Hegemonic Masculinity and the Aging Factor in The Old Man and the Sea

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Abstract: The absence of any female presence in Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea and the subsequent centrality of its male characters turn the American novella into an interesting object of study regarding the portrayal that it offers of masculinity. It opens the doors to new definitions of manhood, since its protagonist, without going any further, does not fit into any previously established gender stereotypes. The Cuban fisherman Santiago is not the prototypical macho man, but he is described as a compassionate, humble and noble individual who, in spite of not being able to fulfil all his duties, endures adversity with dignity and never gives up on his quest. He possesses certain traits which do him credit and make him stand out against the other fishermen in the village. The aim of this paper is precisely to analyse Santiago's virtues, among which there are his wisdom, his courage, his perseverant spirit, and his equilibrium with life, and to prove that such outstanding qualities, as the title of the novel anticipates, emanate from nowhere else but the same one source: Santiago's advanced age. In other words, this research will be based on the idea that the life skills which Santiago has accumulated through experience have shaped his personality and transformed him into a one-of-a kind man who differs greatly from the ideal of manhood proposed by hegemonic masculinity.

Keywords: masculinity; age; old; redefinition; wisdom; courage; perseverance; equilibrium

Introduction

A first look at the very title of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* provides its readers with relevant information about the American novella. They learn that the narration will have a male character as the protagonist, and that he will not be any type of masculine figure, but an aging man. The level of maturity reached by the protagonist

as well as the life experiences accumulated throughout his youth, adulthood and old age shape the plot and fill it with certain noteworthy values. This is to say that age has an effect on the main character but also on the whole novel, which would have been completely different had Santiago been an adolescent instead of a man grown old. Most of his qualities derive from his experience and therefore differentiate him from his younger fellows. He may no longer have the strength, energy or carelessness of youth, but he has gained much more valuable attributes that, far from perishing, will accompany him for the rest of his life. Therefore, the protagonist of *The Old Man and the Sea* is not the prototypical man that is normally encountered in literature, but a wise, courageous, persistent and balanced individual who stands out amongst his contemporaries and provides both characters in the novel, but also readers, with some of the most powerful life lessons.

Hegemonic masculinity

The concept of hegemonic masculinity, which was developed by the Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell in the 1990s, has undergone fundamental transformations during the last decades. When the word was coined, it was used to refer to the specific type of masculinity that subordinated other masculinities and femininities. In other words, "hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men's dominance over women to continue" (Connell 832). Hegemonic masculinity was supposed to provide men with guidelines and models of masculine conduct so that they could behave properly and therefore be admired by nonhegemonic men and women. Hegemonic masculinity, consequently, was very oppressive, since men were subjected to strict scrutiny so that they did not "deviate toward un-masculine or feminine practices, and fail to embody or reject idealized productions of masculinity" (Evans et al. 8). At that time, hegemonic masculinity praised those men who were "unemotional, independent, non-nurturing, violent and dispassionate" (Collier 19). However, not all men subscribed to the ideal, and even if some men came to have some of the defining properties of hegemonic masculinity, in most cases such attributes were not permanent and fixed, but they were subject to variability. This is because "men can adopt hegemonic masculinity when it is desirable; but the same men can distance themselves strategically from hegemonic masculinity at other moments" (Connell 841). The problem, therefore, was that hegemonic masculinity did not define all men but just a minority. It limited the male figure to a very specific type of man, and excluded all the other existing patterns of masculinity. Obviously, hegemonic masculinity obliterated not only non-hegemonic masculinities but also femininities. This means that the very concept of hegemonic masculinity was defined by analyzing only masculine attributes and practices instead of comparing them to feminine traits and attitudes. Since the notion of hegemonic masculinity was so restrictive and failed to describe real men, it became necessary to redefine it, so that it could "recognize the agency of subordinated groups as much as the power of dominant groups and the mutual conditioning of gender dynamics and other social dynamics" (Connell 848). Connell played a fundamental role in the reformulation of the concept. She made four major contributions to the initial definition of hegemonic masculinity. Firstly, she suggested that hegemonic masculinity needed to be based on a more flexible gender hierarchy that could raise the visibility of women, since "women are central in many of the processes constructing masculinities—as mothers; as schoolmates; as girlfriends, sexual partners, and wives; as

workers in the gender division of labor; and so forth" (Connell 848). Secondly, she added that hegemonic masculinity should acknowledge the difference between local, regional, and global masculinities. Connell also established that hegemonic masculinity should take social context into account. And finally, she defended that hegemonic masculinity should allow more democratic gender relations.

