A Further Study of the “Code Hero” in Ernest Hemingway’s Works

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Abstract: This paper further explores the theme of the “code heroes” created by Ernest Hemingway, and points out that the main strength of the “code heroes” comes from the integration of their physical, spiritual, psychological and social qualities, qualities that form their very identity. The paper also fully reveals the noble quality of the “code heroes” through analysing Hemingway’s writing career.

Key words: code heroes; courage; challenge; willpower; personality
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1 The Motivation to Create the “Code Hero”

To Hemingway, a completed book is just like a dead lion, and what he is interested in is the next game. The same idea is conveyed in The Old Man and the Sea through Santiago, who keeps challenging his own limits to test his courage and confidence. Compared with the old victory, the new challenge is of more value; The thousand times that he had proved it meant nothing. Now he must prove it again. Each time is a new time and the previous encounters are of little consequence to the present challenge.

He tries to stretch his capabilities yet remains unsatisfied with his achievements. Such a spirit is the very idealism Hemingway himself advocates. To him every time he finishes a book it is a new beginning. Before the publication of The Old Man and the Sea Hemingway was already a world famous writer, and his genius had already been proved in several masterpieces. Yet he was to surpass himself. In The Old Man and the Sea there is no sense of depression and loss in the protagonist Santiago. He suffers only bodily injury, yet his heart is clean and unwounded. The whole story is pervaded by optimism. The hero overcomes a sense of defeat and renews his confidence by the end. The tone is calm and deep. Hemingway himself accepts that the story is his most favoured one and thinks that it is the biggest and the most beautiful lion he has ever hunted. It is therefore safe to say that the story The Old Man and the Sea epitomizes all that Hemingway meditates and experiences in his own life and could be regarded as the summarization of his perception of the world. As a matter of fact, the The Old Man and the Sea is incomparable among Hemingway’s works. The story has become his last masterpiece. According to some quoted sources, as early as in 1935, namely 16 years before he formally began the writing of The Old Man and the Sea, Hemingway heard about the story from an old fisherman. He wrote it as a feature article for Esquire.

An old man fishing alone in a skiff out of Cabanas hooked a great marlin that, on the heavy headline, pulled the skiff far out to sea. Two days later the old man was picked up by fishermen 60 miles to the eastward, the head and the forward part of the marlin lashed alongside. What was left of the fish, less than half, weighed 800 pounds.

The old man stayed with him a day, a night, a day

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and another night while the fish swam deep and pulled the boat. When he had come up the old man had pulled the boat up on him and harpooned him. Lashed alongside the sharks had hit him and the old man had fought them out alone in the Gulf stream, in a skiff, clubbing them stabbing at them, lunging at them with an oar until he was exhausted and the sharks had eaten all they could hold. He was crying in the boat when the fishermen picked him up, half crazy from his loss, and the sharks were still circling the boat.

But it is sixteen years later that Hemingway begins to turn it into a story. What is implied in the simple story tallies with how he perceives life as an individual. He feels that the fighting between the old man and the sharks exhausts but encourages the old man. But at the time he first heard the story he was not sure of what he had discovered from it. His world then was filled with injuries and cruelty and his perception of the world was basically pessimistic. So it was impossible for him to adapt his experience and feeling to the optimistic tone conveyed in the story. In a letter to a friend in 1951 he said he even dare not to touch the story.

From Hemingway’s early works and characters, what he exposes is the contradiction and conflicts deep-rooted in the human heart. On the one hand, he believes that a man will be crushed or defeated in this world of violence. On the other, he upholds grace and honor under great pressure. It is paradoxical to be defeated and to maintain the grace and dignity while being defeated at the same time. And such is the dilemma Hemingway was in. It is not until Hemingway came to realize the value in challenging impossibility that he feels what he perceives is much in accordance with the theme presented in the story.

Just like Santiago in The Old Man and the Sea, Hemingway meditates the great theme of life and fate. He does not compromise, nor try to escape when confronted with what is inevitable, but calmly accepts it. To him, such acceptance itself is of value. Santiago is old and stricken by bad luck and he lost the fight in the sea. Yet his triumph lies in his attitude towards loss. He still has dignity and the resolution to meet greater loss and danger. To Hemingway, Santiago is a new hero, a man that can be destroyed but not defeated. In the character Hemingway seems to have found a solution to his own dilemma. What Santiago did in the sea is the very incarnation of Hemingway’s personal experience. When he set down to create this character, he was trying to embody his own perception and experience. And the height that is reached in the story is what Hemingway could reach himself. Santiago is a real fisherman, and a real man in literature. Hemingway succeeded in creating such a character, he also succeeded in himself.

