victory seems to be spiritual rather than material.

Many of Ernest Hemingway's novels and other writings are based on his own experiences and

beliefs. Ernest Hemingway was a man of contradictions. On one hand he was fond of outdoor life, fishing and hunting i.e. a life of adventure and on the other he was interested in music and fine arts and extremely fond of reading. He was also interested in nature. His love of adventure attracted him towards war. He was interested in military strategy and considered war as a test of strength and colour.<sup>1</sup>

Ernest Hemingway was an adventurous man so he delineated in his writings the exciting events of bull-fighting he saw in Spain, perilous hunting in African forests, battling of a giant fish at the coast of Cuba and the two disastrous World Wars in which he played a part in Europe. As a matter of fact, it is notable that Hemingway was fond of chivalrous and hazardous feats. But, when he joined the Italian Army as an Ambulance Driver (Red Cross), he came to know the realities of the battlefield. He, then, experienced that war is nothing but a meaningless violence and destruction of human life in the name of patriotism and glory. As a result, he began to hate wars and wanted to abolish them as he had written in the preface to his war-anthology, *Men at War*:

"I have seen much war in my life-time and I hate it profoundly. But there are worse things than war; and all of them come with defeat. The more you hate war, the more you know that once you are forced into it, for whatever reason it may be, you have to win it. You have to win it and get rid of the people that make it."<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, Hemingway wanted to eradicate the poisonous route of world wars from this world for the welfare of the whole globe. He was a superb craftsman and an optimistic thinker who had striven to give artistic expression to his views on life and human destiny. However Hemingway did not propound any systematic system of philosophy, he poured the theme of hopeful struggle as a guiding principle through his novelistic calligraphy. One who reads his novels can get a ray of hope very easily as S. C. Mundhra illustrates: "Hemingway had an obsession with evil, early sorrow and death, but he had also a message. The only ray of hope is that provided by individual human courage. Dying well for Hemingway was a crucial corollary to living well.

The great heroes of Hemingway show extraordinary fortitude even on the point of death."<sup>3</sup>

**Meaning of Optimistic Imagination:** The term 'optimism' is linked with the doctrine of a German philosopher, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who held that the actual world is the best of all the possible worlds that could have been created. To a great extent, optimism is nothing but a mental attitude that explicates human situations under the impact of best feelings and dealings. Moreover, Shorter Oxford English Dictionary defines the term 'optimism' as 'any view which supposes the ultimate predominance of good over evil in the universe'.<sup>4</sup> In other words, it is 'the tendency to hope for the best or to take a favourable view of circumstances or prospects'.<sup>5</sup> As a result, optimism is a method or mode of thinking that guides all human beings to move forward with a cheerful flush whether they are in the shade of gladness or sadness. In addition, Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language specifies the term 'optimism' as 'a disposition or tendency to look on the more favourable side of events or conditions and to expect the most favourable outcome'.<sup>6</sup> Thus, optimistic imagination is a vision of contemplation that is bound to expect the most favourable resultant in each and every favourable or unfavourable situation.

**Seeds of Optimism in *The Old Man and the Sea*:** With the publication of *The Old Man and the Sea*, a parable of an old man's struggle against the powers of natural objects, Hemingway captured the culmination of his reputation which was figured in the form of the Nobel prize in literature. *The Old Man and the Sea* is the narration of an old Cuban fisherman, Santiago, who displays gallantry to strive against the marlin. Moreover, Santiago struggles hard against the natural objects such as sea, water and sharks etc. and all these things decide his destiny. Although he was lean and thin, he was a man of unconquerable will as it is observable through the following lines:

The old man was thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck. The brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer the sun brings from its reflection on the tropic sea were on his cheeks. The blotches ran well down the sides of his face and his

hands had the deep-creased scars from handling heavy fish on the cords. But none of these scars were fresh. They were as old as erosions in a fishless desert. Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same colour as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated.<sup>7</sup>

Santiago is always cheerful as he has the optimistic spirit that is always ready to charge him with the undefeatable courage. He used to go for fishing every day with the confidential imagination of catching a large fish. In his profession of fishing, Manolin, a young boy, was his companion with whom he would talk of fruitful days.

Indeed, he had gone eighty-four days without catching a fish. During the first forty days, Manolin had voyaged with him. But after forty days, the boy's parents advised him to leave the old man as his parents were convinced that Santiago was an unlucky fellow. Santiago became alone, notwithstanding, he did not lose his heart and tried his best satisfactorily. Moreover, he became happy for Manolin who had gone on a luckier boat. Thus, it is clear that he was a kind-hearted and hopeful person. Furthermore, he went on sailing and reflecting: "I'll bring the luck with me."

On the eighty-fifth day, he happened to go far into the sea and got success in hooking a large fish, marlin which was eighteen feet long. It was two feet longer than the skiff which was being rowed by Santiago. The marlin kept on pulling his skiff near about for three days. Struggling strenuously with the marlin, Santiago became extremely exhausted, nonetheless, he was not hopeless.

He felt comfortable even when he was suffering. Although he was not a religious man, he remembered Holy Mary, Mother of God and Jesus many times and, thus, went on uttering his prayers mechanically. Sometimes, he was so tired that he could not remember the prayer and then he would say them fast so that they might come automatically. By doing this, he got vigour and prospective strength as God and all other godly things are the perennial source of energy, impetuosity and optimistic inclination for all the human beings when they are in difficulty or danger. Here, the old man's pious uttering is quite revealing:

"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 de Cobre if I catch him. That is a promise....Hail Mary full of Grace the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen; Blessed Virgin, pray for the death of this fish." (*The Old Man and the Sea*, p. 63.)

