

Hemingway's the Old Man and The Sea: An Ecocritical Study

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Abstract

Cheryll Glotfelty has simply mentioned that the relationship between literature and physical environment is Ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is the study of relationship to the discursive meditation of the natural environment in the lieu of literature. The close association of the nature with human life is initiated and studied in Ecocriticism. Lawrence Buell and Ursula K. Heise extend the idea of the relationship between literature and environment as human – nature interactions. The theory also broadens our view of the study of the nature along with the other prospects which are in its periphery. The ecocriticism will help to discover and develop a vision, a balanced attitude towards sustainable and reverential environment. It will also study its representation in literature, focusing on the varied and stimulating works novelists. In literary works, environmental crisis and ecological consciousness have always been an integral part of human life, the main need which today surrounds us with the issues these days is an outcome of the understanding that we may return back to nature. This paper is an attempt to contemplate the theoretical framework with reference to the study of canonical text. The Old Man and the Sea (1952) is one of the finest works of Ernest Hemingway, an American writer. The novel depicts the close proximity of the association of man and nature.

KEYWORDS: Ecocritical, man, nature, relationship

The novel describes about how the man is living in the nature and how he retaliates and challenges the power of nature. The novel highlights about how nature and man are related to each other. Santiago, the Cuban fisherman is middle aged poor man who is innately having a profound determination of adventure in the sea. Moreover, there are certain autobiographical elements in the novel also. The novel is the reflection of the Hemingway's reflection of his personal life. The indomitable spirit of the fisherman Santiago is appreciated in the story. The novel is awarded the Noble Prize in 1954 for its extraordinary simple and lucid style.

Santiago, the old man and the central character of the novel acts like a stoic who is same in adversity and prosperity. His fight against the nature ultimately reveals that he is in close bonding with the nature and all the other natural things such as turtles, fishes, birds he finds are the caricatures. Santiago makes a comparison of all these creatures with man with whom he is communicating in the sea. He is responding to them and enjoying with these creatures. These creatures are the lens through which the character of the old man is analyzed. The undying courage of the old man and his struggle is one of the inspiring incidents in the novel. Through his struggle, Santiago demonstrates the ability of the human spirit to endure hardship and suffering in order to win. It is also his deep love and knowledge of the sea, in its impassive cruelty and beneficence that allows him to prevail. Hemingway was famously fascinated with ideas of men proving their worth by facing and overcoming the challenges of nature.

The paper thus, highlights how the novel has used nature as one of the dominating theme. Hemingway's hero believes that 'man can be destroyed but not defeated.' Also, how the nature is surrounded by enemies and how it is exploited by the incessant greed of man. This undying spirit of the Hemingway's theme, uttered in the seemingly simple, yet actually intricately designed plot of Santiago's adventure with the marlin and sharks, is man's capacity to withstand and transcend hardships of time and circumstance. Hemingway depicts, in circumstantial detail, elements of tests of endurance to which Santiago is subjected, and also his courageous response, summoning both physical energy and imaginative vision to counter the forces testing him.

The nature is presented in a dominating way right from the beginning to the end of the novel. Santiago has tried to explore the mysteries of the nature and God. But he is not allowed to take a spiritual thing like Marlin along with him to the material world. The novel begins when Santiago is suffering from a cast-down state. This state of the protagonist is clear in the first paragraph. We are told that Santiago is old and alone (solitude) and that he "had gone eighty-four days ... without taking a fish." (5) The first sentence of the novel starts the long series of the binary oppositions. Santiago, now, is without the help of the boy, Manolin, because the boy's parents forced him to go with a lucky boat, for Santiago is described as "salao which is the worst form of unlucky". From the first paragraph, it is obvious that we have the absence of many required things: absence of power, luck, youth, company, catch, etc. This absence has resulted into weakness, unlucky, solitude, the dearth of catch – with its complication of physical nourishment. Santiago's ordeal and real test is to out-weigh this cast-down state in order to enjoy its opposite.

The relationship between Santiago and Manolin is memorable and of a special kind. It has the meaning of a "symbolic doubling". (Baker 27) Besides this symbolic doubling, there is the dramatic function of Manolin. Manolin succeeds to heighten our sympathy with Santiago. Manolin provides Santiago with food and we watch the old man through the admiring and pitying eyes of the boy. After the ordeal with the sharks, Manolin brings the exhausted Santiago, beside food, ointment for his injured hands commiserating on the loss and planning for the future when they will work side by side again. This love of Manolin for Santiago is that of a disciple for master in the art of fishing. It is also the love of a son for an adopted father. In order to do this, Santiago's individualistic qualities are scrutinized and the emphasis is laid on the character's intrinsic intuition and his exceptional spiritual relationship with both the animate and inanimate objects in his world.

In addition, the old man's transcendentalism, seclusion, independence, primitivism and endurance are dissected. Also the nature is closely studied in harmony with the man, but after the failure of Santiago, he became a rebel and enemy of the nature. The counter attacks of Marlin and the destruction of the nature shows the unconquerable spirit of man. Santiago emerged as a hero whose struggle against the hostile forces of the nature is evident in the novel. He believes that 'what a man can do what a man endures... man is not born to suffer defeat.' This oneness with nature and its living things is reflected also through the fisherman's attitude that man

is part of the cycle of life; today's hunter could be tomorrow's prey and man should fight in order to win and survive; thus man is seen as an individualist within the larger system of life, this is seen through the general development of the plot in which Santiago wins over the great marlin but later loses it to the sharks.