All the changes that the concept has undergone in the last decades and the ones that it is likely to experience in the coming years prove that hegemonic masculinity is not the unique and best option to organize and understand gender hierarchy. It is necessary to find other models that will enable a more equalitarian interaction amongst men, and also between men and women. In other words, and as Kimmel states, "we need a new definition of masculinity for a new century," namely "a gender politics of inclusion, of standing up against injustice based on difference" (333).

Masculinity in the United States of America

Since masculinity is a social construct, it may vary from country to country and time to time. In the case of the United States of America, the definition of manhood has also undergone significant modifications throughout history, giving rise to many different ideals of manhood. Professor Senaha uses the concept of the man of faith to refer to the first English men who succeeded in settling in America between 1774 and 1848, and who were easily recognizable by their deep sense of patriotism and their genuine faith in God. He also distinguishes the man of adventure, an archetype whose appearance coincided with the discovery of gold in California in 1848, and who was described as "self-reliant, ready to fight any oppression and fault, and capable of making his dreams come true" (Senaha 98). The American sociologist Michael Kimmel focuses on other three models of masculinity that were encountered during the late eighteenth century, which included the genteel patriarch, the heroic artisan, and the self-made man. The genteel patriarch "embodied love, kindness, duty, and compassion, exhibited through philanthropic work, church activities, and deep involvement with his family" (Kimmel 16). The heroic artisan was the independent and honest craftsman who worked hard in his farm or shop. The third archetype, the self-made man, corresponded to the individual who "must ever be tinkering, improving, adjusting; starting over, fearful his product will get out of date, or rot in the storehouse" (Wills 214).

The several archetypes analyzed so far confirm that the concept of masculinity has been understood in slightly different ways over the course of American history. However, the ideal American man from all eras preserves one unquestionable and unifying quality: he is young, and consequently he has a skilled body. The man of faith, the man of adventure, the genteel patriarch, the heroic artisan and the self-made man could establish new colonies, look for gold and work hard to build a better future because their young and vigorous bodies allowed them to engage in physical activity, which according to Connell is the "prime indicator of masculinity" (851).

Masculinity and aging

There are many factors which may influence masculinity and the extent to which men perceive themselves as masculine. The cultural and social context is probably the most known, but age is another determining aspect that cannot be overlooked since it plays a major role in the deviation from hegemonic masculinity and consequent development of alternative types of masculinities.

In youth, men try to hide feelings of vulnerability and weakness by not showing their emotions and by stubbornly refusing to ask for help. At the same time, they demonstrate their manliness by means of expressions of aggression, strength and the performance of risk taking activities. In the middle age, what defines the sense of masculinity of a man is his productivity in the workplace. Men who are in control or who achieve high positions, on the one hand, and men whose jobs involve physical activity, on the other, subscribe to the ideal man. Finally, older men experience many changes in later life: they get retired, their bodies are no longer muscular, they are more likely to develop health problems, they may see their income decline, etc. All these continual changes force older adults to redefine themselves. However, they do not always adopt the same attitude towards aging, since some of them discover new opportunities at this stage, and some others go through a personal crisis that may even end up in a depression.

The fact that there are several masculinities leads scholars to affirm that "what it means to be a man and practices of masculinity change in response to locale, life events and aging across the lifespan" (Evans et al. 10). It is reasonable to accept that masculinity changes as men grow old, but what is not so clear is whether they maintain the hegemonic ideal in old age. There is great controversy surrounding such a thorny issue. On the one hand, some scholars consider that the classification of old men in the group of hegemonic masculinity depends on whether they are compared to younger men or analyzed on their own (Thompson 643). Other academics defend that all men lose their masculine hegemonic status when they grow old (Meadows and Davidson 296). Kampf, Marshall and Petersen also hold the same opinion. They claim that hegemonic masculinity is found in those men whose bodies are svelte, robust and youthful. Therefore, they believe that, "if these embodied qualities of youth are viewed as 'essentially masculine' then aging and old age are the negation of that ideal, threatening men as they age with the obvious failure of matching up to such representations of maleness" (Kampf et al. 23).

