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SOMMAIRE

Étude sur l'adaptation du programme de formation en maraîchage au Togo aux besoins des personnes handicapées visuelles et auditives
Kossi Eli SENAYAH ……..……1

Effets de concept de soi et attitudes envers les mathématiques sur les aspirations d'études secondaires des élèves de la Sous-Province Éducationnelle de Limete 1 en RD. Congo
Noël BULA NDUNGU, Rabbi MASHITA KAMBUYA, Patrick BUESI MBUENE……15

La pratique du décloisonnement en didactique du vocabulaire à l'école primaire au Burkina Faso
Ahoubahoum Ernest PARDEVAN, Daniel OUEZZIN COULIBALY, Ousséni SORÉ, Wendnonga Gilbert KAFANDO…..……23

Exode rural des jeunes du sud tchadien vers N'Djamena : exploitation domestique et informelle, impacts éducatifs
Mbaïrenaye NAMBE, Urbain NDIGMBAYEL REOULAR, Kebkiba HINFIENE, Alhadji MAHAMAT, Abraham DAGUE……39

Motivation des enseignants des écoles catholiques privées et leur assiduité au travail à Kinshasa
Joël MAFU ELIKYA, Florentin AZIA DIMBU...……55

Les déterminants de l'utilisation pédagogique de l'intelligence artificielle générative (IAG) par les étudiants du premier cycle universitaire
Benjamin SIA...……65

The Analysis of 'English for First Year' Textbook Explicit Nature for a Suitable English Learning in Burkina Faso
Eymard François de Paul Wendemi OUEDRAOGO, Yacouba BAMOGO, Moses Kwodwo KAMBOU...……79

Effet des représentations sociales de la déficience visuelle des élèves sans déficience sur l'inclusion scolaire des élèves déficients visuels
Léonce RAMDE, Harouna DERRA, Maïmouna SIDIBÉ……93

Intersectionnalité et tri institutionnel de l'inclusion au secondaire : une étude mixte sur les parcours d'élèves en situation de handicap au Burkina Faso
Gninneyo Sylvestre-Pierre NIYA……107

La didactique des mathématiques : enjeux et apports pour la qualité de l'enseignement-apprentissage en République Démocratique du Congo
Benjamin MUGARU DAWA ……119

Transformations esthétiques maternelles et socialisation de genre chez l'enfant de 4 à 11 ans : une approche développementale
Louvrance Michèle MAKOUEGHA FOTSING, Serge-André BATIKALAK……129

Équité dans l'accès et l'allocation des ressources éducatives dans l'enseignement primaire public au Cameroun
Ronald Emery MINKA ……143

Le métier d'éducateur spécialisé au Cameroun : rôle institutionnel et déficit de reconnaissance sectorielle
Aimé MBOYANA NDONGO ……159

Contrôle parental en matière des TIC et performances scolaires des écoliers de la région des Savanes au Togo
Biriziwè HOULOUM ……167

Degré de maîtrise des concepts relatifs à l'éducation à l'environnement et au développement durable chez les enseignants des sciences de la vie et de la terre dans les écoles de Bukavu (RDC)
Basilwango Placide KIMENGELE, Charles NIYONKURU, Bahuga Paulin BAPOLISI..…179

Environnement physique de travail et adaptation des primo-arrivants du sous-cycle d'observation dans le département du Lom-et-Djerem (Cameroun)
SWALA ME MBEUL, Dorkas Octavia EYENGA NTONGA…….....…191

L'approche pédagogique intégratrice : la solution face à la faible performance des élèves ?
Maïmouna SIDIBÉ …….....…203

Effets du style incitatif et approche par situation sur l'acquisition des connaissances dans les disciplines psychopédagogiques par les élèves des écoles secondaires de Goma
André Halerimana GIHANGA, Paulin BAPOLISI BAHUGA, Jah Ndovya MUNDALA, David MALALA NTAMBUE…….....…217

Communautés de pratique et consolidation mémorielle : transformations des pratiques didactiques en enseignement de l'économie à Bangui
Darius AZARIA HIMBAÏLE NDAÏ..……..…….....…231

L'innovation pédagogique frugale et qualité interne dans les Universités Publiques du Togo
Nassougou N'SILE, Candide Achille Ayayi KOUAWO, Bilakani TONYEME.....…241

L'utilisation professionnelle de WhatsApp par les chefs de circonscription d'éducation de base au Burkina Faso
Windpouiré Zacharia TIEMTORÉ, Souleymane NIAMPA…….....…255

