

From the Playground to the Fishing Ground: Re-evaluating the Influence of Baseball on *The Old Man and the Sea*

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Abstract

Baseball as a sport contributes much to represent American culture and life. The playground of baseball provides the basis where Americans can dream and fulfill their aim. Gradually, the baseball becomes an integral part of American literature. Earnest Hemingway, the noted American novelist uses the playground of baseball in context of Cuban fisherman Santiago's struggle to catch the big marlin. Thus baseball becomes the vitality of culture represented by literature. This paper aims to examine the influences of baseball on the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, both thematically and structurally. The paper also tries to show how Hemingway's true baseball hero Dimaggio becomes the only inspiration for Santiago.

Keywords: Baseball, Sport, Culture, American Dream, Literature.

The spirit of a sport represents the force, identity and nationality of a nation. The sport is capable of representing competition as well as vitality and recreational power of a sportsman. Thus the sports have been arguably important ingredients in the broader U.S culture. James Robertson has described their significance: "The games of modern Americans are rituals... significant dramas which they believe are an important part of the realities of their lives" (Elias 7). The symbolic expression of the values and belief of the broader society is provided by the sports. The sports also strengthen the structure of the economic, political and cultural hegemony of dominant group. But the baseball game, originated in 19th century surpasses all other sports in reflecting U.S society. Roger Angel has suggested, "Baseball seems to have been invented solely for the purpose of explaining all other things in life" (Angell 8). Baseball influenced American life to such extent that thousands of soldiers during the time of Civil War indulged in learning baseball. The game nourished the spirit of the soldiers and the game became their national identity which is also reflected in the speech of Walt Whitman: "I see great things in Baseball. It's our game, the American game." Upon returning home they spread the game to their friends and neighbors and it soon got its recognition as 'The National Pastime'. But it breaks down its narrow role merely as a sport and represents American culture and life.

According to John Thorn, “Baseball had become more than the mere reflection of our rising industrial and political power and its propensity for bluster and hokum: the national game was beginning to supply emblems for democracy, industry and community that would change America and the world.” (Elias 8) The early American writers also proclaimed baseball as a relevant and powerful force in both national history and national psychology. Thus baseball became the very symbol to represent America. Mark Twain explains the influence of baseball in his time: “Baseball is the very symbol, the outward and visible expression of the drive and push and rush and struggle of the raging tearing, booming nineteenth century” (Graber 1107). The spirit of baseball in 19th century still continues in 20th century. In this century the baseball also acts as a force to represent the essential values like hard work, social mobility and democracy. Philosopher Jacques Barzun also testifies to the importance of baseball in American life when he wrote: “Whoever wants to know the heart and mind of America had better learn baseball, the rules and realities of the game” (Barzun 34).

The American writers’ interest for baseball spirit creates a new genre, the baseball fiction. In their writings they try to incorporate the lesson and domain of baseball which give the Americans the opportunity to fulfill their dream. Yale University president and former major league baseball commissioner, Bart Giamatti, rightly claimed that baseball “is the last pure place where American can dream. This is the last great arena...where everybody can learn the lessons of life” (Elias 9). The best recent baseball fictions such as Mark Harris’ *The Southpaw* and *Bang the Drum Slowly* and Bernard Malamud’s *The Natural* concentrates on the games of players’ lives as well as on the universal problems of human behavior. Thus the imagery of baseball is used by some of America's finest novelists. Baseball’s symbolic significance is emphasized by Thomas Wolfe as he stated,

Is there anything that can evoke spring-the first fine days of April-better than the sound of the ball smacking into the pocket of the big mitt, the sound of the bat as it hits the horse hide: for me, at any rate, and I am being literal and not rhetorical-almost everything I know about spring is in it-the first leaf, the jonquil, the maple tree, the smell of grass upon your hands and knees, the coming into flower of April. (Elias 101)

This paper attempts to present how Ernest Hemingway was conscious of the spirit of baseball game and infuses its spirit in his novel *The Old Man and the Sea* to project the patience, resolution and vitality of the protagonist Santiago. It also shades light on the fact that how baseball influences the novel both thematically and structurally.

Hemingway was interested in baseball since the days of his boyhood. He played plenty of

baseball games as a home-run hitting first baseman and baseball became a part of his everyday life. Hemingway describes the popularity of baseball in his time in his writings. In *Death in the Afternoon*, he makes reference of baseball and matadors:

You cannot learn to be a full matador any more than you can learn to be a major-league ball player, an opera singer, or a good professional boxer. You can learn to play baseball, to box, or to sing, but unless you have a certain degree of genius you cannot make your living at baseball or boxing or singing in opera. (Hemingway 75)

Hemingway compared himself obliquely with Joe Dimaggio and his bone spurs in a letter to Lillion Ross in which he defends his Key West novel:

