

SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST IN *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA* AND *LIFE OF PI* : A MARITIME LITERARY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

In this paper, the idea of 'survival of the fittest' is discussed in regard to Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea and Yann Martel's Life of Pi. It compares and contrasts the ways in which the two major heroes, Santiago and Pi Patel, demonstrate fortitude, flexibility, and resiliency in the face of adversity. Additionally, this research situates these works in the broader context of nautical literature by contrasting them with other seafaring narratives. To situate the survivalist themes within an existential and evolutionary framework, the study references a number of literary critics and scholars, highlighting how these works contribute to the literary concern with the human struggle against the sea that has persisted for so long. This paper aims to examine these novels alongside maritime literary traditions, including works like Moby-Dick by Herman Melville and Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe. By drawing on various literary theories such as Darwinian evolution, existentialism, and postmodern survival narratives, this study intends to show how Santiago and Pi embody two aspects of human resilience: one grounded in unwavering determination and another in mental adaptability.

Introduction

People often connect the saying 'survival of the fittest' to Charles Darwin's natural selection theory, but philosopher Herbert Spencer came up with it first in his 1864 book *The Principles of Biology*. This idea suggests that in the fight to stay alive, creatures that fit their surroundings best have the highest chances to live and have offspring. At first, folks used this idea to talk about how living things change over time, but now people apply it to how society works how money moves around, and even to stories. In books and movies, tales about surviving often look at how tough people can be when they face hard times, whether it's physical challenges, mind games, or questions about why we're here. Scholar Richard Slotkin points out, "the theme of endurance in literature often reflects a hero's transformation where survival is not physical but also existential" (78). The idea of survival of the fittest plays a big role in sea stories where the ocean acts as a wild and unpredictable force that characters must fight against. The

sea often stands for nature's coldness, a huge and overwhelming thing that puts human toughness to the test. "The ocean in literature is not a backdrop, but an active force that shapes the destinies of those who brave it" (Cohen 156).

Particularly when facing the overwhelming force of nature, survival frequently tests one's capacity for endurance, adaptation, and psychological fortitude. In both *Life of Pi* and *The Old Man and the Sea*, the characters must fight against overwhelming odds in order to survive. Both Pi Patel, the young shipwreck survivor, and Santiago, the elderly fisherman, exhibit distinct strategies for perseverance, drawing on their individual abilities, life lessons, and philosophical beliefs to get through their hardships. Their experiences show how intricately existential change, mental toughness, and physical survival interact.

Santiago: The Struggle of Strength and Perseverance

In Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago's fight with the marlin symbolizes his dogged resolve. Santiago's fellow fishermen see him as unlucky after he fails to catch a fish for 84 days. Even though he's old and frail, he sails further out to sea to land his biggest fish. His battle with the marlin puts his might, toughness, and self-knowledge to the test; it's more than just fishing. Hemingway's well-known words, "A man can be destroyed but not defeated," (Hemingway 103) capture Santiago's iron will. Santiago's refusal to give up his struggle as he nears total fatigue and hurt shows the classic heroic traits of honor and grit. Santiago's affinity with nature is closely linked to his struggles. Santiago has a great deal of respect for the marlin, who is not only an enemy but also a noble foe. "You are killing me, fish... but you have a right to," (Hemingway 92) he says, acknowledging the beauty and strength of the marlin. His tribulation gains philosophical depth from the mutual respect between man and nature. Hemingway portrays nature as a force that can both challenge and elevate those who interact with it, in contrast to other survival stories that portray nature as merely hostile. Even when sharks devour his hard-earned prize, Santiago remains undefeated in spirit, proving that survival is as much about inner strength as it is about physical triumph. Harold Bloom notes that "Santiago's endurance is not merely about physical survival but about the reaffirmation of human dignity in the face of inevitable defeat" (47).

Pi: Adaptation, Intelligence, and Psychological Survival

Pi Patel in *Life of Pi* survives by being adaptive, intelligent, and psychologically resilient, in contrast to Santiago, who thrives on tenacity and physical stamina. Pi is stranded on a lifeboat with Richard Parker, a Bengal tiger, and must deal with the dangers of the ocean as well as the presence of a lethal predator. Pi uses intelligence, religious faith, and an awareness of animal behavior to survive, in contrast to Santiago, who depends on experience and physical willpower. He acknowledges right away that living with Parker is essential to his life, saying, "I wouldn't be here today to tell you my story without Richard Parker" (Martel 164). Instead of being a threat, Tiger turns into a friend

who helps Pi be vigilant, disciplined, and interested in survival techniques.

The way Pi handles food, water, and territory demonstrates his adaptability. He establishes a system of rationing goods, comes up with a way to catch rainwater, and uses conditioning techniques to establish his domination over Richard Parker. His life depends on his comprehension of nature's laws and his capacity to influence them rather than his physical prowess, which Santiago possesses. "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves," (Frankl 99). By turning his fear into a strategic mind set and preventing himself from giving up, Pi is a prime example of this idea. Additionally, Pi's religious convictions have a significant impact on his survival. Because he feels that faith gives meaning to suffering, he seeks solace and direction from Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam during his journey. He muses, "Faith in God is an opening up, a letting go, a deep trust, a free act of love" (Martel 231). This spiritual fortitude stands in sharp contrast to Santiago's more existential philosophy, which places more emphasis on honor and self-reliance than on divine intervention. As literary critic Susan Bassnett observes, "Pi's survival is not just a battle against nature, but an exploration of belief, narrative, and the human capacity to find meaning in suffering" (114). He also states, "Survival in literature is often depicted not merely as endurance, but as a deep psychological transformation catalysed by adversity" (Bassnett 114).