Analyse des difficultés de l'enseignement-apprentissage de la génétique au secondaire : cas de quelques établissements secondaires de la ville de Bongor
Reoular Urbain NDIGMBAYEL, Philippe MBAÏADOM..…….....…269

Topogenèse en classe de français au post-primaire au Burkina Faso : entre prescriptions curriculaires et pratiques didactiques
Édouard BAKOAN..……..…….....…283

Le verdict de la note : analyse sociologique du décalage entre évaluation chiffrée et compétences effectives des étudiants à l'Université Félix Houphouët-Boigny d'Abidjan
Marie-Thérèse Dahonnon ZEZE..……..…….....…295

Les fondements de la réforme LMD, source d'ambiguïtés conceptuelles et opérationnelles autour de la professionnalisation de la masse étudiante en humanités facultaires : zoom sur l'Université de Yaoundé 1
Joseph ELOUNDOU ANABA, Marcelline DJEUMENI TCHAMABE…….....….313

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Analyse de la perception sur l'efficacité des visites de classe par les acteurs de l'enseignement secondaire au Burkina Faso
Drissa Modeste SESSOUMA, Djiblirou KOLONGO……..……...…333

Perceptions et attitudes des enseignants de l'École Nationale de Développement Sanitaire et Social sur l'universitarisation de la formation des infirmiers : une étude phénoménologique
Alioune TALL, Assane MBAYE, Michel TOURÉ, Sokhna Oumy SARR…..……...…343

L'Approche par les Compétences (APC) au Burkina Faso : fondements théoriques, enjeux pédagogiques et défis de mise en œuvre
Mandjin Adama SOULAMA ……..……...…355

Le développement émotionnel par le jeu sérieux et son apport à l'apprentissage chez les adultes
Fanjalalaina Nadia RAZAKAMBOLA, Sahondra Olivia RAKOTOSON, Omer ANDRIANARIMANANA, Cyrile MIHAMITSY, Andriniaina RASOANAIVO...……...…365

Résilience scolaire des élèves handicapés sensoriels en contexte d'école inclusive en Côte d'Ivoire : le rôle des interactions sociales et du sentiment d'appartenance scolaire
Tointhé Olivier NYWLÉ, Kouakou Rodolphe MENZAN…….....……...…379

Une relecture de Dewey pour une réforme du système éducatif visant le progrès aux Comores
Bastoine CHADHOULI ……...…….....……...…391

L'enseignement de la philosophie au Togo : Genèse et état des lieux. Une étude exploratoire auprès des enseignants et étudiants de 1965 à 1975
Sougle-Man Yao IMOU, Bilakani TONYEME……...…….....……...…405

Formation professionnelle continue des enseignants de « Technique Industrielle » au Burkina Faso : l'analyse des pratiques enseignantes comme outil d'amélioration de la qualité
Wendkouni Jean Éric SAWADOGO……..……...…….....……...…417

Analyse des effets du stress professionnel sur le bien-être et la performance des acteurs éducatifs des régions à forts défis sécuritaires au Burkina Faso : cas de la région des Koulsé
Beli Alexis NEBIE, Salamata SANA……..……...…….....……...…433

Rapport aux études et absentéisme des étudiants de première année en Sciences Humaines à l'Université Joseph Ki-Zerbo (Burkina Faso)
Marcel ZERBO, Touwindé MILOUNGOU BAMOGO, Koug-nongom BONKOUNGOU……447

Vers une médiation numérique de l'enseignement du hardware : développement d'un dispositif d'aide à l'identification des composants internes
Janvier NGNOULAYE ……...……459

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea (1952): Educational Value and Universal Lesson*
Mouhamed Abdou Latif MBENGUE ……..……473

Entre difficultés sémiotiques et choix intuitif : analyse des pratiques enseignantes dans l'environnement papier-crayon et dans l'environnement informatique WIMS

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Espoir Joddrel MEMOUGAME ZEZONG, Joachna MEYA LOUA BOUAYI, Fernand Alfred MALONGA MOUNGABIO……..…….……479

Le confiage et son incidence sur les performances scolaires des enfants : une contribution théorique et psychopédagogique
Yasnoga Félicité BARRO COULIBALY...…….……493

Lien entre stéréotypes de genre en mathématiques et estime de soi chez les filles de l'enseignement secondaire général au Burkina Faso
Adama KÉRÉ, Voulbouè Bakiéma Casimir BAZONGO..…….……509