To Have and Have Not is much better than people think and not nearly as good as I hoped. The night with the vets is wonderful but could have been better but that was the year I had bone the spurs in my ankle and hit. (Hemingway SL 648)

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, the novelist gives vent to his interest for baseball to a great extent. His references of Indians of Cleveland, Tigers of Detroit, Reds of Cincinnati and the Sox of Chicago make us sure that baseball got national recognition in his time. As the baseball game became America's national sport, it also influenced the Cuban psyche and daily life greatly. So baseball was not only their national pastime but turned into the source of the force and vitality of their life. They imbibe the force of the game in their heart and mind that they "measure themselves according to baseball and baseball players" (Barros 1). In this novel Hemingway did this measurement in a vital way. Hemingway first makes reference of baseball in the novel to show Santiago's love and concern for baseball. Reading about baseball and talking about it are his indulgence. Santiago knows the importance of play in one's life. He tells Manolin to play baseball: "Go and play baseball" (Hemingway 20). When Santiago and Manolin get little bit of time, they talk about baseball teams. They are in favor of the Yankees. Manolin fears of both the Tigers of Detroit and the Indians of Cleveland. He is in suspicion whether the Yankees will win or not. But Santiago calms him down and says: "Have faith in the Yankees my son. Think of the great Dimaggio" (Hemingway 25). The tussle between fear and hope in Manolin and Santiago regarding the victory of the Yankees shows their love for baseball. Their tension about the winning of the Yankees also sheds light on their character. This tension shows that Santiago is experienced while Manolin is going to be experienced regarding the sport. This is also reflective in their experience about fishing. James Barbour and Robert Settlemeyer comments that baseball provides "initiation talks in which Santiago is the teacher, Manolin the pupil and baseball a topic through which desirable attitudes and behaviour are taught" (Barbour and Settlemeyer 283).

There are references to great baseball players in the novel. They are Joe Dimaggio, Dick Sisler, J McGraw. In a conversation about the reference of Joe Dimaggio or baseball Ernest Hemingway said: “What I was trying to do was to present a true picture of a fisherman, and down here the fishermen are crazy about baseball” (Conversations 100). Baseball stars are the heroes of Santiago. The Old Man is a connoisseur of Joe Dimaggio who contributes much to America’s past glory as Cramer says,

He [Dimaggio] was, at every turn our idea of the American hero –one man we could look at, who made us feel good. For it was always about how we felt...with Joe. That’s how it worked. No wonder we strove for six decades –the nation, its presidents, its citizen almost everyone –to give Joe the hero’s life. It was always about us. And of course that he knew. (Elias 13)

The constant association with Joe Dimaggio adds to the heroic proportion of the old man. Kathleen Morgan and Luis Losada propounded that the Dimaggio analogy,

also serves to emphasize that Santiago, like Homer’s great heroes, is perceived as being the ‘best’, a characteristic he does not disavow. As there are “other men on the team” and even other ‘great’ players, there are also other ‘great’ fishermen, but there is ‘only’ Santiago. (Morgan and Losada 36)

The reference to Baseball creates a dichotomy between poor and rich background in the novel. Santiago finds a comfortable similarity with Joe Dimaggio not with Dick Sisler. Joe Dimaggio is from poor background and his father was a fisherman. On the other hand Dick Sisler was a rich boy and whose father was a baseball player: “The great Sisler’s father was never poor and he, the father, was playing in the Big League” (Hemingway 30). He takes inspiration from Dimaggio’s poor background thinking that how Dimaggio enlivened himself to the stature of a great baseball player. Dimaggio was born to be a baseball player. He was determined in his aim and baseball was his only passion. Santiago was a true fan of Dimaggio who could hit the longest ball. He wants to take Dimaggio to his fishing and feels that he would understand the struggle of a fisherman. There is also a dichotomy between Dimaggio’s aim and J.McGraw’s aimlessness. When the boy, Manolin asks Santiago about McGraw, the old man says, “He was rough and harsh-spoken and difficult when he was drinking.” (Hemingway 30). McGraw was not determined in his aim. His mind was on horses apart from baseball: “His mind was on horses as well as baseball. At least he carried lists of horses at all times in his pocket and frequently spoke the names of horses on the telephone” (Hemingway 30). Santiago knows this dichotomy and tries to lead his life in accordance with the good one.

Baseball has great thematic significance in the novel. C. Harold Harley says, “Hemingway invites the reader to consider the significance of the external events recorded in the sports section to the internal events delineated in the novel.” (Harley 85-86). The actual weeks (September 12-16) in the 1950 formed the backdrop to the novel. Harley’s interesting contribution established a factual parallel to the internal action of the novel, where

the games of baseball’s ‘September Stretch’ serves not only to heighten and intensify Santiago’s heroic encounter with the great marlin and the sharks but also to place that encounter against the heroes of a sport that in the mythic sense is emblematic of humanity’s struggle to endure and prevail. (Harley 87).

