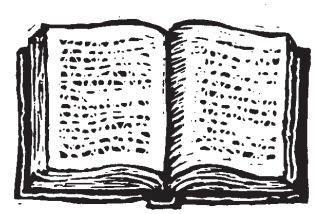
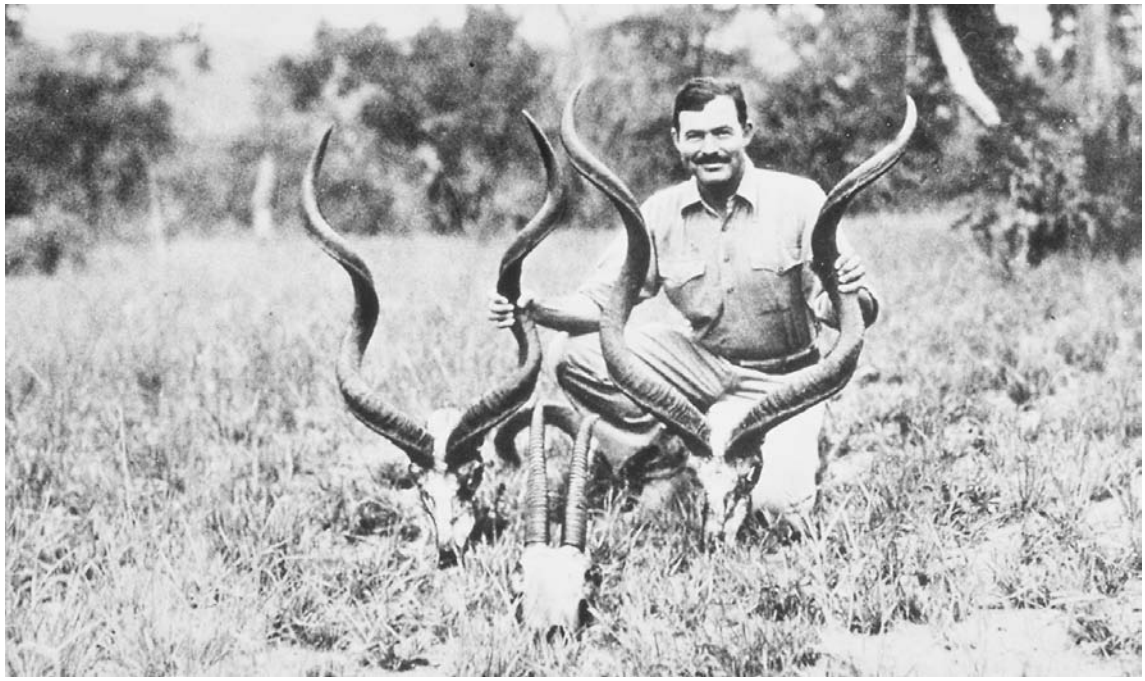
The Old Man and the Sea

Ernest Hemingway

1952

When *The Old Man and the Sea* was published in 1952 to wide critical acclaim, it had been twelve years since Ernest Hemingway's previous critical success, *For Whom the Bell Tolls.* His major writing effort during the intervening period, *Across the River and Into the Trees,* published in 1950, had been widely dismissed as a near-parody of the author's usual style and themes. *The Old Man and the Sea,* however, was a popular success, selling 5.3 million copies within two days of its publication in a special edition of *Life* magazine. A few complaints about the stilted language of some of the Spanish transliterations came from critics. Some also found Santiago's philosophizing unrealistic. Nevertheless, the story won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1953. A year later, Hemingway was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. The Nobel committee singled out the story's "natural admiration for every individual who fights the good fight in a world of reality overshadowed by violence and death," (noted Susan F. Beegel in "Conclusion: The Critical Reputation of Ernest Hemingway"). Although Hemingway's writing continued to be published, much of it posthumously after the author's suicide in 1961, *The Old Man and the Sea* is generally considered by many to be his crowning achievement. The work was especially praised for its depiction of a new dimension to the typical Hemingway hero, less macho and more respectful of life. In Santiago, Hemingway had finally achieved a character who could face the human condition and survive without cynically





Ernest Hemingway

dismissing it or dying while attempting to better it. In Santiago's relationship with the world and those around him, Hemingway had discovered a way to proclaim the power of love in a wider and deeper way than in his previous works.

Author Biography

Ernest Hemingway was born in Oak Park, Illinois, in 1899. He was the second son of Clarence Hemingway, a doctor, and Grace Hall Hemingway, who had been an aspiring opera singer. While his father encouraged his son's athletic and outdoor skills, his mother fostered her son's artistic talents. In school, Hemingway was an active, if not outstanding, athlete. He wrote poems and articles for the school newspaper, and he also tried his hand at stories. After graduation Hemingway became a reporter on the *Kansas City Star,* where he learned the newspaper's preferred style of simple declarative sentences that was to permanently influence his own style of writing.

In May of 1918, Hemingway volunteered for duty in World War I, serving as an ambulance driver on the Italian front. This experience later served as the source material for *A Farewell to Arms.* He, like the novel's protagonist, was wounded in the legs. However, instead of being returned to the front he was sent home, where he was greeted as a celebrity. He spent months convalescing at the family cabin in Michigan. Having recovered, in 1920, Hemingway moved to Toronto where he functioned as companion to a disabled youth. There, he again entered the world of writing by working for the *Toronto Star.* After marrying, he became a correspondent with the paper. His position enabled him to begin pursuing a career as a novelist. He and his wife, Hadley Richardson, left for Paris, where Hemingway associated with a group of other authors known collectively as the "Lost Generation." The group included James Joyce, Ezra Pound, Gertrude Stein, and Ford Madox Ford.

Awaiting the birth of their child, the Hemingways returned to Toronto in 1923. Following the birth of their son John, the family went back to Paris. There Hemingway spent a year and a half editing a literary magazine. 1925 to 1929 proved to be a prolific period for Hemingway, who wrote and published the short story collection *In Our Time* and the novels *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms,* as well as others. The end of the 1920s was marred, however, by his divorce from Hadley in 1927 and by the suicide of his father in

1928. In the same period, Pauline Pfeiffer, whom Hemingway married the same year as his divorce, nearly died while she was giving birth to their child. This experience later found its way into the death of the character Catherine Barkley in *A Farewell to Arms.*

The 1930s, on the other hand, were filled with writing and adventure, as Hemingway hunted in Africa, fished in the Gulf Stream near Cuba, and reported on the Spanish Civil War for the *North American Newspaper Alliance.* During the mid-1930s Hemingway began gathering material for *The Sea,* one part of which eventually became *The Old Man and the Sea.* The other parts, as edited by Charles Scribner, were later published posthumously in 1970 as *Islands in the Stream.*

In 1940 Hemingway left Pfeiffer for Martha Gellhorn. The same year he published *For Whom the Bell Tolls.* Hemingway and Gellhorn then went to China. Next, he became a war correspondent with the U.S. Fourth Infantry Division where he met Mary Welsh. In 1946, one year after divorcing Gellhorn, he married Welsh.

The Old Man and the Sea won the Pulitzer Prize in 1952. Two years later, Hemingway was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. But as he approached his sixties, Hemingway's health began deteriorating. The once robust adventurer now suffered from hypertension, mild diabetes, depression, and paranoia. Despite treatment for mental health issues, Hemingway committed suicide on July 2, 1961. He is remembered as one of the great stylistic innovators of modern American literature.

Plot Summary

An Unlucky Boat

The Old Man and the Sea tells the story of Santiago, an aging Cuban fisherman, who alone in his small boat faces the most difficult fight of his life against an enormous marlin. At the beginning of the short novel, Santiago has lost his fisherman's luck; he has gone eighty-four days without catching a marketable fish. Even his closest friend, a village boy he taught to fish, has left him to work on another boat. The local fishermen make fun of Santiago or feel sorry for him, but he himself remains hopeful and undefeated. Every day he rises early, prepares his skiff, and rows far out into the Gulf Stream in search of marlin.

Though ordered by his parents to work on a luckier boat, the boy still loves Santiago, and he visits the old man's simple shack when he can. Once married, Santiago now lives alone in increasing poverty. He has little to eat, and frequently must rely on the boy or others in the village to bring him food and clothing. As they share their meals, Santiago and the boy discuss baseball and the important players of the period, especially "the great DiMaggio." The old man tells of his early life working on ships that sailed to Africa. When he sleeps, Santiago dreams of being young again and seeing "lions on the beaches in the evening."

The Truly Big Fish

Early one morning the old man rises, shares coffee with the boy, and sets out for the far reaches of the fishing grounds. He passes all the other fishermen, who stop to work "the great well," the point where the ocean drops off suddenly to seven hundred fathoms. He watches for flying fish or other signs of bait that might signal the presence of larger fish. Soon he catches a small albacore and, using it for bait, quickly hooks something very large. Though he pulls as hard as he can on the line, Santiago cannot move the great weight on the other end. The big fish refuses to surface and begins to swim out to sea, towing the skiff behind it.