Dissonance structurelle et sécurité à l'employabilité : Une analyse transdisciplinaire de la tension entre logique comptable et service public au Cameroun
Jacques Yannick NGALLY NGALLY.....…521

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea (1952): Educational Value and Universal Lesson*

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Abstract

From his background as the son of a medical doctor and his passion for the corrida, Hemingway has inherited a particular philosophical concern for the human condition and a keen interest in man's capacity to face and overcome adversity. Indeed, very early in his life, Hemingway has been exposed to not fictitious but, real-life situations of ordinary people facing extreme situations of chronic pain, sufferings and death. This experience opened his eyes to the frailty of the human condition. It also directed his writing career, gave purpose to his life and oriented his prose toward a continuous exploration of man's immanent and unique capacity to face and overcome tragic situations. As a classic and major Hemingway work, *the Old Man and the Sea* is the typical epitome of Hemingwayan thought. Since its publication in 1952, the novel has been viewed as a platform for the author's existential preoccupations and an initiation story featuring various characters who all face extreme existential dilemmas. Probing into that strong existential stance, this paper approaches Hemingway's masterpiece as an educational novel loaded with personal, societal and universal life long message. In particular, the paper posits that Hemingway's novella explores a rare form of real life education close to the principles and philosophy of positive thinking.

Key words: adversity, capacity, existence, education, human condition.

Homme d'Ernest Hemingway le vieil et la mer (1952) :Valeur éducative et leçon universelle

Résumé

De par son éducation de fils de médecin et sa passion pour la corrida, Hemingway a hérité d'une profonde préoccupation philosophique pour la condition humaine et d'un intérêt aigu pour la capacité de l'homme à affronter et à surmonter l'adversité. Très tôt, il a été confronté à des situations bien réelles, non pas fictives, mais vécues par des gens ordinaires aux prises avec des souffrances chroniques extrêmes et à la mort. Cette expérience lui a révélé la fragilité de la condition humaine et a orienté sa prose vers une exploration continue de la capacité intrinsèque et unique de l'homme à affronter et à surmonter les situations tragiques. Œuvre majeure et classique d'Hemingway, *Le Vieil Homme et la Mer* est l'incarnation même de sa pensée. Depuis sa publication en 1952, ce roman est perçu comme une plateforme pour les préoccupations existentielles de l'auteur et un récit initiatique mettant en scène divers personnages confrontés à des dilemmes existentiels profonds. Explorant cette profonde dimension existentielle, cet article aborde le chef-d'œuvre d'Hemingway comme un roman éducatif porteur d'un message intemporel, à la fois personnel, sociétal et universel. Plus précisément, il soutient que la nouvelle d'Hemingway explore une forme rare d'apprentissage par la pratique, proche des principes et de la philosophie de la pensée positive.

Mots-clés : adversité, potentiel, existence, éducation, condition humaine.

Introduction

Since its publication in 1952, Hemingway' *The Old Man and the Sea* has been considered one of the finest pieces in American fiction. The novella has been scrutinized and critically assessed from several angles and points of view. When some see in its modernist features, others perceive its historical or existential preoccupations, while others perceive its initiation story features or that of a bildungsroman. Taking into consideration these different reading angles and perspectives, this paper approaches Hemingway's masterpiece from an educational and universal spectrum. In particular, the paper posits that Hemingway is exploring or rather redefining education through the novella. How is this operating? What principles of positive thinking can be derived from it? What type of education seems to be promoted and to what extent can that be termed education? To these questions and others, the paper provides answers while trying to decipher the novel's societal and universal message.

1. The educational value of *the old mand and the sea*

When Hemingway published the OMS he was, 68 and was at the dusk of his writing career. He had spent years battling against critics who seriously challenged his writing capabilities. He rose to the challenge by producing this masterpiece in a final effort to prove to his critics that he was not ''finished'' as a writer. But that ''bragging right'' was not the one and single purpose of the novel. In fact, though the novel deals with fishing as a subject, but its major themes go far beyond that professional activity. Metaphorically, one can even consider the search for fish as an allegory of life and its constant challenges, in that sense one of the novel's main theme has to do with existence and the quest for man's triumph over the hardships of life. Thus, how to cope with defeat? How to face failure and life's obstacles with grace? These seem to be constant questions Santiago as a character keeps grappling with throughout the story.