Santiago leads his life like an athlete. He finds his success in the win of the Yankees. Eighty-five days was lucky to him as in this day the Yankees won the league. The Old Man takes spirit from the success and says: “But today is eighty-five days and I should fish well” (Hemingway 47). Like a baseball player he eats turtle eggs to get strength and drinks shark liver oil to fit his eyes. It is more important for a baseball player to excel at the end of the season than spring. Similarly, Santiago welcomes September when ‘the great fish comes, not May. He develops his analytic power like a baseball player as he says that “Anyone can be a fisherman in May” (Hemingway 26). Santiago takes his fishing as a baseball game. Like a sport there is a struggle between the old man and the marlin as he says: “I can do nothing with him and he can do nothing with me” (Hemingway 55). He compares the marlin’s sword with a bat and the marlin as a player: “His sword was as long as a baseball bat and tapered like a rapier and he rose his full length from the water and then re-entered it, smoothly like a diver...” (Hemingway 70). There are numerical baseball allusions in the novel – Santiago “used both of his hands in a swinging motion” (Hemingway 91), he sees the fish “on the third turn” (Hemingway 94) etc. When the marlin comes to the surface to be harpooned, the distance is “only thirty yards away” (Hemingway 94). Coincidentally this distance matches with the distance between the bases and home plate in baseball.

In every adverse situation Santiago thinks of baseball to disperse the monotony of his fishing as well as to encourage himself. He thought about baseball as the sun turned hot and he began to sweat. At the very first day of catching the fish he also began to think of baseball as the night was coming. He infuses the spirit of baseball in his struggle with the fish. When the Old Man was steadily being towed by the fish, he thought about the baseball and how it came out in the ground leagues that day. Baseball is his source of inspiration, but he does not get too much indulgence in it. He keeps thinking about the game but then tells himself: “Now is not time to think of baseball. Now is the time to think of only one thing. That which I was born for” (Hemingway 46). Dimaggio’s determination infuses patience and resoluteness in Santiago which

makes him an embodiment of a professional fisherman. Like a baseball player he uses his tricks to tower over the marlin and to defeat him. And it is his determination that wins him a victory over the sharks. But in his struggle with the fish he was suffering from physical pain. His left hand was cramped which is reminiscence of Dimaggio's bone spur. Dimaggio was unable to present the Yankees because of his operation that illustrates in the novel how "a preoccupation with pain can destroy an individual's sense of his own potential for action – a truth Santiago finds reaffirmed in the example of an American athlete" (Monteiro 277).

Though most of the time Santiago takes inspiration from Dimaggio, he sometimes wants to be worthy of the great Dimaggio, "who does all things perfectly even with the pain of the bone spur in his heel" (Hemingway 74). The old man wonders several times as he finds himself worthy of his hero, great Dimaggio. Firstly, when he hooks the marlin and struggles with it, he wonders if Dimaggio would "stay with fish as long as I will stay with this one" (Hemingway 75). He thinks of Dimaggio even after he harpoons the fish: "The great Dimaggio would be proud of me today. I had no bone spurs. But the hand and back hurt truly" (Hemingway 102). Finally, when the Make shark comes, Santiago hits on his head with the club and utters, "I wonder how the great Dimaggio would have liked the way I hit him in the brain" (Hemingway 108)? For Santiago baseball is infinitely real and inspirational.

The baseball not only influences the novel thematically but also structurally. The novel starts and ends up with baseball. At the beginning Santiago suggests Manolin that the lessons a sport can impart on life are really important. In the last of the novel, the spear of the big marlin is provided to the boy by Santiago and it resembles as 'long as baseball bat.' Through this symbolic transfer Santiago gives his experiences to Manolin so that the boy can be a great and successful fisherman.

In the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, the baseball has been used in structural perspective as well as in narrative perspective. Here baseball has been viewed as a self-made man's fertile ground where Santiago exercises his techniques and skills for individual success which add to the interest of the novel. In order to be successful one need true aptitude, opportunity and passion. Throughout the novel it is found that Santiago's aptitude is God gifted and the sea provides him the opportunity to lead his life. But in order to be a successful fisherman he needs the undaunted passion which he finds in the baseball game. Santiago's passion sheds light on the individuality of a man. He takes the game's spirit which gets great exuberance as Santiago enlivens himself from a 'salao' to a successful fisherman. But he becomes the prey of fate. The big marlin is out of Santiago's possession as the sharks eat the marlin. Now he is adept in dealing with the ups and downs of life. His emulation of Dimaggio makes him man of action, not man of destiny. He challenges fate as he thinks that fate can

destroy one's life but cannot defeat his aspiring spirit. So Santiago's great utterance – "...man is not meant for defeat. A man can be defeated but not destroyed" (Hemingway 107) – somehow gets its root of spirit in baseball which is represented by Joe Dimaggio.

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