> Eat it so that the point of the hook goes into your heart and kills you, he thought. Come up easy and let me put the harpoon into you. All right. Are you ready? Have you been long enough at table?
>
> "Now!" he said aloud and struck hard with both hands, gained a yard of line and then struck again and again, swinging with each arm alternately on the cord with all the strength of his arms and the pivoted weight of his body.
>
> Nothing happened. The fish just moved away slowly and the old man could not raise him an inch. His line was strong and made for heavy fish and he held it against his back until it was so taut that beads of water were jumping from it. Then it began to make a slow hissing sound in the water and he still held it, bracing himself against the thwart and leaning back against the pull. The boat began to move slowly off toward the north-west.

Alone and unable to release the tightening line, Santiago struggles to hold onto the fish. Without the boy to help him, he knows that either he or the fish will die from this. His body is old but still strong, and he maintains his grip on the line despite his age and increasing discomfort. After several hours, night falls, but he never considers giving up. He realizes that he will need to eat to keep up his strength, and as the sun begins to rise the next day

he consumes one of the small tuna he caught the day before.

During the second day, the great fish surfaces just long enough for Santiago to see him. The sight of the great marlin, "two feet longer than the skiff," inspires the old man. He remembers a time in his younger days when he arm wrestled a man in a Casablanca tavern. The match began on a Sunday morning and lasted the entire night, ending the following morning when Santiago forced his opponent's hand to the wood. Night comes again and the old man realizes that he needs to sleep. He wraps the line around his shoulders and cramps his body against it. Then he sleeps and dreams of the lions.

When Santiago wakes it is still dark, though the moon has come out. While he was sleeping, the great fish has risen to the surface, and now Santiago can hear the marlin thrashing and jumping in the distance. As the old man gathers all his strength to hold onto the line, the marlin begins to circle the boat, and Santiago knows he has won. After several turns, the fish pulls closer, brushing the sides of the boat, and the old man, seeing his chance, drives his harpoon into its side. With a final struggle that sends spray over the entire skiff, the fish dies, its dark blood staining the blue water.

Destroyed But Not Defeated

Now many miles out to sea, the old man lashes the great fish to the side of his skiff and sets his small sail for home. After about an hour of smooth sailing, however, his luck runs out. A shark, following the trail of blood left by the huge fish, bites into the body, taking a large piece of flesh. Santiago manages to kill the "dentuso" with his harpoon, but he realizes that more sharks will follow. He begins to wonder whether he committed a sin in killing the great marlin, but before he has time to decide, the sharks close in. Fighting a hopeless battle, the old man kills several of the large "galanos" before he loses first his harpoon and then his knife. By the time the skiff reaches the village, little remains of the great fish but the head and skeleton.

Convinced that he "went out too far" and bears responsibility for the loss of the fish, the exhausted Santiago returns to his shack and falls asleep. The fishermen in the village marvel at the mutilated fish; at eighteen feet, it is the largest marlin they have ever seen. The boy brings the old man food and fresh clothes and watches over him as he sleeps.

Characters

Bodega Proprietor

Although he is unnamed in the story, the bodega proprietor serves the important function of representing those in the village who show their respect and admiration of Santiago by supporting him—in this case, by giving Santiago free coffee and newspapers.

Female Tourist

Although she has only one line in the story, the unnamed female tourist is important since in her mistaking the carcass of the marlin as that of a shark, she acts as a foil for Santiago's extraordinary knowledge of the sea.

Manolin

Manolin is a young man, based on someone Hemingway knew in Cuba who was then in his twenties. In the story, however, Manolin is referred to as "the boy." Like Santiago, Manolin comes from a family of fishermen and has long admired Santiago as a masterful practitioner of his trade. Although Manolin's father has forbidden him to go fishing with Santiago because of the old man's bad luck, Manolin nevertheless continues to visit Santiago and to help him in whatever ways he can. Manolin shows great concern for Santiago's health, especially after he sees how Santiago has suffered in catching the big marlin. As a mark of his friendship and respect for Manolin, Santiago has given him certain responsibilities from an early age, such as fetching bait and carrying the lines. By contrast, Manolin's own father only belittles his son's relationship with Santiago.

Even though Manolin appears only at the beginning and the end of the story, he is an important character. Manolin's conversations with Santiago, and Santiago's longing for the boy's company when he is alone, reveal the character of both men. Santiago is seen as a loving, patient, and brave man, both proud and humble, who accepts and appreciates life, despite all its hardships. Manolin is shown to be someone who loves and respects Santiago, and who realizes that he can learn things from the old man that he cannot learn at home.

Manolin undergoes an important change between the beginning and end of the story. At the beginning he still defers to the wishes of his parents that he not accompany Santiago fishing since the old man's luck has turned bad. By the end of the story, however, Manolin has resolved to go with

the old man, lucky or not, in spite of his parents' wishes.

Manolin's Father

Manolin's father forbids Manolin from going out with Santiago after the old man's fortieth day without a fish. By the end of the story Manolin decides to disobey his father out of his love for Santiago.

Old Man

See Santiago

Pedrico

As a friend of Santiago, Pedrico helps the old man by giving him newspapers. After the old man's return from the sea, despite his wounds and exhaustion, Santiago remembers to carry out his promise to give Pedrico the head of the fish carcass.

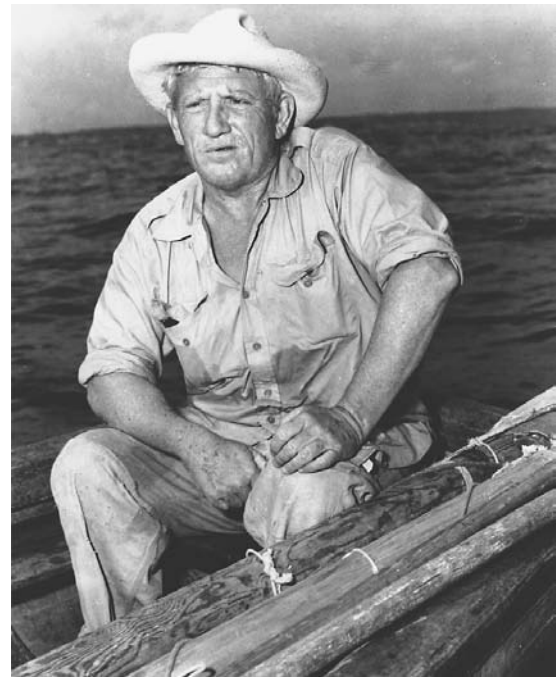
Santiago

Santiago is an old fisherman of undetermined age. As a young man he traveled widely by ship and fondly remembers seeing lions on the beaches of East Africa. His wife died, and he has taken her picture down because it makes him sad to see it. Now he lives alone in a shack on the beach. Every day he sets forth alone in his boat to make a living.

When the story opens, Santiago has gone eighty-four days without catching a single fish. As a result, he is pitied and regarded by the other fishermen as unlucky. Santiago is still respected by some, however, because of his age and his perseverance. He is a very experienced fisherman who knows well the tricks of his trade, including which fish to use as bait.

Santiago also loves baseball and occasionally gambles. He identifies with Joe DiMaggio, the great center fielder for the Yankees in the 1940s and 1950s. Santiago admires how DiMaggio, whose father was a fisherman, plays in spite of bone spurs in his feet that cause him pain whenever he runs. As an old man, Santiago must also cope with the physical demands of his job in the face of the infirmities of his aging body. Yet he suffers without complaining, and it is this stoic attitude that has won him much respect in the community.

Santiago is not a religious person, but he does think about the meaning of life, and his religious references show that he is very familiar with Roman Catholic saints and prayers. Through the author's revelation of Santiago's own thoughts, and the conversations between Santiago and his relatively young companion, Manolin, readers come to sense that despite his setbacks and shortcomings, Santiago remains proud of himself, and this makes his humility both touching and real. Though he strives to attain the most he can for himself, Santiago also accepts what life has given him without complaint.



Spencer Tracy starring in the title role of the 1956 film The Old Man and the Sea.

This largeness of vision also allows Santiago to appreciate and respect nature and all living creatures, even though he must kill some of these creatures in order to live. For example, the old man recalls how he once hooked, brought in, and finally clubbed to death a female marlin, while her faithful mate never left her side once during the ordeal. "That was the saddest thing I ever saw," the old man comments. "The boy was sad too and we begged her pardon and butchered her promptly."