Santiago as a character seems to be experiencing continuous failures at sea and his capacity for resilience is constantly tested. But the question is not whether he is challenged or not but the question is *how* he is coping with challenges. The mindset and the attitude in front of life's challenges seem to be more important to Santiago than the challenge itself. That is why he is determined to go back to see every day despite his continuous setbacks and failures. Santiago kept going back with the firm belief that '' every day is a new day''. For Santiago, attitude is everything and his ultimate catch of a big marlin seem to confirm the popular adage: '' your attitude determines your altitude''. He accepts failure as part of the human experience but seems to indicate at the same time that as human beings, our attitude in front of failure varies from one person to another.

Besides, judging from his interactions with Manolin, the young apprentice who is helping him, one can see that Santiago is not just incarnating this adage, he is also trying to transmit it to Manolin. By refusing to backtrack and accepting to go back to sea after failing 84 times, Santiago embraces failure as a necessary step toward self-realization and success. That level of consciousness is what the boy and the society which calls him ''salao'' is yet to reach. Santiago is teaching by example and not by words. The rare moments when he had to talk to Manolin, he chose to focus on humility. That is when the boy, impressed by his qualities, exclaimed admiringly:'' you are the best fisherman, I have ever seen'', he quickly corrected him by saying: ''no others are good too''. Even though, we know that very few fishermen will go back to sea after failing to catch one single fish for so many times.

However, Santiago was not mainly concerned with teaching Manolin to catch fish, he never focused on the theoretical aspects related to the technique of fishing or to the very art of catching fish, he was more concerned with showing to the boy the right attitude of a good fisherman. Because he knows that attitude is what ultimately makes a difference at the end of the day. When come the bad days which are inevitable in an activity like fishing what should be the reaction of a good fisherman? After facing 84 bad days, Santiago still keeps hope for that

one good day which finally came despite against all odds. Santiago's triumph from that catch of a big marlin is a testimony of Hemingway's belief in resilience and continuous effort and his faith in man's ability to overcome any type of ''adversity''. But that result is the outcome of a long journey and the fruit of continuous efforts which ended up by paying off. The boy's parents, and the rest of fishermen could not wait simply because they were deprived of the positive thinking attitude which ultimately allowed the old man to succeed by catching a fish.

That positive thinking attitude contrasts with the society's greed and impatience which guided their stereotypes and negative thoughts on a potentiel form of bad luck calls ''salao'' which keeps lurking on the old man like a hungry mosquitoe. Thus the educational scope of the story goes beyond the relationship between the two main characters, to include the relationship between the main character and his society. From the interactions between the novel's various protagonists, one may also detect societal and universal messages designed to change the readers' mindsets and elevate their consciences. As a typical model of positive thinking, Santiago serves as a mentor to the boy and provides hands-on learning experience which allow Manolin to grow as a leader and reap the benefits of this positive thinking attitude.

As a philosophy, positive thinking grew out of the works of Carlyle and Norman Vincent Peale through his acclaimed book entitled: *The Power of Positive Thinking*. Citing Carlyle's famous saying: ''the thought is ancestor to the deed', Peale defines Positive thinking as:

> that initial thought which, if given residence in the mind, is the spark that ignites the action. And success and failure depends on whether that thought is positive or negative. What follows that thought is just as important. And that is the deliberating process, how we handle the problem or opportunity. (N.V. Peale, 1998, pp.6-7).

As we observe the attitude of Santiago toward the boy and in the face of his critics, we clearly see that he is definitely inhabited by this positive thought and he wants to educate both the boy and the society into adopting another perception of failure and success. He is teaching not through oral lessons but through his own example. He is using his personal practice and his daily struggle as a pretext cardinal values of perseverance and resilience to the rest of his community.

That method of transmission as a viable educational approach is also known as experiential learning, hands-on education, practical learning, apprenticeship or mentorship. Through this method, the teacher is not in the classroom delivering a lecture or dictating a lesson to student, he or she is on the field practising along with the student. They both experience and face at the same time the professional and personal challenges of the job. They work together to find solutions to their problems while learning and growing together as persons and professionals.