But such disparate opinions only serve to show that "older men thus lack an alternative to midlife masculine ideals, depriving them of guidelines for being a 'real' man and limiting their ability to fashion effective and culturally respectable identities" (Saxton and Cole 98). In other words, "while in relation to early and middle adulthood we find clear models of dignified masculinity, these become vague, even non-existent, when referring to later life" (Spector-Mersel 73).

Masculinity for Hemingway

Masculinity is a central topic in most of Hemingway's works, since his protagonists are apparently very masculine men who perform manly actions such as fishing, hunting or

fighting. But after much research, many academics have concluded that most of Hemingway's characters, who were at first defined as very traditional male figures, are in fact complex men who do not follow pre-established patterns of masculinity but open new articulations of manhood. This is because, as Strychacz affirms, in Hemingway's works, "the act of being or becoming a man is decentred, or subtly problematized, or on occasion downright demolished" (262). This proves that Hemingway does not see masculinity as a discourse that is fixed and patronizing, so he represents it "as temporary and subject to abrupt change rather than stable and permanent; as relational and contingent rather than self-determined; as the function of insubstantial codes and evaluating audiences rather than the sole possession of code heroes; as negotiated and constructed rather than constitutive of an essential identity" (Strychacz 8).

Santiago's unique attributes that result from age

It has been established that the main attribute of the ideal and hegemonic American man is his youth, but what is encountered in *The Old Man and the Sea* is a male figure that has long ago past his prime and has turn into "the first of the heroes to have grown old" (Strychacz 236). Santiago does not possess the most important quality of hegemonic masculinity, but he is still valuable and unique because he has developed several compensatory traits to cope with his new circumstances, such as the ones that will be analysed in the following paragraphs

Wisdom as a source of humility

The first factor which distinguishes Santiago from his younger colleagues is the wide knowledge that he has of the local marine environment. It is undeniable that having devoted himself entirely to fishing has provided him with a deep understanding of the seascape and a "preterite ability to see through and beyond what is immediately apprehended by the physical eye" (Strychacz 243).

As Gurko claims, Santiago is "a superb craftsman who knows his business thoroughly and practises it with great skill" (11). In terms of work, he relies on his own abilities and knowledge, and he depends upon himself alone, which is the basic premise for a man "to assert his manhood" (Strychacz 236). The younger fishermen, on the contrary, compensate their ignorance with the use of elaborate tools which transform their fishing into what has been defined as a more aggressive and therefore ethically questionable practice (Hediger 54-5). Aggressiveness, which is one of the characteristics of hegemonic masculinity, is not present in Santiago's character. On the contrary, he is a very calm man who adopts a humble attitude towards others. This humility, which also derives from the deep understanding of his own identity, allows him to acknowledge and accept his limits. Santiago's humility, which can be read as "an essential component of mature masculine grace" (Stephens and Cools 80), can be noticed in first place in his relationship with his younger comrade, Manolin, who provides him with food, drink and clothes, and always tries to cheer him up. But receiving those cares is not as important as the fact that "all this the old man accepts gratefully and without shame, knowing that such help is not demeaning" (Burhans 450). This implies that Santiago is perfectly aware that he is no longer a strong and buoyant youth, but an aging man whose force

has been considerably reduced as a result of his wanderings, and who therefore needs the care of a much more energetic person from whom he can get support. The same idea of humility can also be found in Santiago's sense of unity with animals. He praises the marlin and recognizes his superiority when he claims: "Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than you, brother" (Hemingway 92). This is to say that Santiago gladly accepts the supremacy of those creatures, no matter whether they are human or nonhuman, that prove to be more able and powerful than him.