This transformation is evident in both Santiago and Pi, who undergo profound shifts in their perception of life and struggle. Santiago returns from his journey physically broken but spiritually affirmed in his dignity and perseverance. Pi, on the other hand, emerges from his ordeal with a transformed worldview, oscillating between rational scepticism and an enduring belief in the necessity of storytelling and faith for survival.

Maritime Literature and the Element of the Sea

Themes of perseverance, survival, and the interaction between people and the natural world have long been explored in maritime literature. *Life of Pi* and *The Old Man and the Sea* both follow this tradition by depicting the sea as a teacher and a challenger. The characters are put to

the ultimate test by the huge and uncaring ocean, which deprives them of social restraints and forces them to rely only on their inner strength, intelligence, and instincts.

Similar struggles are depicted in Herman Melville's *Moby-Dick* (1851), where Santiago's tenacity is mirrored by Captain Ahab's unrelenting search for the white whale. But in the end, Santiago's perseverance upholds his dignity, while Ahab's obsession brings him to ruin. As a "ungraspable phantom of life" (Melville 20), the sea is a force that defines and humbles those who dare to confront it, according to Melville. Like Ahab, Santiago is molded by his encounter with the sea, yet he comes out of it with his soul unbroken.

In a similar vein, Daniel Defoe emphasizes the value of flexibility in nautical life in *Robinson Crusoe* (1719). Like Pi, Crusoe is thrust into a foreign world where his capacity to learn from nature is essential to his life. Pi and Crusoe both create systems to support themselves, realizing that intelligence, resourcefulness, and the capacity to make peace with one's environment are necessary for survival. As Defoe states, "It is never too late to be wise" (Defoe 78), Pi's readiness to adopt a variety of ideologies and useful survival skills reflects this idea.

Lord Jim by Joseph Conrad emphasizes the idea that survival is a moral and psychological battle. The protagonist's adventures at sea highlight the ocean's function as a testing ground for character development by forcing him to face his own flaws and strengths. Conrad observes, "The Sea has never been friendly to man. At most, it has been the accomplice of human restlessness" (Conrad 134). Scholar Margaret Cohen notes, "Maritime literature often presents the sea as both a physical and symbolic challenge, where survival depends on the ability to adapt to the unpredictability of nature" (156). The theme of human resilience in the face of the sea's indifference is further examined in Joseph Conrad's *Lord Jim*, where the protagonist's moral struggle is tied to his survival. Conrad suggests that "The sea is a great leveller, stripping man of pretense and testing his core essence" (134). This aligns with both Hemingway's and Martel's depiction of survival as a physical and philosophical battle.

This aligns with both Hemingway's and Martel's depictions of the sea as an indifferent yet transformative force. This is consistent with how the sea is portrayed by

both Hemingway and Martel as an uncaring yet transforming force. In the end, the sea is constantly portrayed in maritime literature as a place where surviving requires not just endurance but also self-discovery. The adventures of Santiago and Pi demonstrate that although the ocean is harsh and hazardous, it also presents a chance for significant personal development and change. Their battles are not just against the natural world, but also against the more profound existential issues that come up when one is alone in the immensity of the ocean.

Theoretical Perspectives on Survival of the Fittest

The fights in both stories are grounded in Darwinian principles, according to theoretical perspectives on survival of the fittest. Pi's capacity to live with Richard Parker illustrates the value of flexibility, while Santiago's strength and tenacity support the notion that physical endurance is necessary for survival. According to literary historian Harold Bloom "Hemingway's Santiago is an archetype of the existential survivor, embodying sheer will against overwhelming odds," (47). Similar to this, Martel's book has been read from existential and postmodern perspectives, showing how the mind and body work together to create survival. As philosopher Viktor Frankl states, "When we are no longer able to change a situation, we are challenged to change ourselves" (99). This sentiment encapsulates both Santiago's and Pi's struggles, as they emerge transformed by their trials.

Conclusion

While both Santiago and Pi endure extreme physical and psychological trials, their survival strategies differ significantly. Santiago embodies the traditional masculine hero, persevering through sheer willpower and strength. He refuses to yield, even when faced with exhaustion, pain, and eventual loss. Pi, on the other hand, represents a more modern and nuanced survivalist—one who uses intellect, adaptability, and faith to navigate his hardships. Their respective battles highlight two distinct approaches to endurance: one rooted in defiance against nature and the other in harmonious adaptation to it. Despite these differences, both characters undergo profound transformations. Santiago, though physically broken by his ordeal, returns with his spirit intact, proving that survival is

not merely about victory but about the affirmation of self-worth. Pi, meanwhile, emerges with a redefined understanding of reality, faith, and the power of storytelling. As Joseph Campbell states in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, "The hero returns from his adventure with the gift of knowledge, transformed by his trials" (189). Santiago and Pi's experiences both align with this archetypal journey, illustrating how survival is ultimately an evolving process of self-discovery and resilience.

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