Through their collective efforts the master and the student get to better know their limits and mutually appreciate their specific skills. Their learning journey is strengthened by mutual respect and appreciation. Thus, by his acknowledgement of the master's genuine sense of purpose and his capacity to overcome obstacles, the student's trust toward the master is reinforced. That's what we see when Manolin expresses admiration toward the old man despite all the social stereotypes surrounding him. In particular when society labels him as ''salao'' another term for carrier of a bad luck. Santiago's responds with appositive a thinking attitude and a sense of purpose. which translate into his full acceptance of his condition as a fisherman even at times when he is not being successful. This attitude impressed the boy and pushed him to follow him despite the reluctance of his parents. By transmitting to the boy that sense of purpose, he is not just teaching him how to fish but he is igniting in him a resilient mindset and a winning mindset which the young boy needs in order to fully navigate through the vast ocean of life and human existence.

2. The metaphor of fishing as a real-life educational activity

Hemingway's story insinuates that humans are all fishermen, they are all fishing for something. Be it a degree, a position, a promotion in the work place, a winning ticket at the lottery, the hand of a charming bride, or anything else. Life can be paralleled to a large ocean in which man has been continuously fishing. Santiago as a symbol of that man has been fishing for 84 consecutive days without catching any single fish. But he keeps going back to the ocean to fish relentlessly with the idea that ''every day is a new day''. Santiago's luck will only come on the 85th day when he caught that big marlin and fought hard to take it offshore. Santiago's continuous efforts are those of any human being waking up every day to face life. The choice and dilemma faced by Santiago at sea are those of humans forced to either succumb to failure or rise up stronger after each of life's various setbacks. Through his resilience, Santiago exemplifies the novel's main lesson'' a man can be destroyed but a man cannot be defeated''.

2.1. The old man and the sea as a celebration of resilience

Hemingway's concern for the human soul faced with the most extreme challenges, can also be viewed as the writer's aim to give a specific account of the resilient nature of the human soul. That is why, his main characters are made to face dilemmas which expose them to perilous situations. This is the case of Nick in *lndian Camp,* of Kreb in *Soldier's Home,* Santiago de *The 0ld Man And The Sea* or Francis Macombo in *The Poor Happy Life of Francis Macombo*. Each of these characters is exposed to various forms of adversity designed to showcase their ontological capacities to face and overcome adversity[1].

As a demanding activity, fishing challenges us to play by its rules and like in any game we ultimately loose or win. Like in the sport of Santiago's role model, ''the great'' Jo Di maggio, the practitioner has to regularly experience victories but also losses. Yet he or she has still to come back to if they want to triumph one day. Both victories and setbacks are for Santiago not moment of complacency, as he keeps fighting even after he caught, the big marlin. This could've symbolized success but instead it added to the plate of Santiago and turned out to be a new ordeal as sharks will come and dispute the marlin with him. Success, should never be taking for granted, and it is not a destination but a mindset, this seem to guide santiago as he fights to protect his catch from the predators. But that battle between Santiago and the Sharks has also another meaning. It is in fact the testimony that when you dream big you should also be prepared for big fights. [1] It is also in this spirit that Santiago accepted to ultimately ''go the extra mile'' and wage that long and trying fight with the sharks.

2.2. Educating society

One can easily see in the final triumph of Santiago a way for Hemingway to educate his society through the values embodied by Santiago as they are constantly juxtaposed to those of his society. Indeed Santiago has been mocked and laughed at by the rest of the society who saw him as ''salao'', which is the worse form of bad luck. But despite that and against all odds, the Old Man kept going back to sea. The fact that he was able to catch a fish on the 85th, can be interpreted as a triumph of the values of his positive thinking attitude as opposed to the negative mindset of his society. As a character, Santiago is in fact both a great fisherman and a formidable human being whose values are revealed to us by the young Manolin. The boy is in fact attracted to the fisherman not by his fishing abilities but, his right mindset and his humble attitude. Santiago never let himself defeated by his repetitive failures. On the contrary, he viewed these as learning opportunities and kept a positive mindset which ultimately allowed

[1] That concern can be traced back to the author's background as a child witnessing human sufferings while he accompanied his father through his various medical interventions. *So very early in his life, Hemingway has been conscious of the frailty of the human condition, he has experienced death, without having the metaphysical elements to fully understand it.*

him to catch the big marlin. Beside, Santiago's respect for the marlin as a working adversary shows that he does not take success for granted. He also did not take for permanent defeats, his physical challenges and his limits as an old man. He kept struggling with nature with the limits of his physical forces and the power of his mental strength. This face to face between mental and physical strength is what will lead to the triumph of Santiago as a man and which will be expressed through the final lesson he took from this experience when he declare''A man can be destroyed but a man cannot be defeated''.