Hemingway first wrote about the true incident upon which his story is based in an article entitled "On the Blue Water: A Gulf Stream Letter" for the April 1936 issue of *Esquire* magazine. The actual incident took only two days; the fisherman, "half crazy" and crying, was picked up by others after

Media Adaptations

- *The Old Man and the Sea* was adapted as a feature film starring Spencer Tracy as Santiago and Felipe Pazos as The Boy, Warner Brothers, 1958. This film has been praised for some of its visual effects, and the score won an Academy Award.
- It was also the source of a made-for-TV production in 1990 starring Anthony Quinn, Gary Cole, Alexis Cruz, Patricia Clarkson, and Francesco Quinn.
- The novel is also available on a two-cassette sound recording narrated by Charlton Heston.

fighting the sharks; and half the carcass was still left at the end. Hemingway's intentions in creating the character of Santiago may perhaps best be seen in examining how the author altered the true events to shape his telling of *The Old Man and the Sea.*

In Hemingway's later version, Santiago's hooking the fish, hauling it to the boat, fighting the sharks, and then bringing it home takes three days and is completed in heroic fashion with no outside help. Nothing remains of the fish at the end except its skeleton. No mention is made of the fisherman's state of mind other than that he wants to fish again as soon as he can.

Hemingway's changes clearly make Santiago more of a single heroic and tragic figure who fights alone, loses almost everything, and yet still is ready to meet life again. Thus, after a night's sleep and a promise from Manolin that from now on they will fish together, Santiago is making plans not just to resume his life but to strive even harder next time. Similarly, Hemingway turned an anecdote about a piteous, helpless fisherman into a parable of man's tragic but heroic struggle not merely to survive but, as fellow Nobelist William Faulkner expressed it, to endure.

Themes

The Human Condition

In his novella about a fisherman who struggles to catch a large marlin only to lose it, Hemingway has stripped down the basic story of human life to its basic elements. A single human being, represented by the fisherman Santiago, is blessed with the intelligence to do big things and to dream of even grander things. Santiago shows great skill in devising ways to tire out the huge fish he has hooked and ways to conserve his strength in order to land it. Yet in the struggle to survive, this human must often suffer and even destroy the very thing he dreams of. Thus Santiago cuts his hands badly and loses the fish to sharks in the process of trying to get his catch back to shore. Yet the struggle to achieve one's dreams is still worthwhile, for without dreams, a human remains a mere physical presence in the universe, with no creative or spiritual dimension. And so at the end of the story, Santiago, in spite of his great loss, physical pain, and exhaustion, is still "dreaming about the lions"—the same ones he saw in Africa when he was younger and would like to see again.

Love

Against the seeming indifference of the universe, love is often the only force that endures. This force is best seen in the relationship of Santiago and Manolin, which has endured since Manolin's early childhood. Over the years, Santiago has taught Manolin to fish and given him companionship and a sense of self-worth that Manolin failed to get from his own father. Manolin in return shows his love for Santiago by bringing him food and by weeping for him when he sees how much he suffered in fighting the marlin. Manolin also plans to take care of Santiago during the coming winter by bringing him clothing and water for washing.

Santiago's love, of course, extends to other people as well. He loved his wife when they were married, though when she died he had to take down her portrait because it made him feel lonely. Similarly, even in his suffering he thinks of others, remembering his promise to send the fish head to his friend Pederico to use as bait. Santiago's love also extends to include nature itself, even though he has often suffered at its hands. His love for all living creatures, whether fish, birds, or turtles, is often described, as is his love for the sea, which he sees as a woman who gives or withholds favors. Some of the younger fishermen, in contrast, often spoke of the sea as a "contestant" or even an "enemy."

Youth and Old Age

The comparison and contrast of these two stages of human life runs throughout the story. Although Santiago is obviously an old man, in many ways he retains a youthful perspective on life. For example, he is a keen follower of baseball, and admires players like Joe DiMaggio and Dick Sisler for their youthful skills and abilities. His friendship with Manolin is also based partly on Santiago's fond recollections of his own youth. For example, he recalls the time he saw the lions on the beach in Africa or when he beat a well-known player in a hand-wrestling match that lasted all day. His repeated wish that the boy were in the boat is not made just because that would make it easier to fight the fish. He also misses the boy as a companion with his own youthful perspective. Yet Santiago does not admire all youth indiscriminately. For example, he contrasts his own attitude toward the sea as a woman with that of "some of the younger fishermen, those who used buoys as floats and had motorboats," who think of the sea as a male enemy who must be defeated. By the same token, Santiago is aware that not everything about old age is attractive to youth. For example, he keeps from Manolin the knowledge that he doesn't care very much about washing or eating on a regular basis. Santiago is also very aware of the disadvantages of old age. Although he retains much of his youthful strength, for example, he knows that at his age he is no longer able to fight off the sharks that attack his fish. Yet in the end, despite his defeat, Santiago is still able to plan his next fishing expedition and to dream again of the lions who perhaps represent to him the strength and the freedom of youth.

Luck vs. Skill

Many people believe in the concept of destiny, a concept in which spiritual forces and luck are combined. When one is lucky, it is considered a sign that one has the spiritual qualities to succeed. By the same token, when one has been unlucky, as Santiago is considered after eighty-four days of not catching any fish, he is dismissed by Manolin's parents as *salao,* "which is the worst form of unlucky," and therefore someone to avoid. Santiago himself believes to some extent in the concept of luck. He senses that his eighty-fifth day of fishing will be a good one and wants to buy that number in the lottery. Later in the story, when his big fish has already been half-eaten by sharks, he says he would pay "what they asked" for some luck "in any form."

Earlier in the story, however, before he has caught the big fish, Santiago reflects that "It is better to be lucky [than unlucky]. But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready." In this reformulation of the luck-vs.-skill question, Santiago is clearly favoring skill. This preference is shown by his actions throughout the novel, from the way he gauges the strength of the fish by the pull on the line to the manner in which he calculates and conserves his own strength for the battle he knows lies ahead. After his defeat he says the boy should not fish with him because "I am not lucky anymore." Yet Santiago quickly changes his mind about going out with Manolin when the boy says that "we will fish together now, for I still have much to learn." Toward the end, Santiago asks himself "[W]hat beat you" and answers "Nothing. I went out too far." So in the end, Santiago finds that it is matters of judgment and skill that determine success, not luck.

Topics for Further Study

- Throughout *The Old Man and the Sea,* Santiago expresses his feelings about nature. Today, the protection of our natural environment is often in the news. Do some research on environmental issues and write an essay comparing Santiago's attitude about nature to modern theories of environmentalism. Would Santiago be considered an environmentalist today?
- Manolin undergoes a change between the beginning and the end of the novel. What do you think causes this change? Find specific examples from the story to support your opinion. Then write an essay comparing the "old" Manolin from the beginning of the story to the "new" Manolin who has emerged by the end.
- Most of Ernest Hemingway's heroes are young men, but Santiago, as the title reveals, is an old man. Why do you think the author chose to tell this story from an older person's perspective? How might the story have been different if the hero had been a young man? Present your ideas in an essay and use examples from the text to support your conclusions.

Style

Point of View

All novels use at least one point of view, or angle of vision, from which to tell the story. The point of view may be that of a single character, or of several characters in turn. *The Old Man and the Sea* uses the omniscient, or "all-knowing," point of view of the author, who acts as a hidden narrator. The omniscient point of view enables the author to stand outside and above the story itself, and thus to provide a wider perspective from which to present the thoughts of the old man and the other characters. Thus at the beginning of the tale, the omniscient narrator tells us not only what Santiago and the boy said to each other, but what the other fishermen thought of the old man. "The older fishermen … looked at him and were sad. But they did not show it…."

Setting

The Old Man and the Sea takes place entirely in a small fishing village near Havana, Cuba, and in the waters of the Gulf Stream, a current of warm water that runs north, then east of Cuba in the Caribbean Sea. Hemingway visited Cuba as early as 1928, and later lived on the coast near Havana for nineteen years, beginning in 1940, so he knew the area very well. The references to Joe Dimaggio and a series of games between the Yankees and the Detroit Tigers in which Dimaggio came back from a slump have enabled scholars to pinpoint the time during which the novel takes place as mid-September 1950. As Manolin also reminds readers, September is the peak of the blue marlin season. The story takes three days, the length of the battle against the fish, but as Manolin reminds the old man, winter is coming on and he will need a warm coat.

Structure

Like the three-day epic struggle itself of Santiago against the fish, Hemingway's story falls into three main parts. The first section entails getting ready for the fishing trip; then the trip out, including catching the fish and being towed by it, which encompasses all of the first two days and part of the third; and finally the trip back. Another way of dividing and analyzing the story is by using a dramatic structure devised by Aristotle. In the opening part of the story, or rising action, the readers are presented with various complications of the conflict between the other fishermen's belief that Santiago is permanently unlucky and Santiago and the boy's belief that the old man will still catch a fish. For example, readers learn that some of the other villagers, like the restaurant owner Pedrico, help Santiago, while others avoid him. The climax of the story, when Santiago kills the fish, marks the point at which the hero's fortunes begin to take a turn for the worse. This turning point becomes evident when sharks start to attack the fish and leads inevitably to the resolution (or denouement) of the drama, in which Santiago, having no effective weapons left to fight the sharks, must watch helplessly as they strip the carcass of all its remaining meat. Perhaps showing the influence of modern short story writers, however, Hemingway has added to the ending what James Joyce called an epiphany, or revelation of Santiago's true character. This moment comes when the author implicitly contrasts the tourist's ignorance of the true identity of the marlin's skeleton to Santiago's quiet knowledge of his skill and his hope, reflected in his repeated dreams of the lions on the beach, that he will fish successfully again.

