

Evocative Simplicity of Style in *The Old Man and the Sea*

Amit Kumar

Assistant Professor in English GMN (PG) College, Ambala Cantt (Haryana) India

Abstract

The Old Man and the Sea is one of the true classics of its generation. The qualities of Ernest Hemingway's short novel are those that readers associate with many great stories of the past: near perfection of form within the limitations of its subject matter, unities of time and place, and evocative simplicity of style. Like most stories, it can be read on more than one level of meaning. First, it is an exciting but tragic adventure story. On another level, the book is a fable of the unconquerable spirit of man, a creature capable of snatching spiritual victory from circumstances of disaster and material defeat. The story is heart-wrenching indeed, but Hemingway's writing style at a glance seems to offset that. The entire book is told in very brief, concise sentences, occasionally punctuated with small flourishes of language; aside from these, the writing seems nearly clinical in how it portrays the story's events.

KEYWORDS: Form, Simplicity, Symbolic Imagery, Human Tale, Parable

On the surface an exciting but tragic adventure story, **The Old Man and the Sea** enjoys near perfection of structure, restraint of treatment, and evocative simplicity of style. On a deeper level, the book is a fable of the unconquerable spirit of man, a creature capable of snatching spiritual victory from circumstances of disaster and apparent defeat and on yet another level, it is a religious parable which unobtrusively utilizes Christian symbols and metaphors. **The Old Man and the Sea** is one of the true classics of its generation. The qualities of Ernest Hemingway's short novel are those that readers associate with many great stories of the past: near perfection of form within the limitations of its subject matter, unities of time and place, and evocative simplicity of style.

The story's protagonist is an old man named Santiago, wrinkled and weatherbeaten, Hemingway's hero nevertheless remains physically strong. Despite being so poor that he sometimes goes hungry and often wears patched clothes, he has great dignity. He is lonely, misses his wife, and repeatedly wishes that Manolin were still with him. In his loneliness, he has

begun to talk to himself, the birds, and even the fish he hopes to catch. Perhaps in a subconscious effort to console himself for his misfortunes, he often dreams of Africa, especially of lions playing together like cats on a beach. Despite his long spell of failure, he remains optimistic and persists in trying. Other aspect of **The Old Man and the Sea** has to do with luck and the laws of chance. Santiago thinks to himself that while it's important to be lucky, it is also important to be exact so that he can take advantage of his luck when it comes. It is the old man's reputation for bad luck that costs him his apprentice. Santiago believes that he violated his luck by fishing too far out. Certainly for Santiago what seems like good luck--successfully catching the fish eventually becomes misfortune.

Like most stories, it can be read on more than one level of meaning. First, it is an exciting but tragic adventure story. On another level, the book is a fable of the unconquerable spirit of man, a creature capable of snatching spiritual victory from circumstances of disaster and material defeat. Hemingway's Cuban fisherman allows the imagination of his creator to operate simultaneously in two different worlds of meaning and value. The typical Hemingway hero, existential in a peculiarly American way, faces the sterility and failure and death of his contemporary world with courage and resistance to pain that allows him essentially human, nobility and grace. Hemingway is particularly known for his "mastery of the art of modern narration". As a kind of ultimate condensation of the Hemingway code, this short novel attains an important dignity.

Hemingway displays his genius of perception by using, without apology, the most obvious symbolic imagery; in fact, he creates his desired impact by admitting the ordinary facts. An example is the statement that the old man's furled sail each evening "looked like a flag of permanent defeat ". Here the admission of the obvious becomes ironic, since the old man is not, as he himself declares, defeated--when he is almost destroyed. As for setting, three elements stand out : the sea itself, which the old man regards as feminine and not as an enemy but as the locus in which man plays his little part, with security and serenity derived from acceptance of her inevitable capriciousness; the intrusions of the outside world, the woman's ignorant comment at the end that shows total insensitivity to the common man's capacity for tragedy and the sharks, which make everything wrong and stands for the heroic absurdity of human endeavours. The words he says to no one but himself reveal the old man's mind as clearly as, and even more poignantly than the narrator's knowledge of his thoughts.