Courage to go far with no interest in establishing masculine reputation

Another trait which is unique about Santiago is his valour in going far, or even too far, both at the physical and psychological level, with no aim of proving his manhood in the public sphere. Firstly, the literal act of going far in the Gulf proves that the Cuban fisherman is not afraid of taking risks. His willingness "to go beyond safe spaces" (Stephens and Cools 91) contrasts starkly with the attitude of both Manolin and the younger fishermen in the village. Manolin, as a young boy, cannot decide for himself since he is subjected to parental control. Manolin has the guts and enthusiasm which are so typical of youth, but he still needs to learn many valuable lessons before he can venture to go as far as his old friend. In turn, the young fishermen, despite being brave and courageous, prefer not to drift too far from the shore in order to avoid peril. This is to say that, although "the world contains the possibilities of heroic adventure and emotion to which everyone, on whatever level, can respond" (Gurko 12), the inexperienced and fearful fishermen do not take advantage of such great opportunities because they are too scared to go into uncharted territory. As Hollenberg points out, the young fishermen have a "destructive view" of the sea, since they see it "as a contestant or a place or even an enemy" (38). That is why, whenever they go into the sea, they need to be accompanied by their group, so that they can prove their validity and demonstrate that they are true men. What can be inferred from such an attitude is that, since they have not fully reached manhood, the young men need the approval of others to reaffirm themselves and build their self-confidence. Santiago, on the contrary, is not afraid of failure because he has learnt to turn his experiences of frustration into the development of new skills and the performance of exemplary actions that "represent what other male characters covertly desire or unconsciously need in order to attain essential manhood" (Strychacz 239). However, Santiago's merit does not only remain in daring go far, but in engaging in such dangerous quest alone, which suggests "the incurable reliance on the individual" (Gurko 14). Regarding individualism, it is important to distinguish between two opposing trends of thought amongst academics. Whereas some critics, such as Gurko, emphasize Santiago's epic individualism and his "moving from the confinements of society to the challenges of Nature" (15), some others, such as Burhans, consider that the initial sense of individualism is finally replaced by more communal values. That is why Burhans claims that, at the end of the novel, Santiago "no longer dreams of great individualistic deeds like the one which brings violence and destruction on him and on the marlin," but instead he dreams of lions playing on the beach, which "evokes the solidarity and love and peace to which the old man returns after hunting and killing and losing his great fish" (452). Burhans' approach seems more complete, since it implies that "in going out too far and alone, Santiago has found his greatest strength and courage and dignity and nobility and love" (453). In other words, it is by having performed the trial on his own that Santiago has

learnt to replace individualism with solidarity, and has become more aware of his love for Manolin and Nature. And he has not needed the presence of others to reach such epiphany, but he has done it by removing himself from the "watching and evaluating crowd" (Strychacz 244).

Secondly, the expression "going far" when connected to a more psychological dimension may mean that Santiago is able to see further than the other men thanks to his ability to engage in personal reflection. He is able to recognize his sins and feel moved and affected by them. He is not unemotional or dispassionate, as traditional hegemonic masculinity would expect men to be. He is a sensitive man who, instead of celebrating his triumph and moving mechanically to the next goal, as most youths would do, revises his behaviour and takes responsibility for his actions. This re-examination leads him to self-doubt, but it is necessary since it reconnects him with his beliefs, as it can be appreciated in the apology "I am sorry that I killed the fish" (Hemingway 103) or in the reflection "I shouldn't have gone out so far, fish.[...] Neither for you nor for me" (Hemingway 110).

Persistence which does not lead to visible success

A third noteworthy aspect about the protagonist of The Old Man and the Sea is his sheer persistence. Santiago does not surrender and never changes his goals. First of all, he keeps going out to fish despite not having caught anything for months. Secondly, he is determined to kill the marlin despite all the suffering that such an action imposes on his tired body. And thirdly, he defends the corpse of the marlin against the most ferocious sharks putting his own life into great peril. He does not alter his objectives but remains loyal to them because they have meaning and purpose. The desire of attaining his goals encourages him to maintain effort and interest over time despite failure and adversity. His ideas are not as changeable as those of younger men, who are constantly learning, being encountered with new opportunities, or discovering new possible paths. But what makes Santiago more valuable is precisely the fact that, despite having alternative options, he sustains effort over a long period of time and does not fall into the temptation to give up. And even if he does not manage to accomplish his goals, he does not feel defeated because he knows that he has given his all to attain them and that, "if he has failed he has done so in an epic quest" (Melling 22). In order to understand why he is not defeated it is necessary to analyse the meaning of the word *achievement*, which can be defined as "the product of talent and effort, the latter a function of the intensity, direction, and duration of one's exertions toward a goal" (Duckworth and Peterson 1098). According to such definition, Santiago's actions could be seen as achievements, since he invests great amounts of energy on them, he does not change their direction, and he works on them for extended periods of time. He shows a "purposeful, continuous commitment to certain types of activities" instead of "sporadic efforts in diverse areas" (Duckworth and Peterson 1099). Santiago is an exemplary man, not because he is successful, but because he sustains commitment to his ambitions. He embodies what Duckworth and Peterson call the gritty individual, the subject who is constant, has great stamina, and perseveres to the end without being discouraged by boredom or fatigue.