Symbolism

A symbol can be defined as a person, place, or thing that represents something more than its literal meaning. Santiago, for example, has often been compared to Christ in the way he suffers. His bleeding hands, the way he carries the boat mast like a cross, and the way he lies on his bed with his arms outstretched, all have clear parallels in the story of Christ's crucifixion. In this interpretation of the story, Manolin is seen as a disciple who respects and loves Santiago as his teacher. In this context, the sea could be said to represent earthly existence. Humans, as stated in Genesis, have been created by God to have dominion over all other living creatures, including the fish in the sea. Yet humans like Santiago still suffer because of Adam and Eve's original sin of eating the apple from the tree of knowledge. Santiago, however, says he does not understand the concept of sin. Santiago can also be seen more broadly as a representative of all human beings who must struggle to survive, yet hope and dream of better things to come. Hemingway himself does not seem to mind if his characters, setting, and plot have different meanings to different readers. He once said that he "tried to make a real old man, a real boy, a real sea and a real fish and real sharks. But if I made them good and true enough they would mean many things."

Gregorio Fuentes, a Cuban fisherman, was Hemingway's inspiration for the title character of The Old Man and the Sea. *With a portrait of Hemingway and Fuentes hanging in the background, this photograph was taken in 1994.*

Historical Context

Cuba and the United States in the Early 1950s

Relations between Cuba and the United States were generally friendly during most of the 1950s, as they had been since 1934. That year marked the end of the Platt Amendment, which had given the United States the right to intervene in Cuba's affairs. United States' ownership of many Cuban sugar mills, however, was a continuing source of dispute. In 1952, President Prio Socarras was overthrown in a military coup by General Fulgencio Batista y Zalvidar. Batista had previously ruled as dictator from 1933 to 1940, and would rule again until 1959, when he was overthrown by Fidel Castro. Despite Hemingway's move to Ketchum, Idaho, soon after Castro and his supporters overthrew the Batista regime, Hemingway had supported both the overthrow and what he called the "historical necessity" of the Castro revolution.

Cuban Culture

Cuban culture during the first half of the twentieth century was marked perhaps foremost by an ambivalent view toward the Catholic Church. Unlike other Latin American countries, church and state in Cuba were constitutionally separate during this period. Because of its long Spanish heritage, however, Cuba was still dominated by Catholic cultural influences. The result was a contradictory situation in which 85 percent of the population called itself Catholic, but only 10 percent actually practiced the faith. The effect of these circumstances are seen many times in *The Old Man and the Sea.* For example, when Santiago battles the marlin, he says, "I am not religious, but I will say ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys that I should catch this fish, and I promise to make a pilgrimage to the Virgin of Cobre if I catch him." Later after he has killed the fish, Santiago wonders if it is a sin to hope that he will make it back to shore with the fish's meat intact, but he quickly dismisses the thought. "Do not think about sin," he thought. "There are enough problems now without sin. Also I have no understanding of it."

Cubans, like other Latin Americans, place a high value on the innate worth of the individual. Success in life is defined under the code of *personalismo* as the achievement of one's spiritual potential or personal destiny rather than one's financial or career status. Thus Santiago is respected as a skilled and unique individual even though he has not caught a fish in three months. As seen through the eyes of Manolin and the omniscient narrator, Santiago is a heroic and majestic figure who, like Odysseus or Christ, has undergone a great ordeal and provides a model to emulate.

Machismo, or maleness, is an important male goal in traditional Latin American society. *Machismo* is ideally developed in several ways, including military, athletic, and intellectual exercises, and sexual prowess. Most men are not expected to live up to the *machismo* ideal in practice. Yet by cultivating these powers, one can approach being the ideal man. Santiago, for example, is admired because of his physical power of endurance. He takes great pride in having in his youth defeated a powerful Negro in an all-day hand-wrestling contest in Casablanca. Santiago also places a high value on mental qualities like his self-confidence and his vast knowledge of the "tricks" of fishing. Santiago is so confident of these qualities that he can bet "everything [the fish] has against only my will and my intelligence." It has often been noted that in his own life, Hemingway also strove to challenge himself intellectually through his friendships and writing, as well as physically, through boxing, war service, hunting, fishing, and bullfighting. Although Hemingway is sometimes criticized for what is interpreted as an attraction to violence for its own sake, it is not hard to understand why the Latin American belief in *machismo* appealed to the author.

Critical Overview

The early critical reception of *The Old Man and the Sea* upon its publication in 1952 was very favorable, and its reputation has been generally high ever since, notwithstanding negative reactions in the 1960s by critics like Kenneth Lynn and Philip Young. Yet what the critics have seen worthy of special note in the story has changed noticeably over the years.

The early reviews of Hemingway's first novel since the disastrous reception two years earlier of *Across the River and into the Trees* especially praised the central character, Santiago. In his original 1954 evaluation of the book which Gerry Brenner included in *The Old Man and the Sea: The Story of a Common Man,* Philip Young wrote, "It is the knowledge that a simple man is capable of such decency, dignity and even heroism, and that his struggle can be seen in heroic terms, that largely distinguishes this book." In his book *Ernest Hemingway: Critiques of Four Major Novels,* Carlos Baker noted that critic Clinton S. Burhans saw in Santiago "a noble and tragic individualism revealing what a man can do in an indifferent universe which defeats him, and the love he can feel for such a universe and his humility before it." *The Old Man and the Sea* won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1953 and played a large role in Hemingway's being honored with the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954.

Though several posthumous volumes of his fiction would follow in the 1970s, Hemingway's suicide in 1961 was the occasion for a major, and perhaps less inhibited, reevaluation of his work. Philip Young's *Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration* was one of the most influential of these. According to Young's "wound theory," Hemingway's entire life and art was an attempt to master the traumatic event of his wounding in World War I. To do this, said Young, Hemingway evolved a "code" by which his heroes sought to live. As Young described this hero code, it was a "'grace under pressure' … made of the controls of honor and courage

which in a life of tension and pain make a man a man and distinguish him from the people who follow random impulses, let down their hair, and are generally messy, perhaps cowardly, and without inviolable rules for how to live holding tight."

In his life and his heroic struggle against the fish, Santiago fits Young's definition. His pride in his physical strength, still noteworthy in his old age, is shown in his fond recollection of the time he beat a "giant" in an all-day hand-wrestling match in Casablanca. In his mental suppression of physical pain, Santiago also reminds the reader of Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises* and Frederic Henry in *A Farewell to Arms.*

Young's "wound theory" and "code hero" concepts continued to influence much of Hemingway criticism in the 1960s and 1970s, despite the posthumous publication during this period of nine new volumes of Hemingway's fiction and nonfiction, including his Toronto newspaper dispatches, his high school literary efforts, his poetry, *A Moveable Feast* (a nonfiction collection of acid-witted accounts of Hemingway's days in Paris as a young writer in the 1920s), and *Islands in the Stream.* In fact, as Susan F. Beegel has pointed out, "the idea of the code hero would smother the originality of lesser critics and stifle alternative views for a long time." The best source of basic facts about Hemingway's life, however, remains Baker's 1969 biography, *Ernest Hemingway.*

Though the Hemingway "industry" of posthumous publications, memoirs of old friends, and newsletters and annuals of Hemingway critics continued to mount, it was not until after 1986, with the publication of *The Garden of Eden,* that Young's theory began to be replaced in most critical readers' minds by Kenneth Lynn's "theory of androgyny," or the state of having both male and female characteristics, as described in Lynn's influential psychoanalytic biography, *Hemingway.* According to Lynn, Hemingway's androgyny was partly the result of his mother's having dressed Ernest as a toddler in girl's clothes that were identical to his older sister's. In *Hemingway's Quarrel with Androgyny,* Mark Spilka sees Santiago's androgyny as a typical example in Hemingway's late fiction of the "return of the repressed" female side of the author's personality.

The androgyny theory allows readers to view Santiago, and indeed Manolin, from a wider perspective. Many people see, for example, that while women themselves play only a small role in the novel, nevertheless, the sea itself is regarded as feminine in Santiago's eyes, unlike some of the other younger fishermen in the story, who regard the sea as a male enemy to be conquered. Santiago describes the sea (*la mar*), like a woman, as "something that gave or withheld great favours." Hemingway also describes how Manolin cries not once, but twice, after seeing the old man's condition soon after he returns to shore. This is perhaps more significant than it may appear, because Manolin, although called "the boy," is actually at least twenty-two years old as noted by Bickford Sylvester in "The Cuban Contest of *The Old Man and the Sea.*" A critic laboring under the more rigid notion of the code hero would probably expect Manolin, as a full-grown man, to keep his emotions held in check.