He continued to say prayers and recollect his baseball tournaments, hand-wrestling with a Negro, dream of the lions and the boy, Manolin. On the third day, he succeeded in killing and lashing the large fish to the skiff, then, he thought that he was victorious and, as soon as, he moved towards his hut, some sharks came and began to eat the marlin. In killing one of them, he lost his harpoon. Even then he continued to struggle with them: 'I will fight them until I die.' As he, further, states: 'But man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated.' (*The Old Man and the Sea*, p. 103.) This positive thinking provided him strength and energy and he went on fighting with them. Gradually, the sharks ate the marlin completely, still, Santiago who had borne starvation for two days on the surface of the ocean did not seem to lose his hope. While killing the marlin and struggling with the sharks, he received various wounds on his hands. At this, he only utters: 'God, oh, God.' And it gives him strength to fight and struggle. Although he fought with the sharks with all his might, he could not save the marlin as he reached the shore with the skeleton. He was extensively tired but not defeated because his victory lay in his dauntless conflict. Besides, his suffering may be compared to Christ's crucifixion as it is visible through his state of slumber at the conclusion of the novel: "His face was down, his arms straight and the palms of his hands up." (*The Old Man and the Sea*, p.122.) While Santiago was sleeping, he was dreaming of the hopeful and fruitful experiences. In this reference, E. M. Holiday's meditative statement is noteworthy: "In the image of crucifixion, which has haunted Hemingway from *Today is Friday* (1929) to *The Old Man and the Sea*, it is the unique courage of the forsaken and crucified man-God that takes his

attention.... We are part of a universe offering no assurance beyond the grave, and we are to make what we can of life by a pragmatic ethic spun bravely out of man himself in full and steady cognizance that the end is darkness.”<sup>8</sup>

Undoubtedly, Santiago is a man of optimistic spirit as it is observable when he met Manolin with the skeleton of the marlin in a delightful mood. Both of them discussed the next voyage in the expectation of catching the other giant fish. Indeed, he is still hopeful as his principle of life is lying in the specification: ‘Man is not made for defeat.’ As a matter of fact, *The Old Man and the Sea* illustrates that life is nothing but a perennial struggle that must have its foundation on the seeds of optimistic consideration. Struggle for better reason is, indeed, an optimistic vision that energizes the whole humanity with the characteristics of divinity. Undoubtedly, Santiago has the same behaviouristic spirit and seems to follow L. P. Jacks’ principle that is quite quotable: “The pessimist sees the difficulty in every opportunity; the optimist, the opportunity in every difficulty.”<sup>9</sup>

**Conclusion:** The novel – *The Old Man and the Sea* – has a thematic beauty that is a source of inspiration for the whole humanity. The concluding section of the great novelette is as impressive and effective as the whole of the work:

That afternoon there was a party of tourists at the Terrace and looking down in the water among the empty beer cans and dead barracudas a woman saw a great long white spine with a huge tail at the end that lifted and swung with the tide while the east wind blew a heavy steady sea outside the entrance to the harbour.

‘What’s that?’ she asked a waiter and pointed to the long backbone of the great fish that was now just garbage waiting to go out with the tide.

‘Tiburon,’ the waiter said, ‘Eshark.’ He was meaning to explain what had happened.

‘I didn’t know sharks had such handsome, beautifully formed tails.’

‘I didn’t either,’ her male companion said.

Up the road, in his shack, the old man was sleeping again. He was still sleeping on his face and the boy was sitting by him watching him. The old

man was dreaming about the lions. (*The Old Man and the Sea*, p. 127.)

All the same, *The Old Man and the Sea* concludes with the vision of optimistic contemplation because the old man was sleeping and dreaming of the lions while the boy, Manolin, was sitting beside him. Here Ramji Lal’s reflection is quite suitable: “The old man is in close proximity with both the boy and the lions which symbolise his youthful strength and which are a source of inspiration to him at difficult times. Thus the novel does not end on a note of gloom and despair, but on a note of hope and optimism.”<sup>10</sup>

Through the novel – *The Old Man and the Sea* – Ernest Hemingway emphasises that life is nothing but a game of struggle in which it is not necessary that the fruit of struggle will always be material success. The struggler may get spiritual success that is, to a great extent, bound with the elements of optimization. Indeed, spiritual success lies in the parameter of hard struggle. Struggle based on optimistic fancy is the real promoting factor of human life. There are two forms of success – material and spiritual. Material success refers to the worldly possession while spiritual success is concerned with the mental possession which is an amount of satisfaction even at the state of total privation. Santiago in the novel seems to have achieved spiritual success as he is satisfied even when he has lost the valuable reward of his struggle, the marlin. His optimistic spirit imagines that he would again be successful in catching a large fish very soon. Moreover, he was exhausted physically but not mentally even at the completion of his naval expedition. Thus, it is explicable that Hemingway spread the seeds of optimism in his nautical imagination – *The Old Man and the Sea* which is, indeed, the culmination of his fictional success as he was awarded the Pulitzer prize in 1953 and the Nobel prize in 1954.

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