Equilibrium with life instead of domineering attitude

The fourth attribute that is remarkable about the aging protagonist is the state of equilibrium with life that he reaches by the end of the novel. Firstly, he is at peace with himself because he has learnt to realize his worth. That is why, when he returns home, he "rests in quietude dreaming of the lions in the eastern coasts of Africa" and "reaches a state of tranquillity" despite having been previously tormented by guilt and repentance (Chakraberty 442). For this reason, it could be claimed that although he has had some existential doubts throughout the process, he has finally developed a strong sense of pride. Nevertheless, it is not any type of pride, but *true pride*, which is the feeling that recognizes that "one can maintain dignity and grace - even heroism- in equivocal circumstances" (Stephens and Cools 80), and which is not that common amongst youths. Secondly, Santiago is in balance with society, since he has understood that all creatures have a fixed role, that he is not central, and that his going beyond the limits may have unpleasant consequences. He is also reunited with society because he has gained the respect of the younger fellows, who, instead of laughing at him when seeing the carcass of the marlin, remain silent as a symbol of recognition and admiration. And finally, he is also in balance with Nature because he has learnt to love animals and feel compassion for them. In fact, if he is finally able to admire animals, treat them as brothers, and feel moved whenever he has to kill any of them, is because, as Stephens and Cools claim, "the humbled state of grace he has achieved is a mature man's submission to a natural order in which humans cannot presume dominance" (92). He starts the narrative by attempting to catch the marlin and trying to control Nature, but his final abandonment of the skeleton on the beach indicates a change in his character. This is to say that he "begins the narrative as a subject defined by the anthropocentric impulse to instrumentalize and control the non-human other" (Hollenberg 29), but he gradually abandons his oppressive and domineering attitude until he becomes a more integrative subject. The reason for such a change, as Hollenberg defends, is that "Santiago's confrontation with the sea gradually broadens his sense of responsibility to the world and thus reveals to him the possibility of imagining himself in other waysneither as conqueror, nor victim, but as an ecological participant" (40).

Conclusion

After having analyzed the character of Santiago in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* in relation to the notions of hegemonic masculinity and aging, it can be concluded that the process of growing old does not necessary imply loss of value on the part of men, but a reconstruction of their masculine identity. Santiago is not young, aggressive, independent, and stoic, as the ideal hegemonic man is supposed to be, but he has many other qualities that make him as valid as his younger counterparts. Throughout his life course, Santiago has gained the knowledge, the lonely courage, the astonishing stamina to face obstacles, and the state of peace with himself and the world that the younger fishermen lack. This proves that age has not led the old fisherman to decline, but to a process of self-discovery and to the development of a new sense of manhood. He does no longer subscribe to the ideal of hegemonic masculinity, but far from being marginalized, he becomes the protagonist of one of one of the greatest classics of American literature. The centrality of such a character proves that hegemonic masculinity is not the only option for men, but there are many other possibilities that

can be explored and used as models of socially-accepted masculinity. As the novel exemplifies, masculinity is a social construct, so it can be subverted and redefined to meet contemporary needs. Santiago's masculinity has changed due to his growing older and his losing of the defining attributes of the hegemonic man, but his sense of being a man has not faded away because he has been able to adjust to changes and reconstruct his identity according to his new circumstances.

Further research should be conducted in order to determine whether any other character in Hemingway's novels parallels Santiago. An interesting option could be to classify Hemingway's masculine characters according to their age, and to carry out an in-depth analysis of their personality traits to discover further differences in the portrayal of young and old men in literature.

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