No matter through which prism the reader analyzes Hemingway's great sea story, it seems there will always be new revelations to find. Beegel notes that new areas for study may be found in Hemingway's ecological consciousness or the multicultural background of several of his novels. And with the increased use of the computer to analyze prose text and style, who knows what other discoveries await the Hemingway scholars of the future.

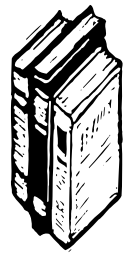
Criticism

Carl Davis

In the following essay, Davis, an associate professor of English at Northeast Louisiana University, describes The Old Man and the Sea *as a brilliant, deceptively simple work that expresses the author's most fundamental beliefs about what it means to be a person. The work might also be seen as an expression of the author's personal struggle with thoughts of suicide.*

From its publication in 1952, *The Old Man and the Sea* has played an important role in defining and confirming Ernest Hemingway's position as a major voice in twentieth-century fiction. Long famous for his short stories and the early novels *The Sun Also Rises* in 1926 and *A Farewell to Arms* in 1929, Hemingway built his public image upon that of his wounded, isolated heroes. His passion for bull fighting, fishing, and big game hunting inevitably led him to dangerous places and activities. He covered the Spanish Civil War as a reporter and later served as a war correspondent during World War II. By the 1950s, he was at the height of his fame, living on a small estate or *finca* in Cuba and

What Do I Read Next?



- *Youth* (1903) and *Typhoon* (1902), both by Joseph Conrad, are sea stories with intriguing parallels to Hemingway's work. It is believed that Hemingway, who read all of Conrad in Paris and Toronto during the twenties, may have consciously or unconsciously used the "central strategy" of *Youth* when writing *The Old Man and the Sea.*
- *For Whom the Bell Tolls* (1940) was Hemingway's last successfully received novel before *The Old Man and the Sea,* and the only previous Hemingway novel in which a Hispanic background plays a major part. It depicts the struggle of Robert Jordan, an American fighting against the Fascists in the Spanish Civil War, to live up to his political and personal ideals without becoming narrowly partisan.
- *Islands in the Stream,* published posthumously in 1970, is the book, as edited, of which *The Old Man and the Sea* was originally envisaged by Hemingway as the fourth part. The first three sections were originally called "The Sea When Young," The Sea When Absent," and "The Sea in Being."
- *The Nick Adams Stories* (1972) are all Hemingway's short stories, plus a few story fragments, about this recurring fictional character, from the time he first appeared in the early 1920s as a young boy, to his last appearance as an adult and father in 1933. Although written and published at different times in Hemingway's life, they are arranged here by Hemingway scholar Philip Young to illustrate Nick's unfolding life.

playing out his role as "Papa" Hemingway, the white-haired, white-bearded symbol of virility and intellectual heroism. With the publication of *The Old Man and the Sea,* a taut, technically brilliant short novel, his reputation as a master craftsman of prose narrative was reaffirmed. More importantly, however, the story of Santiago, the isolated old man who fights a great fish for three days, seemed to bring together all the major elements of Hemingway's life and work. Indeed, it remains a concise expression of what it means for Hemingway to live and act as an individual in the modern world.

On first glance the most striking aspect of *The Old Man and the Sea* is its combination of compression and depth. Like many of Hemingway's early stories, the novel takes full advantage of the author's widely imitated prose style—a mixture of simple sentence structures, limited adjectives, and spare but suggestive description. As he himself explained in his examination of bullfighting in *Death in the Afternoon,* good writing should move like an iceberg, only one-eighth of which appears above the water. The writer who truly knows a subject should be able to leave much of the content unstated, and the reader will "have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them." Accordingly, *The Old Man and the Sea* offers a deceptively simple surface story of an aging fisherman who catches a great fish only to lose him to marauding sharks. The fable-like simplicity of the plot, however, suggests that the story may yield broader symbolic meanings.

One such symbolic interpretation of the novel focuses upon the ancient and often repeated pattern of a hero confronting a natural force. In this reading, Santiago the fisherman is more than just a poor Cuban hoping to break his streak of eighty-four days without a fish. He represents the skillful, courageous individual who willingly undergoes a test of character against an equally worthy opponent. The sea, the feminine and possibly maternal "la mar," becomes the site of his encounter with nature itself. Far away from the other fishermen and even further from any sort of civilized society, Santiago must test his own strengths alone and without help. Not even the boy he has taught to fish can be present at such a moment. Like the bullfighter or the soldier in battle, the old man struggles as though against his own death. However, to catch his "brother," as he calls him, is not to prove himself better than the fish, only its equal. Indeed, Santiago's failure to save the dead marlin from the sharks serves to reaffirm his limits as an individual and remind him of the need for humility in the face of nature's power.

Santiago's actions suggest that he is more than just a courageous individual, however. He also shows great concern for the quality of his work and the precision of his actions. As tutor to the boy, he fills the archetypal or mythic role of the master craftsman who not only represents the height of

artistic skill but also upholds the ethical standards of heroic action. He stands above the other fishermen both in terms of experience and skill, but he is also marked, set apart as the one for whom fishing has become more than just a livelihood:

> "Who is the greatest manager, really, Luque or Mike Gonzalez?"
>
> "I think they are equal."
>
> "And the best fisherman is you."
>
> "No. I know others better."
>
> "*Que va,*" the boy said. "There are many good fishermen and some great ones. But there is only you."

Like the "great DiMaggio" whose father was also a fisherman, Santiago stands alone in the level of his commitment to his craft and in his role as the hero who must test himself against his own frailty. His defense against the randomness of experience is precision. Unlike the other fishermen who let their lines drift with the current, Santiago keeps his "with precision…. It is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready." The value of such a method is confirmed by the presence of the great fish. Just as Santiago goes "far out" beyond the lesser ambitions of the other fishermen, he finds the great fish not simply because he is a better fisherman but because, in a symbolic sense, he deserves it. His "religious" devotion to the precision of his craft has made it difficult for him to catch ordinary fish, reserving him instead for the extraordinary, mythic creature whose quality equals Santiago's "purity."

Such a deep concern with the quality of Santiago's actions reflects Hemingway's own concern with style, both in writing and in behavior. In much of his work, heroic characters face dangerous and even impossible situations as a test of their devotion to an unwritten code or method of behavior. The more courageous the act, the greater its beauty, clarity, and ethical purity. The same can be said of Hemingway's own prose style, which aims to reproduce the uncluttered grace and control of the bullfighter or the boxer. In fact, Santiago's struggle with the great fish may also reflect Hemingway's own difficulties in writing the story itself. The act of catching the great fish only to lose it in the end may suggest the combination of triumph and failure that comes with attempts at artistic perfection.

This fundamentally religious dimension to Hemingway's thinking appears even more forcefully in the novel's many allusions to Christianity and Christ in particular. The name, Santiago, for instance, is Spanish for Saint James, himself a fisherman, like Christ, the symbolic "fisherman" for souls. Also like Christ, Santiago undergoes a test and a type of "crucifixion" when the sharks attack the marlin: "'*Ay,*' he said aloud. There is no translation for this word and perhaps it is just a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hands into the wood." Yet Santiago's suffering does not appear to lead to any sort of traditionally Christian resurrection. At the novel's end he is not reborn, literally or spiritually. Though he admits his fault in going too far out, he is simply tired and empty. He acknowledges his weaknesses but upholds the quality of his actions and his "brotherhood" with the fish: "'Half fish,' he said. 'Fish that you were. I am sorry that I went out too far. I ruined us both. But we have killed many sharks, you and I, and ruined many others. How many did you ever kill, old fish? You do not have that spear on your head for nothing.'"

The combination of triumph, endurance, and loss that *The Old Man and the Sea* offers says a great deal about the Hemingway of 1950s. Shortly after the novel's publication Hemingway was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1953. The following year, he received the Nobel Prize for literature for his life's work, though many acknowledge that the success of *The Old Man and the Sea* played a crucial role in the decision. About this same time, however, Hemingway suffered serious injuries in two separate plane crashes in Africa and was even reported dead by many newspapers. For the next seven years he lived in deteriorating health on his ranch in Ketchum, Idaho. In 1961, his ability as a writer severely compromised by his physical problems, Hemingway killed himself. Whether viewed as an act of courage or surrender, such a choice by the author of *The Old Man and the Sea* was no surprise. As the critic Earl Rovit speculates, "Having chosen to do battle with nothing less than eternity on a day-to-day basis, it may have been his way of complying with the rules insofar as the rules required the unconditional surrender of one of the combatants."

Viewed in light of Hemingway's long-held interest in suicide, *The Old Man and the Sea* might also be the author's way of thinking through the ethical and philosophical problems of taking his own life. In this respect, the fish, already a symbol of death in general, becomes the representation of the writer's self, his identity as a living thing. To wrestle with and conquer this "other" identity suggests a measure of self-control, a way of reaffirming your strength as an individual. To lose such a conquest to the attacks of voracious sharks under-

mines any certainty the individual might have gained from such a victory. Thus suicide, as a method, suggests the ultimate sort of self-control, a removal to safety beyond the mouths of the sharks, an ironic self-taking that precludes the attacks of others.