2 Santiago as one of Hemingway’s “Code Heroes”

Santiago is an old Cuban fisherman living by fishing. Life has not been easy. He has caught no fish at all for 84 days continuously. In the beginning, he has the company of a little boy out in the sea, but because of his bad luck and defeat the boy is forced by his parents to leave and go out to the sea with other fishermen. Now the old man is alone and helpless. Yet he is surprisingly strong-minded. The contrast is between his old limp appearance and his ambitious mind. In his presentation of the hero, Hemingway tries to display this inner strength in the description of his body and eyes:

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 the 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 color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated.

In Santiago, great tension is created from the two counterchecking forces, and such tension intensifies the readers’ expectation of the hero. One is the contrast between the wretched sail that is like a flag of permanent defeat and his undefeated eyes. Another is
the contrast between wounded body and his pleasant eyes. Hemingway contrasts physical weakness with psychological strength. Moreover, the hero’s bad luck and defeat is ‘permanent’ in other’s eyes, but to Santiago, it does not matter much, as he still believes that he will have good luck again. He will be able to catch a big fish with his rich experience and great skill; The old man said, “I may not be as strong as I think.” “But I know many tricks and I have resolutions.”

The old man is confident and self-assured. He knows clearly he is no longer as strong as he used to be and he has nothing to rely on but his staying power and experience. His words are brief and powerful, with little explanation, yet the little boy Manolin, holds strong belief in him, as does the reader. Besides the energetic eyes, Hemingway also successfully makes the reader see the other powerful parts in the old man’s body through the eyes of Manolin. Like Manolin, the reader knows what they can expect from Santiago and their attention is oriented at the powerful shoulders, the head, and all that demonstrates potential strength; They were strange shoulders, still powerful although very old, and the neck was still strong too and the creases did not show so much when the old man was asleep and his head fallen forward.

And such physical strength is one of the forces that support Santiago’s confidence. As a fisherman who is often alone out at sea in direct conflict with natural forces, Santiago knows very much himself. He knows clearly what sort of advantages he has and to what extent he can win. And for the fish he has to face, he also has great ideas of how to win in a fair fight with his tricks and resolution. He has no illusions about his ability and never boasts about himself. What he waits for is the opportunity to prove his ability. This is the reason he does not respond very actively to Manolin’s praise. He only says “thank you. You make me happy. I hope no fish will come along so great that he will prove us wrong.” Such response shows that he is calm and reserved as a good fisherman before the fight. The simple words act upon the readers effectively as Santiago acts upon the big fish.

Santiago’s actions are as brief as his words. They are precise and accurate, and there is nothing unnecessary. It seems that all his actions are calculated and no energy is wasted. When he goes to sleep, the action of undressing is practical and life-like to the readers; He rolled his trousers up to make a pillow, putting the newspaper inside them. He rolled himself in the blanket and slept on the other old newspapers that covered the springs of the bed.

His life is simple but not wretched. He is humble but not low. In his action there is always dignity and self-respect. In Santiago Hemingway places his understanding of and confidence in humanity. No matter what kind of plight one is in and no matter how high one’s social position, what is most important is to maintain one’s dignity as a human being. And such dignity should not fluctuate with changes in wealth and turnings of luck, as it is a necessary part of humanity. Young pointed out it is the height that Hemingway himself could reach and is therefore the very success of his story:

The knowledge that a simple man is capable of the decency, dignity, and even heroism that Santiago possesses and that his battle can be seen in heroic terms is itself perhaps the greatest victory that Hemingway won.

Santiago maintains his dignity in his action and displays heroism as a code hero with his undefeated spirit when he lost in the fight. Yet his friendship with Manolin exposes much of the warmth in his personality. His faithfulness and passion can always be expressed through actions. When he is alone out in the sea he frequently talks of the little boy Manolin, and we know that he is in need of help and friendship. However Santiago’s character is not without its flaws. For example, he allows the conversation on the non-existent rice and the caster to go on between the little boy and him. And such illusionary talking exposes his irrationality.

“What do you have to eat?” the boy asked.