He is seen as the unvanquished with sufficient pride to allow humility, with trust in his own skills and in the folklore of his trade, with almost human endurance and with a noble acceptance of the limitations forced upon him by age. The old man projects his own qualities onto the fish- his strength, his wisdom- until his initial hunter's indifference turns to pity. But the old man says, " I am glad we do not have to try to kill the stars... It is enough to live on the sea and kill our true brothers ". Killing with dignity, as it done also in the bullring, is an accepted part of the human condition. In contrast, Hemingway's realism doesn't present the struggle as the force of darkness but as an everyday confrontation between the strength of an ordinary man and the power of nature. Santiago has gone an astonishing Eighty four days without catching a fish. Manolin is forbidden by his family to go fishing any longer with such a spectacularly unlucky fisherman. So, Santiago sails out alone, ventures out too far and hooks a big marlin, more than twice the size of his tiny skiff.

The story is heart-wrenching indeed, but Hemingway's writing style at a glance seems to offset that. The entire book is told in very brief, concise sentences, occasionally punctuated with small flourishes of language; aside from these, the writing seems nearly clinical in how it portrays the story's events. Hemingway's style allows the reader to react to the text with his or her own emotions. Unlike, for example, romance novels where you are given a full set of clues as to when to cry or feel warm and fuzzy, Hemingway leaves emotions up to the reader.

There are few adjectives to give us insight into the old man's emotions. Throughout Hemingway's books this style of compound sentence is used to bring out the emotion in the reader but not to show it in his characters. Of course, Hemingway could not maintain

that style throughout the story. But the modern novel form wouldn't work with only such compounded descriptions. But Hemingway used the style at thematically important moments to heighten the drama while keeping his heroes in character.

This novel that tells the story of an elderly fisherman, with little but hope to sustain him through a punishing life tells a fundamental truth about life. Santiago, the old man is a dreamer but with his age, his dreams have changed, scuffed and sanded down by decades of fishing the Gulf Stream: no longer does his sleeping mind drift to the great events throughout his life but instead just to a place, a childhood memory also remains alive. Fishing is his life and religion. But lately the sea has been cruel and the old man has endured 84 days without a catch.

He thinks and speaks of luck but is not prone to superstition. He is reverent but not pious, wary of devotion, although he could waver. When it suits, when hope take the bait under the deep blue sea, Santiago offers to pray should he require not only strength but fortitude to land his prize : " I will say ten our Fathers and ten Hail Marys that I should catch this fish... ". His body racked and gnarled by years of labour but with blue eyes " cheerful and undefeated ", he sets out on the Eighty fifth day since his last catch and rows the skiff far away from the deep wells that have offered no reward. But it is then, with his quarry hooked, that his true test begins. With little or no sleep the old man loses track of time and island of Sargasso weed drift by. Eating raw banito to maintain strength, while slowly sapping the marlin's will, Santiago regrets his poor planning: "I will never go in a boat again without salt or limes ". But his words are laced with hope that he will return to the sea. He will win the battle but lose the prize and rue the desperation that carried him beyond practical bounds. Hemingway's words, in this short novella, are consistently affecting, as steady a comfort as a lighthouse beam. It is a beautiful tale that tells a fundamental human truth that in a volatile world, from our first breath to our last wish, through triumphs and pitfalls both trivial and profound, what sustains us, is hope.

Santiago demonstrates persistence in his fishing endeavour. Each evening going home empty-handed, he does not relent and still goes out to fish. Humility is also shown when Santiago accepts Manolin's kindness. He put aside his pride and accepted assistance from a young boy that pitied him. Manolin portrays loyalty by ensuring that Santiago has enough to eat.