It is in the context of such crucial issues that *The Old Man and the Sea* continues to evoke comments and questions from its readers. It presents a fundamentally human problem in graceful form and language, proposing not an answer to the limits of individual existence but a way of facing those limits with dignity and grace.

Source: Carl Davis, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1999.

William J. Handy

In this excerpt the critic examines the novel's characters, particularly Santiago, noting that these portraits are the most powerful elements of the novel.

[In] the portrayal of Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea* there is no uncertainty of being, no confusion of self and values. The old man is presented from beginning to end as one who has achieved true existence. His response to every situation is the response of a spiritually fulfilled man. The story, then, is not concerned with the familiar Hemingway search for values; rather it is concerned with the depiction of conflicting values.

Throughout five carefully delineated sections of the novel, the center of focus is always on the image of the old man. The first section concerns the old man and the boy; the second, the old man and the sea; the third, the old man and the marlin; the fourth, the old man and the sharks; the fifth section returns to the old man and the boy.

In the opening section Santiago is shown to be something of a pathetic figure. He is old, alone, except for the friendship of a young boy, and now even dependent to a degree upon the charity of others for his subsistence. His situation is symbolized by the condition of his sail which was "patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat." For eighty-four days he had fished without success and had lost his apprentice because the boy's parents had considered him "salao," "the worst form of unlucky."

But almost at once the tone of the writing changes. Only in external appearances is the old man pathetic. Hemingway reverses the attitude toward the old man in a single stroke:

> Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated.

The contrast in meaning is evident: To be defeated in the business of fishing is not to be a defeated man. The theme begins and ends the novel; never, after the opening lines, does the reader regard Santiago as defeated. The point is made emphatic in the final conversation between the old man and the boy:

> "They beat me, Manolin," he said. "They truly beat me."
>
> "He didn't beat you. Not the fish."

And the old man, whose thoughts have been on a much more profound level of contesting, replies,

> "No. Truly. It was afterwards."

The novel's concern, then, is with success and failure, more precisely, with kinds of success and kinds of failure. The central contrast is between the two fundamental levels of achievement: practical success and success in the achievement of one's own being. Similarly the novel posits two kinds of defeat: Failure to compete successfully in a materialistic, opportunistic world where this only is the measure of a man and failure to maintain one's being regardless of external defeat. Thus the real story concerns the meaning, in terms of fundamental human values, of human existence.

Almost at once we become aware that the misleading initial depiction of the old man as a somewhat pathetic figure is the direct result of viewing him only from the standpoint of his recent prolonged ill luck. Had Hemingway continued to present Santiago through the eyes that measure a man's worth merely in terms of his practical success or failure, the novel would necessarily have been a naturalistic one. Santiago's skill, determination, and nobility of spirit would simply have contributed to the greater irony of his finally catching a prize fish only to worsen his lot by losing it.

But the key to all of Hemingway's major characters is never to be found … in merely what happens to them. Rather it is to be found in what they essentially are. This is not to discount the importance in Hemingway of environmental forces, both man-made and cosmic, acting to condition and even to determine human destiny. In fact, those whose values do not follow from the shaping forces of environment are few in number, rarely to be encountered. Santiago is one not determined by environment. And in his age and wisdom and simplicity he constantly reminds himself and the boy, who is

learning from him, of the distinction. It is a subtle but vital distinction, one which Santiago never loses sight of. When the boy complains to Santiago about the attitude of his new master, Santiago's response is central to the underlying theme of the novel. The boy points out:

> "He brings our gear himself. He never wants anyone to carry anything."
>
> "We're different," the old man said.

The real story of *The Old Man and the Sea* begins with this distinction. In the first section two indistinct characters are introduced who embody the values of the practical world, the boy's father and the successful fisherman to whom the boy is assigned. In the old man and the boy's discussion of their enforced separation, we see the old man's simple recognition of the problem.

> "Santiago," the boy said to him as they climbed the bank from where the skiff was hauled up. "I could go with you again. We've made some money."
>
> The old man had taught the boy to fish and the boy loved him.
>
> "No," the old man said. "You're with a lucky boat. Stay with them."
>
> "But remember how you went eighty-seven days without fish and then we caught big ones every day for three weeks."
>
> "I remember," the old man said. "I know you did not leave me because you doubted."
>
> "It was papa made me leave. I am a boy and I must obey him."
>
> "I know," the old man said. "It is quite normal."

But the old man's response means something more than that it is quite normal for a boy to obey his parents; it means the acknowledgment that materialism is the central criterion for action and values in the practical world. And the passage also suggests that the boy has been taught something more than how to fish; he has been taught love and respect, values which he now finds conflicting with the practical demands of his parents.

The successful fisherman, the unnamed "he" who is the boy's new master, is, in spite of his success at catching fish, totally without respect in the boy's eyes. When Santiago promises to awaken the boy in time for his day's work with his new master, the boy declares,

> "I do not like for him to waken me. It is as though I were inferior."

The missing quality in the boy's new relationship is evident: The old man wakens the boy in order to share living with him; the impersonal 'him' wakes the boy in order to use him.

Both the old man and the boy are keenly aware of their loss of each other, and both plan ways to regain their former partnership.…

The novel's second section presents the full significance of what it means to possess the sense of true existence. Just as the "he" who wakes the boy to use him is blocked by his practical ends from the experience of love so also the "younger fishermen" whose intention is to exploit are prevented from regarding the sea as anything more than "a contestant or a place or even an enemy." Again the distinction is one of individual values:

> He always thought of the sea as *la mar* which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her. Sometimes those who love her say bad things of her but they are always said as though she were a woman. Some of the younger fishermen, those who used buoys as floats for their lines and had motorboats, bought when the shark livers had brought much money, spoke of her as *el mar* which is masculine. They spoke of her as a contestant or a place or even an enemy. But the old man always thought of her as feminine and as something that gave or withheld great favours, and if she did wild or wicked things it was because she could not help them.
>
> The moon affects her as it does a woman, he thought.

The passage is an important one in the development of the novel. Hemingway's theme is clear: Success in the achievement of being carries with it the most valued of man's possessions, the capacity for love. And Santiago's capacity is everywhere evident. Once far out in the Gulf the old man takes his place as a true inhabitant of his true environment. He responds to the sea and the sky and the birds and the fish with the pure response of his achieved being:

> He loved green turtles and hawkbills with their elegance and speed and their great value and he had a friendly contempt for the huge, stupid loggerheads, yellow in their armour-plating, strange in their love-making, and happily eating the Portuguese men-of-war with their eyes shut.

One is reminded of the philosopher's statement, "Being consents to Santiago's being responds to the creatures about him."

> During the night two porpoises came around the boat and he could hear them rolling and blowing. He could tell the difference between the blowing noise the male made and the sighing blow of the female.
>
> "They are good," he said. "They play and make jokes and love one another. They are our brothers like the flying fish."

Nowhere in all of Hemingway's works can be found such a direct treatment of genuine sentiment. One is reminded of Pound's statement that the writer in our time must necessarily be ironic and indirect to be effective. But in the simple image of the old man's identification with the creatures of the sea we have a rare instance of positive values being directly and effectively presented. Yet perhaps it is because there is everywhere present the lurking dangers of the dark water and the old man's realistic awareness of those malevolent forces that his love emerges fully as realistic as the ever-present threats which surround him.

Santiago's struggle with the marlin is the principal subject of the long third section. From the moment he feels the fish touch the bait, his feeling is one of joy for the anticipated contest:

> Then he felt the gentle touch on the line and he was happy.
>
> "It was only his turn," he said. "He'll take it."
>
> He was happy feeling the gentle pulling and then he felt something hard and unbelievably heavy.

Throughout the long contest his attitude toward the fish remains constant:

> "Fish," he said. "I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends."
>
> Let us hope so, he thought.

The events of the struggle are dramatic: From the time the fish is hooked, about noon of the first day, until the fish is killed, about noon of the third day, the old man is forced to place his own body between the fish and boat. Fastening the line to the boat would result in the breaking of the line by any sudden lurch or swift motion by the fish. Thus the contest means for Santiago the summoning of his greatest efforts in skill and endurance. He carefully plans his strategy: Constant maximum pressure on the line must be maintained in order to wear down the resistance of the fish and to encourage him to surface in an attempt to dislodge the hook. Santiago knew that once having surfaced, the fish would be unable to dive deep again. Nourishment and rest must be systematically apportioned to his body so that he would not lose the battle prematurely through physical exhaustion. All effort must point to the final struggle which would involve not merely skill and physical endurance but will, his own will in mortal contest with the will of the marlin.