It is a paradoxical view point that applies to Santiago's outlook to the great marlin as well; he admires the fish and considers it sometimes near and sometimes beyond the human-animal boundary "Fish, he said, "I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends." Animals, for Santiago are nobler and more able than man "They are not as intelligent as we who kill them, although they are more noble [sic] and more able". (p. 53), so they could transcend humanity. By linking himself with the marlin and the natural world Hemingway's protagonist is set apart from the rest of the world by his spontaneity and instinctiveness; qualities that associate the character with primitivism. He remembered the time he had hooked one of a pair of marlin. The male fish always let the female feed first... That was the saddest thing I ever saw with them, the old man thought. The boy was sad too and we begged her pardon and butchered her promptly.

My reading of Hemingway's novella wonders whether there is a relationship between the text's environmental ethics and its hermeneutic ethics, between the way Santiago uses nature and the way we use Hemingway's text through interpretation. Is there a link between the way the vast and simply-wrought settings of the text work upon the reader and the way those spaces condition Santiago's understanding of otherness? Here, I specifically consider how Santiago's interpretation of spaciousness occasions his transition from an anthropocentric to a biocentric ethic, how that ethic comes into being for both Santiago and the reader through an interpretive process that exposes the inevitability of appropriation in the text and the world beyond, and how Hemingway's recalcitrant simplicity might offer readers an opportunity to negotiate that inevitability through moments of self-consciousness.

The vast spaces of Hemingway's novella articulate an anxiety towards the synthetic value of nature in both life and art. Whereas Love's Ecocritical approach stresses that "Nature exists in

Hemingway's work and life primarily as a backdrop for aggressive and destructive individualism, the same individualism which, written large, has authored ecological devastation" (123). The prominence of vast and simple space in *The Old Man and the Sea* produces an interpretive anxiety destabilizing such an anthropocentric reading. In bringing such ecology to the fore, the text implicitly asks what one ought to "do" with and in and to such space. Santiago laments that he "went too far out" that his error was one of trespass, of crossing spatial boundaries. The reader comes to recognize how vast space defers its own promise of freedom. This recognition is key to understanding the hermeneutic ethics of the novella as it emphasizes both the potential for misusing space through an aggressive assertion of will and the power of space to overwhelm the human agent.

The text's representation of space appears to work against the dominant narrative strain. Whereas the battle between Santiago and the marlin dramatizes the intersection between human need (for sustenance, livelihood) and human desire (for individuation through control over the natural world), the presence of vast space suggests an alternative relation with otherness in which the ego hesitates and, for a moment, dissolves into the eco. The narrative, in this sense, exhibits stubbornness: the simply-wrought natural world can be read as both background and foreground, existing for us and existing for it. From the panoramic perspective of the first sentence, to Santiago's detailed observation of the plankton in the water, there is a downwards movement in this passage. This movement from the narrator's rendering of the vast and simple space into the character's particularized perceptions also signals a shift in ethical perspectives.

The panoramic view, with its characterization of the horizon as "a long green line;" suggests that open space is the site of limitations and boundaries rather than freedom. The clouds, the coast, and the hills together arrest vision--they prevent the eye from seeing any further. Hemingway has embedded in this description a notion of the natural world as another existing autonomously, not as a background for human desires, nor wholly vulnerable to human vision. This sense of limits is juxtaposed against Santiago's own way of seeing space, which is, in fact, an attempt to defy limitation. Santiago's "line" operates in contradistinction to the line of the horizon; his line leads his eye downwards, breaching the nonhuman ocean space.

The way in which Hemingway has activated the space and shown how the simple interaction between sun and sea defy Santiago's gaze is not the only matter of significance here. His simple prose style also minimizes our ability to see the space as personified. In other words, the implied author goes to great lengths not to anthropomorphize the sea as Santiago does when he thinks of her "as though she was a woman" (32). Beegel locates the ecological ethic of the narrative through an interpretation of the sea as "a protagonist on equal footing with Santiago" (131). The simplicity of passages such as the one above as retaining the integrity of space as space are all in the periphery of the Ecocritical studies. The discomfort Santiago feels here is not a function of a personified or competitive desire but of dimensionality: the simple and expansive flatness of the space works against the human desire to see.

Thus, the present paper delineates certain aspects of the novella which deals with the nature. The theme of continuous moving and working is innately present in the novel. The nature is prominently studied with reference to the other characters. The quest and adventure of Santiago is strong and tough. His journey from the beginning to the end made us to believe that he was really a man of strong will power to whom nature cannot defeat. Although, he was earlier in a friendly relation with nature but then returns into a rebel, who find nature as one of his enemy who turns him down.

Thus, when Hemingway attempted to explain the novella in a letter to Bernard Berenson, writing that "The sea is the sea. The old man is an old man. The boy is a boy and the fish is a fish. The sharks are all sharks no better and no worse. All the symbolism that people say is shit" he was not only emphasizing the value of a mimetic reading strategy, but re-

performing the ethical position of his implied author. Insofar as the novellas simple representation of space limits the type of over-interpretation that would attribute meaning to the space only in terms of something it is not Hemingway is attempting to narrativize a relationship to otherness that takes as its ethical source a sincere contemplation of surface. Just as Hemingway warns against "going out too far" in our interpretive ventures, so too does his implied author's version of simple space warn against the interpretive impulse to see through the narrative's surface by turning image into symbol. The Old Man and the Sea thus conditions our imaginative response to otherness by imposing limits on how we read and see spaciousness; it is both a source of freedom but also, importantly, a text whose meaning is structured on its own terms.

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