Hemingway as we know it, wrote the Old Man and the Sea at a time when he was highly attacked by critics who expressed doubts as to his capacity to bounce back as a major writer at an advanced age. He wanted to prove these critics wrong and to show that despite his age, his literary talents were still intact. That is why to some analysts the story of Santiago is the very trajectory of no other than Hemingway himself. It is the story of his own perseverance as a writer and the whole work was produced to silence the writers' numerous detractors. Indeed one can easily connect the trajectory of Santiago to that of Hemingway as they both share the weight of age and received both mockeries and criticisms from their contemporaries. Santiago is considered ''salao'' and mocked by society for his poor performances as a fisherman. While Hemingway is critiqued for his dwindling career. Both responded by choosing to confront their critics. They did so by challenging the fatalist mindsets of their society and through the principles of work ethic, sense of purpose and humility. Through this attitude they both triumphed ultimately over their critics. Their sense of purpose helped them clearly identify their craft as a the challenge and not society and people. By harnessing their talents to meet the standards of their crafts they were able to avoid the trap of targeting people instead of principles. Their attitude speak volume as to how the principles they live by, are in conflict with those of their societies.

3. The novel's universal and timeless message

A universal text is often seen as one which transcends time and space and speaks to all readers regardless, of their background, age and or their social positions. he Universality of the message in Hemingway's text can be explained in part, by the writer's journalistic background and by his openness to the world. In fact, for long time Hemingway had lived in Paris and was part of the group of expatriates known as the lost generation writers. Hemingway also served as ambulance driver during the Second World War. He also lived in Cuba for a while. His interest in other cultures and world affairs made him collaborate with the FBI as an informant. Hemingway become both a national and an international literary figure as his text addressed universal and humanistic issues. *The Old Man and the Sea* follows that trajectory as it speaks to readers of all ages and has been translated to several languages. The novella addresses universal themes such as human perseverance, resilience, respect, work ethic, success and failure, solidarity and hard work. Santiago's philosophy is that of life. Anyone, from any culture or background can take ownership of his resilient mindset and his positive conception of life as an ordeal, a challenge which can be overcome despite its numerous hurdles. As he puts it ''every day is a new day''. Which can be interpreted as every day is an opportunity for growth and personal development. Such a posture can speaks to any human being and its appeal has no boundary or limit.

The choice of Santiago to focus on principles while others choose to focus on people and his continuous quest for success are not just universal message they are also timeless ones. Indeed people from of all times and place can respond to adversity by focusing on what they think are the right principles to follow. They can also position these principles as potential alternatives to their societal values which they do not share. By living with an attitude guided by his own principles, Santiago seem to echo Mahatma Gandhi's injunction when he declared :''be the change you want to see in the world''. In other words, do not just accept the

world as it is, change it. But change it with your own worldview and with the attitude and mindset that defines a true man and which can be found in the following wisdom lessons Santiago has learned throughout his long career as a fisherman:

> The only guarantee of failure is not to try.
> Every day is a new day.
> Better late than never.
> No pain no gain.
> Fortune favors the brave.
> Pain does not matter to a man.
> The hardest journey is the one you have to make alone.
> A journey of a thousand miles starts with one step.
> What does not kill you makes you stronger.
> Man is not made for defeat. A Man can be destroyed but not defeated.

These life lessons are also known by critics as the Hemingway hero code. They are completed by the notions of grace under pressure, resilience and personal honor in the face of adversity. Hemingway's hero accepts failure as part of the process. He accepts life as a sport's game which entails wins and losses. That's is why Santiago's role model is a sport's figure whose constant experiences with losses and defeats allowed him to ultimately triumph and emerge as the legendary Jo Di Maggio.

Conclusion

Like all masterpieces, *The Old Man and the Sea* can be read from several angles and points of views but its educational value and universal features seem not to have been highlighted enough. This paper has dug into that double perspective to demonstrate that Hemingway carefully chose his heroes not among the impatient masses or the mentally defeated people but among the individuals with the right mindset and positive attitude in front of life challenges and adversity. That's why Santiago cannot be viewed as an ordinary hero but as a non-ordinary one. His anti-conformism and his acceptance of failure are meant to educate his people and to transform their perception of life. This transformation process begins starts with his young apprentice Manolin who, in the perspective of an initiation story or bildungsroman is the initiated who should receive the several lessons derived from the master's positive thinking and his litany of life lessons which guide it. It is in that regard that the educational and universal values of the novel cannot be overstated.

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