But the real power of the novel's impact does not lie merely in the events of the old man's dramatic struggle. It lies, I believe, in Hemingway's successful creation of a new dimension in dramatic portraiture. In each of the five carefully delineated sections of the novel, the reader's attention is always on Santiago. But in each, Hemingway alters with subtle but masterful strokes his changing image of the old man. In each he modifies the dramatic focus to isolate, intensify, and thereby magnify the novel's central and controlling image, the portrait of Santiago.

In the setting of the simple fishing village we are presented with the aged fisherman, initially pathetic in his meager existence, but admirable in his determination to break his run of bad luck, at once lovable in his touching relationship with a young boy and quaint in his concern for American baseball. But as a solitary figure on the sea, against a backdrop of cosmic nature, the image of the old man takes on new and greater proportions. He becomes a being among the beings of the sea, a human force among the forces of the natural world. But it is at the point at which the old man engages the great marlin that a more profound level of meaning is reached. Hemingway marks the shift with characteristic restraint. The change is simple but unmistakable:

> The boat began to move slowly off toward the North West.

It is here, I think, that the reader becomes aware that he is experiencing the achievement in prose which Hemingway had tried vaguely to explain in *Green Hills of Africa.* He had referred there to "a fourth and fifth dimension that can be gotten." And in speaking of the complexity of such writing, he had declared, "Too many factors must combine to make it possible." He had called such prose "much more difficult than poetry," but "one that can be written, without tricks and without cheating. With nothing that will go bad afterwards." In the amazing combination of simple realism of narrative and complex symbolism of image at once contained in *The Old Man and the Sea,* Hemingway has, I believe, constructed his closest approximation to his goal.

Source: William J. Handy, "A New Dimension for a Hero: Santiago of *The Old Man and the Sea,*" in *Contemporary Novels,* The University of Texas, 1962, pp. 62-69.

Clinton S. Burhans Jr.

In this excerpt the critic explores the various levels of the novel, focusing on individualism and interdependence.

In *Death in the Afternoon,* Hemingway uses an effective metaphor to describe the kind of prose he is trying to write: he explains that "if a writer of

prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water."

Among all the works of Hemingway which illustrate this metaphor, none, I think, does so more consistently or more thoroughly than the saga of Santiago. Indeed, the critical reception of the novel has emphasized this aspect of it: in particular, Philip Young, Leo Gurko, and Carlos Baker have stressed the qualities of *The Old Man and the Sea* as allegory and parable. Each of these critics is especially concerned with two qualities in Santiago—his epic individualism and the love he feels for the creatures who share with him a world of inescapable violence—though in the main each views these qualities from a different point of the literary compass. Young [in *Hemingway*] regards the novel as essentially classical in nature; Gurko [in *College English*] sees it as reflecting Hemingway's romanticism; and to Baker, [in *Hemingway*] the novel is Christian in context, and the old fisherman is suggestive of Christ.

Such interpretations of *The Old Man and the Sea* are not, of course, contradictory; in fact, they are parallel at many points. All are true, and together they point to both the breadth and depth of the novel's enduring significance and also to its central greatness: like all great works of art it is a mirror wherein every man perceives a personal likeness. Such viewpoints, then, differ only in emphasis and reflect generally similar conclusions—that Santiago represents a noble and tragic individualism revealing what man can do in an indifferent universe which defeats him, and the love he can feel for such a universe and his humility before it.

True as this is, there yet remains, I think, a deeper level of significance, a deeper level upon which the ultimate beauty and the dignity of movement of this brilliant structure fundamentally rest. On this level of significance, Santiago is Harry Morgan alive again and grown old; for what comes to Morgan in a sudden and unexpected revelation as he lies dying is the matrix of the old fisherman's climactic experience. Since 1937, Hemingway has been increasingly concerned with the relationship between individualism and interdependence; and *The Old Man and the Sea* is the culminating expression of this concern in its reflection of Hemingway's mature view of the tragic irony of man's fate: that no abstraction can bring man an awareness and understanding of the solidarity and interdependence without which life is impossible; he must learn it, as it has always been truly learned, through the agony of active and isolated individualism in a universe which dooms such individualism.

Throughout *The Old Man and the Sea,* Santiago is given heroic proportions. He is "a strange old man," still powerful and still wise in all the ways of his trade. After he hooks the great marlin, he fights him with epic skill and endurance, showing "what a man can do and what a man endures." And when the sharks come, he is determined " 'to fight them until I die,' " because he knows that " 'a man is not made for defeat.… A man can be destroyed but not defeated.' "

In searching for and in catching his big fish, Santiago gains a deepened insight into himself and into his relationship to the rest of created life—an insight as pervasive and implicit in the old fisherman's experience as it is sudden and explicit in Harry Morgan's. As he sails far out on the sea, Santiago thinks of it "as feminine and as something that gave or withheld great favours, and if she did wild or wicked things it was because she could not help them." For the bird who rests on his line and for other creatures who share with him such a capricious and violent life, the old man feels friendship and love. And when he sees a flight of wild ducks go over, the old man knows "no man was ever alone on the sea."

Santiago comes to feel his deepest love for the creature that he himself hunts and kills, the great fish which he must catch not alone for physical need but even more for his pride and his profession. The great marlin is unlike the other fish which the old man catches; he is a spiritual more than a physical necessity. He is unlike the other fish, too, in that he is a worthy antagonist for the old man, and during his long ordeal, Santiago comes to pity the marlin and then to respect and to love him. In the end he senses that there can be no victory for either in the equal struggle between them, that the conditions which have brought them together have made them one. And so, though he kills the great fish, the old man has come to love him as his equal and his brother; sharing a life which is a capricious mixture of incredible beauty and deadly violence and in which all creatures are both hunter and hunted, they are bound together in its most primal relationship.

Beyond the heroic individualism of Santiago's struggle with the great fish and his fight against the sharks, however, and beyond the love and the brotherhood which he comes to feel for the noble creature he must kill, there is a further dimension in the old man's experience which gives to these their ultimate significance. For in killing the great marlin and in losing him to the sharks, the old man learns the sin into which men inevitably fall by going far out beyond their depth, beyond their true place in life. In the first night of his struggle with the great fish, the old man begins to feel a loneliness and a sense almost of guilt for the way in which he has caught him; and after he has killed the marlin, he feels no pride of accomplishment, no sense of victory. Rather, he seems to feel almost as though he has betrayed the great fish; "I am only better than him through trickery," he thinks, "and he meant me no harm."

Thus, when the sharks come, it is almost as a thing expected, almost as a punishment which the old man brings upon himself in going far out "beyond all people. Beyond all people in the world" and there hooking and killing the great fish. For the coming of the sharks is not a matter of chance nor a stroke of bad luck; "the shark was not an accident." They are the direct result of the old man's action in killing the fish. He has driven his harpoon deep into the marlin's heart, and the blood of the great fish, welling from his heart, leaves a trail of scent which the first shark follows. He tears huge pieces from the marlin's body, causing more blood to seep into the sea and thus attract other sharks; and in killing the first shark, the old man loses his principal weapon, his harpoon. Thus, in winning his struggle with the marlin and in killing him, the old man sets in motion the sequence of events which take from him the great fish whom he has come to love and with whom he identifies himself completely. And the old man senses an inevitability in the coming of the sharks, a feeling of guilt which deepens into remorse and regret. "I am sorry that I killed the fish," he thinks, and he tells himself that "You did not kill the fish only to keep alive and to sell for food. You killed him for pride and because you are a fisherman."

Earlier, before he had killed the marlin, Santiago had been "'glad we do not have to try to kill the stars.'" It is enough, he had felt, to have to kill our fellow creatures. Now, with the inevitable sharks attacking, the old man senses that in going far out he has in effect tried "to kill the sun or the moon or the stars." For him it has not been "enough to live on the sea and kill our true brothers"; in his individualism and his need and his pride, he has gone far out "beyond all people," beyond his true place in a capricious and indifferent world, and has thereby brought not only on himself but also on the great fish the forces of violence and destruction. "'I shouldn't have gone out so far, fish…,'" he declares. "'Neither for you nor for me. I'm sorry, fish.'" And when the sharks have torn away half of the great marlin, Santiago speaks again to his brother in the sea: "'Half-fish,' he said. 'Fish that you were. I am sorry that I went too far out. I ruined us both.'"

The old man's realization of what he has done is reflected in his apologies to the fish, and this realization and its implications are emphasized symbolically throughout the novel. From beginning to end, the theme of solidarity and interdependence pervades the action and provides the structural framework within which the old man's heroic individualism and his love for his fellow creatures appear and function and which gives them their ultimate significance. Having gone eighty-four days without a catch, Santiago has become dependent upon the young boy, Manolin, and upon his other friends in his village. The boy keeps up his confidence and hope, brings him clothes and such necessities as water and soap, and sees that he has fresh bait for his fishing. Martin, the restaurant owner, sends the old man food, and Perico, the wineshop owner, gives him newspapers so that he can read about baseball. All of this the old man accepts gratefully and without shame, knowing that such help is not demeaning. "He was too simple to wonder when he had attained humility. But he knew he had attained it and he knew it was not disgraceful and it carried no loss of true pride."