“A pot of yellow rice with fish. Do you want some?” “No. I will eat at home. Do you want me to make the fire?” “No. I will make it later on. I may
eat the rice cold.” “May I take the castnet?” “Of course.” In fact they have neither rice nor fish, nor the castnet. Yet everyday they share in the illusion with different attitudes. Manolin is being sympathetic when he tries to keep the lies, whereas Santiago indulges in the illusion because of his weakness in character. But such weakness doesn’t make the hero low, but makes him lovable and closer to humanity. If a character is portrayed as too perfect or rational, it loses much of its three dimensional quality and hence appears rather inhuman. But such a tendency is avoided in Santiago through the portrayal of his emotional make-up.

3 Hemingway Code and Santiago

The “code”, sometimes called grace under pressure, is an ideal set of beliefs and attitudes, essentially a mode of self-regard, which enables the hero to function in a hostile, destructive environment, and if not prevail, at least to come through with honor and dignity. The “Hemingway Code” of manhood does not involve mere physical strength, sexual potency, or ability to accumulate (or spend) wealth. According to this code, a man is defined by will, pride, and endurance; the ability to accept pain, even loss — when the loss cannot be avoided; the pride of knowing that one has done one’s best with the courage to act truly according to one’s nature; and the will to face defeat or victory without complaint on one hand or boasting on the other. Santiago certainly does embody this code, which is essentially one of dignity rather than “success”. Santiago, despite his age and poverty, is a ‘man’ in the fullest sense of the word. Although his strength is gone (he is no longer ‘the Champion’ who defeated the Negro in the ‘hand game’), his endurance and courage permit him to conquer the marlin. Even faced with defeat, he does not quit; knowing that he has no chance against the sharks, he continues the struggle against them.” For Santiago, a man who struggles against fate will not to be defeated. “You can destroy him, but you can never defeat him.” This — in spiritual terms — is the essential truth of the “Hemingway Code”. And Hemingway defines the theme: the will to challenge and maintain dignity in the face of adversity. Santiago lost the fight against the sharks but he was not afraid. His value lies in the fact that he rose from his failure and regained his confidence. The success alone is meaningless without the initial setback. Santiago obtained more experience and taught them to Manolin. The marlin he hooked had nothing left but a skeleton, but it won great love and respect for him. To us readers, the relationship between the protagonist and the marlin somewhat embodies the very existence and faith of human beings. The marlin is graceful and noble, and its existence supports Santiago’s life and his faith. Yet the sharks are those dark forces that are destructive to human life. They are indicative of all the violence and injustice in the world. For them Santiago has no respect. What he has is but ruthless revenge and a desire to conquer. In the end he loses, but he is glorious. To sum up, Santiago as a protagonist has the following features: first, Santiago is a hero. He is the epitome of all the code heroes Hemingway had created. In Santiago there are all those outstanding qualities Hemingway most admires, such as courage, nobility, confidence, tricks, and a remarkable personality. What makes the difference is that Santiago demonstrates stronger willpower and nobler dignity due to his physical limits. Second, Santiago is a new type of hero and is distinguished from any “code hero” formerly created by Hemingway. He has greater emotional depth and is an accomplished mediator. He is not without sympathy and warmth. So he is morally superior. Moreover, the ending arranged for him is active and prospective. He is able to enjoy the warmth of friendship and teach his experience and skills to the would-be hero, Manolin. What is more significant, he is successful in making Manolin aware of the true value of life. It is therefore safe to say that the image of the protagonist in The Old Man and the Sea is optimistic and promising. Third, in Santiago, Hemingway illustrates his understanding of human life. Finally, the carefully orchestrated conflict is thematically and psychologically important. While the author is concerned about the fate
of the character in the story, he is also deeply concerned about society. Santiago has developed close relationships with the people around him and he is not isolated from the real world. He is able to enjoy the warmth of friendship, and he is also able to give his concern and love to Manolin. His final image in the literary work is a comment upon the character’s growth and internal development.

To sum up: old but not senile, “unlucky” but not defeated, gentle but not soft, proud but not boastful, resigned but not passive, and ... perhaps most importantly... hopeful for himself without jealousy of others. Santiago (who dreams of “lion”) is himself a poetry of the human spirit. He may “symbolize” the artist who attempts the impossible by going “too far Out”; he may represent the Christ—like essence of willful suffering; he may be an allegory of the grandeur of aged isolation and manhood; or he may speak to us of the love and sharing which permeates all life not just human life ... despite its tragedy, isolation, and ultimate death. Whatever meaning is the “true” meaning of Santiago (and they may all be true), the quality of *The Old Man and the Sea* is that of poetry rather than prose. In the music of its language, in the simplicity of its plot and in the indefinable essence of its dignity, this may well be the book in which Ernest Hemingway achieved the finest “success” of his career.

