The Old Man, America, and the Sea of Iraq

Author : Stone Washington

Date : August 7, 2014

“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. Or is it more?”

~ Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*

Biography

The Book of Great of Great Books has the following information about author, Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961), born in Oak Park, Illinois; died by suicide. Wounded in World War I serving as an ambulance driver with Red Cross in Italy; decorated for bravery. Lived in Paris during the 1920s; Key West in the 1930s; Cuba in 1940-59. Went to Spain in 1937 to report on the Republican side of the Spanish Civil War (1936-39) for a newspaper syndicate. Married four times; three sons. Enjoyed a life as a man of action; refused to behave like a “man of letters.” Awarded the Nobel Prize of Literature in 1954.

Beginning Narrative

This short story by Ernest Hemingway begins with an old Cuban Fisherman name Santiago (who narrates the story in the third person) has spent 84 days without catching anything; September being a hard month for fishermen. He sits on the Terrace near the sea with his companion and apprentice, a young boy named Manolin, who has loved the old man since he was five years old. The boy has been with Santiago the first 40 days but has been ordered to stay away and fish on a luckier boat, for his parents believe Santiago to be a ruined and an unlucky fisherman. The other young fishermen tend to make fun of Santiago while the old ones sympathize for him. But Santiago doesn’t mind this as he believes his fortune will turn the next day; he will not allow himself to have 87 days of bad luck like before.

Manolin is always assisting Santiago by bringing fish bait, gear, and food from the local bar while encouraging him. Manolin wonders if Santiago is strong enough to catch a big fish, nevertheless Santiago believes he can through his great experience, for he possesses many tricks of the trade at sea. That afternoon in Santiago’s shack he and Manolin began talking about their favorite Baseball team, the Yankees. The next morning Manolin brought Santiago some black beans, rice, stew, and fried nuts. The two chat about baseball, fish and the great times in Africa, where Santiago remembers when he saw lions roaming on the beach. At night when Santiago dreams of Africa, his dreams block out his other daily desires and anxieties.

The Epic Journey at Sea

On day 85 Santiago wakes up early, knowing that the “early bird catches the worm” (a popular saying of Benjamin Franklin’s *Little Richard’s Almanac*), and meets with Manolin for coffee. Alone, Santiago rows out to sea with his skiff. At sea he is aware of his surroundings as the many years at sea have taught him to be. He hears the jumping snaps of fish in the water and feels the warm rising light of dawn signaling the morning. Santiago seems preoccupied with his mortal existence—he is acutely aware that he, like his worn out flag and old boat has been battered by time and the sea; he has lived as long life in the water… but for what purpose? Santiago is hopeful for a catch and he has faith in what will come of the day, never abandoning his hope. “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,” wrote Hemingway.

He lowers the bait in the water, varying the depth for the full advantage of the current, and waits silently, searching for any signs of fish in the water. “Finally, the strike.” A marlin (large, saltwater game fish) eats the sardines on his bait at 100 fathoms (600 feet) and Santiago hopes desperately that this will be his chance for glory. He feels the extremely massive weight of the beast crash against his ship as it pulls away from the ship. He allows the line to slip through his hands, while giving it more slack and tightening the pressure with his thumb and finger. He attaches more coils and the fight begins. The fish begins to tow the entire little fishing boat out to sea, causing Santiago to try and regain control by raising his fish to surface level, but he is forced to a long struggle. The old man then realizes he needs Manolin’s help for this great challenge. The ‘Great Fish’ as Santiago calls it is an ultimate match for this seasoned fisherman, and like Captain Ahab of Melville’s *Moby Dick*, Santiago vows to pursue this beast even if it means his own death. Relentlessly the fish intimidates Santiago with its strength by pulling him through the water like a helpless little toy. Thoughts of more triumphal days fill his mind. Santiago ponders the time when he defeated the strongest man on the docks, a Negro from Cienfuegos, in an arm wrestling match. However, he was young and strong then, and beat the man despite this taking all night.