Santiago refuses the young boy's offer to leave the boat his parents have made him go in and return to his, but soon after he hooks the great marlin he wishes increasingly and often that the boy were with him. And after the sharks come and he wonders if it had been a sin to kill the great fish, the old man thinks that, after all, "everything kills everything else in some way. Fishing kills me exactly as it keeps me alive." But then he remembers that it is not fishing but the love and care of another human being that keeps him alive now; "the boy keeps me alive, he thought. I must not deceive myself too much."

As the sharks tear from him more and more of the great fish and as the boat gets closer to his home, the old man's sense of his relationship to his friends and to the boy deepens: "I cannot be

too far out now, he thought. I hope no one has been too worried. There is only the boy to worry, of course. But I am sure he would have confidence. Many of the older fishermen will worry. Many others too, he thought. I live in a good town." In the end, when he awakens in his shack and talks with the boy, he notices "how pleasant it was to have someone to talk to instead of speaking only to himself and to the sea." This time he accepts without any real opposition the boy's insistence on returning to his boat, and he says no more about going far out alone.

This theme of human solidarity and interdependence is reinforced by several symbols. Baseball, which the old man knows well and loves and which he thinks and talks about constantly, is, of course, a highly developed team sport and one that contrasts importantly in this respect with the relatively far more individualistic bullfighting, hunting, and fishing usually found in Hemingway's stories. Although he tells himself that "now is no time to think of baseball," the game is in Santiago's thoughts throughout his ordeal, and he wonders about each day's results in the *Gran Ligas.*

Even more significant is the old man's hero-worship of Joe DiMaggio, the great Yankee outfielder. DiMaggio, like Santiago, was a champion, a master of his craft, and in baseball terms an old one, playing out the last years of his glorious career severely handicapped by the pain of a bone spur in his heel. The image of DiMaggio is a constant source of inspiration to Santiago; in his strained back and his cut and cramped left hand he, too, is an old champion who must endure the handicap of pain; and he tells himself that he "must have confidence and be worthy of the great DiMaggio who does all things perfectly even with the pain of the bone spur in his heel."

But DiMaggio had qualities at least as vital to the Yankees as his courage and individual brilliance. Even during his own time and since then, many men with expert knowledge of baseball have considered other contemporary outfielders—especially Ted Williams of the Boston Red Sox—to be DiMaggio's equal or superior in terms of individual ability and achievement. But few men have ever earned the affection and the renown which DiMaggio received as a "team player"—one who always displayed his individual greatness as part of his team, one to whom the team was always more important than himself. It used to be said of DiMaggio's value as a "team player" that with him in the line-up, even when he was handicapped by the pain in his heel, the Yankees were two runs ahead when they came out on the field. From Santiago's love of baseball and his evident knowledge of it, it is clear that he would be aware of these qualities in DiMaggio. And when Manolin remarks that there are other men on the New York team, the old man replies: " 'Naturally. But he makes the difference.' "

The lions which Santiago dreams about and his description in terms of Christ symbols further suggest solidarity and love and humility as opposed to isolated individualism and pride. So evocative and lovely a symbol is the dream of the lions that it would be foolish if not impossible to attempt its literal definition. Yet it seems significant that the old man dreams not of a single lion, a "king of the beasts," a lion proud and powerful and alone, like the one from which Francis Macomber runs in terror, but of several young lions who come down to a beach in the evening to play together. "He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach. They played like young cats in the dusk and he loved them as he loved the boy." It seems also significant that the old man "no longer dreamed of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor of his wife"—that is that he no longer dreams of great individualistic deeds like the one which brings violence and destruction on him and on the marlin. Instead, the lions are "the main thing that is left" and they evoke the solidarity and love and peace to which the old man returns after hunting and killing and losing his great fish.

These qualities are further emphasized by the symbolic value of the old fisherman as he carries the mast crosslike up the hill to his shack and as he lies exhausted on his bed. His hands have been terribly wounded in catching the great marlin and in fighting the sharks, and as he lies sleeping "face down on the newspapers with his arms out straight and the palms up" his figure is Christlike and suggests that if the old man has been crucified by the forces of a capricious and violent universe, the meaning of his experience is the humility and love of Christ and the interdependence which they imply.

Such, then, are the qualities which define man's true place in a world of violence and death indifferent to him, and they are the context which gives the experience of the old fisherman its ultimate significance as the reflection of Hemingway's culminating concept of the human condition—his tragic vision of man. For in his understanding that "it is enough to live on the sea and kill our true

brothers," the fellow creatures who share life with us and whom he loves, the old man is expressing Hemingway's conviction that despite the tragic necessity of such a condition, man has a place in the world. And in his realization that in going alone and too far out, "beyond all people in the world," he has ruined both himself and also the great fish, the old man reflects Hemingway's feeling that in his individualism and his pride and his need, man inevitably goes beyond his true place in the world and thereby brings violence and destruction on himself and on others. Yet in going out too far and alone, Santiago has found his greatest strength and courage and dignity and nobility and love, and in this he expresses Hemingway's view of the ultimate tragic irony of man's fate: that only through the isolated individualism and the pride which drive him beyond his true place in life does man develop the qualities and the wisdom which teach him the sin of such individualism and pride and which bring him the deepest understanding of himself and of his place in the world. Thus, in accepting his world for what it is and in learning to live in it, Hemingway has achieved a tragic but ennobling vision of man which is in the tradition of Sophocles, Christ, Melville, and Conrad.

It is not enough, then, to point out, as Robert P. Weeks does [in the *University of Kansas Review*], that "from the first eight words of *The Old Man and the Sea* … we are squarely confronted with a world in which man's isolation is the most insistent truth." True as this is, it is truth which is at the same time paradox, for Santiago is profoundly aware that "no man was ever alone on the sea." Nor is the novel solely what Leo Gurko feels it is—"the culmination of Hemingway's long search for disengagement from the social world and total entry into the natural." If the old man leaves society to go "far out" and "beyond all people in the world," the consciousness of society and of his relationship to it are never for long out of his thoughts; and in the end, of course, he returns to his "good town," where he finds it pleasant "to have someone to talk to instead of speaking only to himself and to the sea." To go no further than Santiago's isolation, therefore, or to treat it, as Weeks does, as a theme in opposition to Hemingway's concern with society is to miss the deepest level of significance both in this novel and in Hemingway's writing generally.

For, surely, as Edgar Johnson has shown, the true direction of Hemingway's thought and art from the beginning and especially since 1937 has been a return to society—not in terms of any particular social or political doctrine, but in the broad sense of human solidarity and interdependence. If he began by making "a separate peace" and by going, like Santiago, "far out" beyond society, like the old man, too, he has come back, through Harry Morgan's "'no man alone,'" Philip Rawlings's and Robert Jordan's "no man is an island," and Santiago's "no man is ever alone on the sea," with a deepened insight into its nature and values and a profound awareness of his relationship to it as an individual [a development found in Hemingway's *"Nobody Ever Dies!"*].

In the process, strangely enough—or perhaps it is not strange at all—he has come back from Frederic Henry's rejection of all abstract values to a reiteration for our time of mankind's oldest and noblest moral principles. As James B. Colvert points out [in *American Literature*], Hemingway is a moralist: heir, like his world, to the destruction by science and empiricism of nineteenth-century value assumptions, he rejects equally these assumptions and the principle underlying them—that intellectual moral abstractions possess independent supersensual existence. Turning from the resulting nihilism, he goes to experience in the actual world of hostility, violence, and destruction to find in the world which destroyed the old values a basis for new ones—and it is precisely here, Colvert suggests, in reflecting the central moral problem of his world, that Hemingway is a significant moralist.

But out of this concern with action and conduct in a naturalistic universe, Hemingway has not evolved new moral values; rather, he has reaffirmed man's oldest ones—courage, love, humility, solidarity, and interdependence. It is their basis which is new—a basis not in supernaturalism or abstraction but hard-won through actual experience in a naturalistic universe which is at best indifferent to man and his values. Hemingway tells us, as E. M. Halliday observes, that "we are part of a universe offering no assurance beyond the grave, and we are to make what we can of life by a pragmatic ethic spun bravely out of man himself in full and steady cognizance that the end is darkness [in *American Literature*]."

Through perfectly realized symbolism and irony, then, Hemingway has beautifully and movingly spun out of an old fisherman's great trial just such a pragmatic ethic and its basis in an essentially tragic vision of man; and in this reaffirmation of man's most cherished values and their reaffirmation in the terms of our time rests the deepest

and the enduring significance of *The Old Man and the Sea.*

Source: Clinton S. Burhans Jr. "*The Old Man and the Sea:* Hemingway's Tragic Vision of Man," in *American Literature,* March 1959-January 1960, pp. 446-55.

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For Further Study

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