4 Hemingway’s Language Style

Out of his code comes Hemingway’s style, the second major ideal we are considering. Structurally however, *The Old Man and the Sea* is extremely simple. But the essential aspect of *The Old Man and the Sea* is the measured and dignified cadence of language itself; a rhythm which cannot be paraphrased, and which therefore is ... like the substance of a poem, or the movement of a dance ... likely to be a mere shadow of the actual substance when recapitulated “second hand”. To say that Hemingway, in *The Old Man and the Sea*, perfects the style of precise and concrete observation, the simple declarative periods, the sequence of motion and action which characterized the best of his work, is really to say very little indeed.

Style, which integrates all other fictional elements, is Hemingway’s ultimate term, more important even, as his final years show, than life itself. It is his mastery of the art of modern narration more than any other achievement that won him the Nobel Prize. His style emphasizes objectivity, highly selective detail, minimal metaphor, and flat, neutral, concrete dictum couched most frequently in simple declarative sentences. One reason why *The Old Man and the Sea* is so moving an experience for most readers, is the economy of the novel and the strict focus of its narrative. The words are normally short and common ones and there is a curious freshness, in their use. As Ford Madox Ford remarked some times ago, in a line that is often quoted, the words “strike you, each one, as if they were pebbles fetched fresh from a brook.”

The typical sentence is a simple declarative one, or executed with scrupulous care. The style is remarkably clear, without complexity. Events are described strictly in the sequence in which they occurred; no mind interprets or analyzes them, and our perception of the language is uninfluenced by any authorial mindset.

The very virtues of Hemingway’s style are his exact accuracy of object and motion, his insistence on simplicity, his use of patterns of verbal repetition, and his manipulation of language itself as a kind of camera (“cinematic prose”) to record precise observation of physical surfaces. With *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway achieves complete control of both his subject and its rendition ...a kind of equilibrium of matter and manner that may account for the fact that the book is very difficult to paraphrase. So closely related are music and meaning, action and symbol, that the unique quality of the novel is lost through any retelling. That Hemingway is capable of complete realism is indicated by the scenes which he illustrates with breath-taking precision; that he has deliberately limited his subject matter to particular types and situations is hardly unique with Hemingway.

The key elements of Hemingway’s aesthetic are
truth, individualism, experience, and its validation by observation. First, the truth. A strenuous honesty is directed toward establishing truth of feeling. Hemingway brings a scrupulous honesty and integrity to what is a personal, spiritual self-examination. Secondly, this independence stresses a characteristically American self-reliance. Thirdly, his concern for lived experience. Honoring experience means rejecting received opinion and the terms of the genteel tradition. Hemingway refuses to accept the "blur", in short, the verbal convention of other writers. To write honestly, one must validate what happened by the witness of one's own experience, up front. When driving he always liked to sit up front, watching the road and terrain closely as Colonel Cantwell does. All Hemingway's life was an investigation of reality, to be a real part of the experience of war and conflict. The weather, the wars, the land must all be personally witnessed before any kind of literal account can be created.

If a writer stops observing he is finished. But he does not have to observe consciously nor think how his experience will be useful. Perhaps that would be true at the beginning. But later everything he sees forms part of his great mental storehouse of images he has experienced and seen. Some use can be found by considering the principle of the iceberg. There is seven eighths of it under water for every part that is shown. All that you eliminate only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn't show. If a writer omits something because he does not know it then there is a hole in the story.

This aesthetic ideal, comprised of concern for truth by a self-reliant individual who subjects actual experience to eyewitness examination, informs the act of writing by emerging as a style. Hemingway, to achieve in prose an unparalleled verbal economy usually found only in poetry, summarized his architectural design principle as "less is more." The "less" is fewer words, the visible tip of the iceberg, the technical means. The "more" is the surprisingly disproportionate effect. He has tried to eliminate everything unnecessary in conveying experience to the readers so that after they have read something it will become a part of their experience and seem to have actually occurred. Story after story ... "Indian Camp", "Fathers and Sons", "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place" and "The Old Man and the Sea" ... deceptively simple in their terse, realistic surfaces, are dominated by deeply submerged meaning. The effect is an intensity which no other writer has achieved. The older one gets, the more meaning one discovers, and what one had thought was familiar turns out to be astonishingly fresh and new.

References:

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