After many hours a strange thing occurs; Santiago starts to bond with the Great Fish; during his struggles enemies begin to get along with one another; Santiago even considers the fish his ‘friend.’ Suddenly, with the collective fury of Scylla and Charybdis, the Great Fish rises to the surface leaving the old man to behold its Leviathan splendor and gorgeous color. It is the largest fish anyone in his village has ever caught. Santiago doesn’t waiver; he continues to pursue the Great Fish with his most dependable strategy, and hidden victory—intelligence. Nevertheless, Santiago’s back aches heavily and his hands burn from holding tight to the line these many hours with no respite. He is very tired, yet the Great Fish denies him rest. The old man begins to speak with the fish asking forgiveness in this struggle and begins to empathize wondering how the beast feels. The two are becoming brothers. Hours turn to a day and eventually days pass as the Great Fish circles around and begins to tire out, leaving Santiago to move in and harpoon it, killing the prized beast. Santiago is now overjoyed with his legendary catch which took a total of three agonizing days.

The Return to shore

Since the fish is larger than his skiff he attaches it to the outside of his boat and sets back to shore after an extensive, hard journey. “Then the sharks arrive.” While he is one hour away

from home, the pack of sharks begins to follow the long trail of blood from Santiago's dead fish. One of the sharks (a large Mako shark) then bites out of the fish. Santiago does not back down from the fierce attack and harpoons the shark, defending his catch from the sharks as he journeys closer to the harbor. With each subsequent attack he skillfully defends his catch, using everything in his arsenal to fend off the sharks. As he nears the shore, regret fills his mind. Santiago now wishes he had never caught this Great Fish. Turning the fury he had against the Great Fish, he vows to fight the sharks to the death. During the night when he finally reaches land, his ship illuminated by the search lights, he realizes that he only has saved the fish's large naked backbone, the long tail fin and its massive sword tipped head. He feels a profound sense of tragedy as he believes he has been beaten by the sharks while his great catch has been left mutilated beyond recognition. Will Santiago receive glory for this or has the sharks devoured his destiny?

Exhausted from his relentless odyssey and battle with the Great Fish, Santiago collapses in bed. In the morning Manolin notices the old man's bloodied hands and vows to help him change his luck. Outside the hut, some fishermen measure the Great Fish and call it out to be 18 feet long. Santiago awakens to Manolin and is glad to be around a friend again instead that dreaded fish. Meanwhile, some tourists are surprised to find a trail of blood leading to the beautiful tail of the great fish in the water, which greatly surprises them. All the while Santiago was in doors dreaming of African lions, as Manolin lovingly watches his friend dream of happier adventures.

Modern day significance

As in today's modern crisis of U.S. involvement in Iraqi War, Part III the *Old Man and the Sea* is not so different. The old man Santiago represents America under Obama and Bush; despite America being the "Superpower" of the world with unlimited strength, courage, and international obligation to help and prevent global conflicts in different countries, yet America finds herself like Santiago, weak, on the defense, desperately looking some shred of glory by catching the 'Great Fish." As Santiago was willing to give all, even his life to catch the beast, will America also involve ourselves in a self-destructive wars on the other side of the world where there are no good guys—Sunnis or Shiites both hate America, Christianity and the Jews. Is this a price our brave soldiers were forced to pay? America in Iraq World War III is this not so different from a vicious gladiatorial pit where it's every man for themselves. There are no innocent sides, no heroes here within the Iraqi quagmire which has devoured almost 5,000 American troops and injured over 32,000 since Operation Iraqi Freedom was launched by President George W. Bush in 2003. We were promised "Blood and Treasure" yet where is the treasure our heroic soldiers gave their blood for?—the ingrate Iraqis didn't give America one barrel of oil for the war that cost us over $1 trillion.

Iraq War III represents the Great Fish, destructive and chaotic in every manner. As the fish is a target to be tamed by the old man so is the same for Iraq to America, but this is a fool's journey. The fish has lead Santiago tirelessly for three days, Iraq has done to America for over 11 years and to no avail for the U.S. The sharks represent the enemies in Iraq (ISIS—Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) who use cowardly but effective guerrilla fighting methods, just as the sharks ganged up on Santiago when he was preoccupied with taking his trophy home. Finally,

Manolin, the nice boy in the story represents America's hope for a better more rational way to handle the Middle East—LEAVE THEM ALONE! That's what Manolin's parents urged him to do regarding Santiago early in the story. In the book Santiago longed for his companion for help because he rashly went out to hunt the fish by himself. If he had help from others such as Manolin, he might have brought his prized catch home in one piece because his friend could have helped him fight off the sharks. Now the real question is… will America make it out of this Iraqi mess in one piece or will they be devoured by Sunni and Shiite sharks?