He does all this despite his father's advice to stop associating with Santiago. Santiago demonstrates patience by pursuing the marlin overnight, waiting for it to tire. Perseverance in the face of adversity is clearly evident in this short novella. Santiago is respectful of his environment. He only takes the bait he needs, and he is not wasteful. He is also respectful of his

opponent, his brother, the great fish. He understands this is a battle, but Santiago does fight like a gentleman and respects his foe. He begins the narrative with all the elements of such a hero, although he is old and poor. He is not defeated, because he never gives up on bringing in a fish and he does not lose his pride. Despite his failures, he sets out in his boat after having caught no fish. Nevertheless, he is confident that he will catch a fish that he can sell : " his hope and confidence had never gone. But now they were freshening as when the breeze rises...". Santiago is strong, and he battles the Marlin for days. Despite losing his harpoon, he fights against the fish with his knife and old hands. When Shark comes and eats the flesh of the marlin that is tied to the side of the boat, Santiago continuous to fight for the marlin, talking to himself. Nevertheless, the shark

takes much flesh from the marlin. Santiago's continued fight against the scavengers is useless. They devour the marlin's precious meat, leaving only skeleton. Santiago chastises himself for going "out too far", and for sacrificing his great and worthy opponent. He arrives home before daybreak, stumbles back to his shack, and sleeps very deeply.

A crowd of amazed fishermen gathers around the skeletal carcass of the fish next morning which is still lashed to the boat. Knowing nothing of the old man's struggle, tourists at a nearby cafe observe the remains of the giant marlin and mistake it for a shark. Manolin, who has been worried sick over the old man's absence, is moved to tears when he finds Santiago safe in his bed. The boy watches him sleep and when the old man wakes, the two agree to fish as partners once more. The old man returns to sleep and dreams his usual dream of lions at play on the beaches of Africa. Santiago displays a rare determination to understand the universe, as is evident when he meditates that the sea is beautiful and benevolent but cruel also. And the old man possesses a tragic flaw that is his Pride that leads to his downfall. Men are the central focus of most of Hemingway's writing and certainly of **The Old Man and the Sea**. It is no coincidence that Santiago is convinced that his greatest adversary is a male, a fact that he could not possibly ascertain.

Although Hemingway's early short stories are more florid, his style became almost journalistic, with writing that draws the reader into the current of the story before he realizes it.

He was the master of understatement and his best prose is light and airy, almost dreamlike. It appears that Hemingway's style is all about feeling. His style may be jarring and seem almost incomplete at times—a bit like an abrupt conversation, but it's evocative. His art is conveying feelings and impressions in a way that most authors can write. His sentences are short and choppy. Also, he uses a writing style called "the iceberg method", where he doesn't write a lot of details about something, but the details are implied.

Finally, the old man's patient devotion to his calling is rewarded. Despite exhaustion and physical pain, Santiago fights the marlin for three days and finally succeeds. Neither the old man nor the fish is completely victorious. But the struggle to keep the sharks from the fish is hopeless, and he reaches shore again with only a skeleton, worthless except as a symbol of his victory. **The Old Man and the Sea** is sometimes described as a parable, a story told to illustrate a moral point. The moral and thematic point of the novella might be Santiago's famous declaration: "A man can be destroyed but not defeated".

Works Cited

1. Baker, Carlos. (1952). *Hemingway: The Writer as Artist*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
2. Brenner, Gerry. (1991). *The Old Man and the Sea: Story of a Common Man*. New York: Twayne Publishers.
3. Capellan, Angel. (1985). *Hemingway and the Hispanic World*. Ann Arbor UMI Research Press.
4. Hemingway, Ernest. (1995). *The Old Man and the Sea*. New York: Scribner Paperback Fiction.
5. Young, Philip. (1961). *Ernest Hemingway*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
6. Bloom, Harold. (1999). ed. *Modern Critical Interpretations: The Old Man and the Sea*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers.