Paper 05; Module 17; E Text

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Item	Description of module
Subject Name	English
Paper name	American Literature
Module title	Ernest Hemingway: *The Old Man and the Sea*
Module ID	MODULE 17

The Old Man and the Sea

This article would try and analyze one of Ernest Hemingway's most popular texts and look into what makes this one of the most loved and read novels almost six decades after its publication. The focus of the article would not only be on the character of the heroic fisherman and the problematic relationship that he shares with Mother Nature, but also on diverse issues like whether the novella can be considered a Christian parable or the issues of a

rapidly changing world order in a small fishing village in Cuba. This article seeks to interrogate these issues and more and hopes to provide a comprehensive analysis of the various strands of thought that a reading of this work generates.

Introduction

The Old Man and the Sea has baffled critics and readers since the early days of its publication. The protean nature of the novella has only stoked curiosity and a plethora of critical material trying to dissect the "exact" meaning of the heroic ordeal between the old fisherman Santiago and the marlin and later the sharks. And yet, these marine creatures do not find any place in the novel's cryptic title. The focus is on the "sea" and the conflict is presented as one between two disparate forces. The mighty "sea" taking on not just any man, but an "old" man, waning in physical strength and morally frail after eighty odd days of returning empty handed from his fishing expeditions. And yet, this ordeal has inspired millions the world over and cemented Hemingway's place in the literary hall of fame, apart from getting him the prestigious Nobel Prize for literature. In *Death in the Afternoon,* Hemingway uses an effective metaphor to describe the kind of prose he was 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.*"

Structurally *The Old Man and the Sea* is a three-part sea story: departure, journey, and return or entry to a new world. The story also loosely follows the three-part structure of a rite of passage: separation, the liminal or in-between phase, and re-integration. But it is in the analysis of the character of Santiago that the critics have their loyalties and opinions sharply divided. The critics are focused on the multiple symbolic functions that Santiago's character represents. His epic individualism and the love he feels for the creatures who share with him a world of inescapable violence is something everyone agrees upon, although each critic views these qualities from a different point of the literary compass. Some regard the novel as essentially classical in nature, while others see it as reflecting Hemingway's romanticism, and to many, the novel is Christian in context, and the old fisherman is suggestive of Christ. (Baker 1956: 299)

Did you Know

Adriana Ivancich, the Italian woman who inspired the character of Renata in Hemingway's *Across the River and Into the Trees,* designed the original cover for the book *The Old Man and the Sea.*

The role of the Old Man, Santiago

No matter how divided the opinions of critics are, they agree upon the fact 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. Hemingway had started to be concerned about 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.

One important theme *of The Old Man and the Sea* is one which deals with luck and the laws of chance. Santiago thinks to himself that while it is important to be lucky; it is also important to be exact so that he can take advantage of his luck when it comes. He discusses lucky numbers and lottery tickets with Manolin and it is Santiago's reputation as the "salao", the worst form of being unlucky that at the end costs him his apprentice. Santiago believes that he transgressed and violated his luck by going out too far out into the sea.

One of the many interpretations of this novel is to treat it as a classical tragedy and looked at in this light, this "violation' acts as Santiago's hubris. His sin, if at all any, is pride. He thinks he can successfully catch and kill a fish that he knows from the outset is larger than the boat he is in and return to the shore safe, braving the sharks in his way. This Icarian

ambition would inevitably lead to his fall and it is not surprising that he returns a man, battered and bruised. But not before he utters what has become one of the most quoted lines in English Literature, that a man can be destroyed but not defeated. In the end however, in catching his big fish, Santiago gains a deepened insight into himself and into his relationship to the rest of created life.

One may still say with some truth that Hemingway used *The Old Man and the Sea* as a means of revising his code of "grace under pressure" to consider how a man manifests this grace when facing defeat or old age. Santiago comes at the end of a long line of characters that are commonly known as "code" heroes in Hemingway's fiction. He shares certain qualities with Manuel, the bull fighter in *The Undefeated* and Harry Morgan in *To Have and Have Not*. All these characters preserve and express a stoic dignity even though they are beaten by the much too powerful adversary against whom they are pitched. A young man in the prime of his life could have been proud of his achievement if he had landed an eighteen feet long marlin single handedly, but for a man of Santiago's age, it is not only credible, it is glorious and almost of epic proportions.

On the novella's first page, the old man's patched sail is described as looking "like the flag of permanent defeat" (9), a simile suggesting that Santiago is a man of such scarce resources and bad luck that he is, for all practical purposes, a failure. However, the same opening paragraph conveys something of the devotion and affection the boy has for the old man. And the relationship between the "failed" old man and his young apprentice signals that "permanent defeat" is not the only possible reading of the old man and his symbolic sail-flag. The sail sets up Hemingway's interrogation of defeat and use of Santiago to embody a revised code of masculine grace.

Throughout the text, we find Hemingway interrogating a new emerging world order, with the old values rapidly diminishing and being replaced by a new, which focuses too much on technology, profit and exploitation. Santiago is a remnant of the former, while the trade is being usurped by the young and the ambitious, fishermen whose lack of skill in fishing is compensated by the modern electronic equipment, they arm themselves with. The young fishermen fish not so much for the "celebratory gift of food but for the "shark factory" mentioned at the beginning of *The Old Man and the Sea* (11), an industry processing their catch for the Oriental soup fin trade, for an Ocean Leather Company in New Jersey converting shark skin to wallets, belts, and shoes. As Beegel notes in her analysis of the

novella, "*Santiago sees in the young fishermen the death of his way of life, the end of putting to sea in small boats powered by oar and sail, of locating fish only with his own intimate knowledge of the sea and her creatures, and of catching them with the unaided strength of his body.* (Beegel 2011:121).

The novella is much less weighted toward the concept that dominated the earliest novels—that man is punished by a hostile universe. Santiago acknowledges himself as the author of his own ruin: he knows that he has tried to go beyond the limits of human possibility in making his choices and obeying his imperative, and he knows that he must be punished for it. His suffering which to many is much more than he deserves is one of the eternals of tragedy. Williams observes a stirring parallel when he remarks, *"His serene acknowledgment of his responsibility inevitably recalls that of Oedipus in Oedipus at Colonus, and though there is no evidence whatever to suggest the play as even a minor source, another vital resemblance exists. Santiago is first encountered after the fall, and sometime after; he is not only in a cast-down state but an accursed one. No longer champion, eighty-four days without a fish, he is "salao"—the worst kind of unlucky. His beginning in these depths makes his rise to the pinnacle of taking the fish more thrilling, the catastrophe of its loss more heartrending—and his victory of spirit inside and after that catastrophe more life-enlarging and transcendent."* (Williams 2008:33). The awe he feels at the weight and strength of the fish is the first undisguised declaration of the magnitude of the action, a magnitude made even larger by the first major reversal of the work—the fish's taking command of the skiff and commencing to tow it. In the old man's soliloquy, he makes clear that he and the fish are incarnations of different states of being, that each is noble, and that each is dominated by a single imperative of existence. It is equally clear that the old man has made the choice that sets the tragic action in motion. He reiterates that it has been his decision to go far out to overreach but an equally strong, if implicit, choice is his automatic and unspoken decision not to cut the line. Considering *The Old Man and the* Sea as a specimen of a classical tragedy opens up more fertile avenues to consider. The sharks act as the nemesis to Santiago over-reaching; if the old man had not gone further to sea than his proper limits, he would

not have caught a fish big enough to tow him to sea for three days; if the fish were not so big, he could have put it, butchered, inside the boat and kept it safe from sharks; if it were not big enough to pull him to sea for three days, the sharks would not have had time and space to destroy it completely. The end was in the beginning, when he first went "too far out"; the stream of

blood that went a mile into the ocean and drew the shark was simply a step in an inexorable process more than well advanced.

Did You know

The book was made into a 1958 film starring Spencer Tracy as the old man. Hemingway spent time with the producer, screenwriter and Tracy and tried unsuccessfully to land a marlin to provide footage for the film.

Critics have also seen parallels of the old man's struggle and in his toil against a malignant universe against all odds with that of Sisyphus, pushing a boulder of stone against the mountain and destined to do it forever. The particular defeat on which the novel focuses, the catching of the huge marlin that will be devoured by sharks, is obviously Sisyphean in its combination of prolonged, repetitive, painful struggle and the clear-eyed knowledge of that struggle's ultimate futilityThe old man had once gone through a period of barrenness when he couldn't catch a single fish for eighty seven days. His present ordeal has lasted eighty four and we know that even if he did manage to land the marlin, this long spell of the universe's hostility against the protagonist is bound to repeat again and to put it succinctly, "*The Sisyphean protagonists of Hemingway face this gravity as a vortex of random, quasi-malignant forces that constitute a steady—and ultimately effective—resistance to dreams of love and achievement. The rebellion of those initiated into this dark gnosis by experience centers on the assertion*

of such provisional values as honor, courage, decency, generosity, and stoical fortitude—in other words, the code. This assertion—embodied constantly in actions—is a way of establishing an island of human dignity in the middle of the cosmic mess without losing sight of the certainty that the island will eventually be overwhelmed" (Eddins 2008: 145).

The Man and Nature Conflict

Reading *The Old Man and the Sea* one is struck by the title with the very conspicuous absence of the marlin in it. The heroic struggle of the old man then seems to be against a greater enemy, the sea, the marlin and the Mako sharks are nothing but agents of this very hostile universe. This has led to a lot of speculation about Man's position in the larger

scheme of things, where the sea becomes symbolic of a malignant fate, whimsical and arbitrary, almost symptomatic of the role that the gods would play in the Greek tragedies. Susan Beegel remarks that "*if the novella is an "American Romance," it is not the love story of Santiago and Manolin but of the old man and the sea, conjoined in the title like Hero and Leander, Troilus and Cressida, Antony and Cleopatra, Tristan and Isolde. Given the nature of the sea in Hemingway's novella, this is not a "safe" romance at all but a story about the tragic love of mortal man for capricious goddess."* (Beegel 2011: 109)

And yet, Hemingway's attitude to Nature and her bounties has come under severe criticism. That claim is credible if we examine some of Hemingway's later writings on fishing and hunting. It is balanced by other recent criticism which recognizes that even though Hemingway extended his sense of community and interdependence to animals in *The Old Man and the Sea*, the novella remains a theater of cruelty with a flesh-piercing array of images and terms that complicate the novel's renderings of nature's wonder. If on the one hand, we find Santiago being sympathetic to the fish he has to kill, there is also a gendering of the sea which presents the Nature as feminine, vicious and capricious. It is imperative therefore to try and analyze these two prominent and yet conflicting strands of thought in the text. European and American " *cultures in particular have long seen the earth as something that human beings should dominate and subdue and women have traditionally been relegated to a similar fate.*" (Tyler 2001: 133). One strand of ecofeminist thought argues that men characteristically gender nature as female to justify treating the land in a dominating, exploitative way (virgin land), while expecting unending forgiveness (Mother Earth), Hemingway argues that the true sin is masculinizing nature, treating nature as an enemy or contestant to be met in combat. Examining the role played by the feminine sea in this story may reveal that *Th e Old Man and the Sea* has a stronger ecological ethic than previously supposed.

Santiago rejects those who masculinize the sea. But against his view of Mother Sea as a beautiful, kindly, and generous feminine provider—a belief that in many respects does temper his behavior toward her—he sets an opposing view of feminine nature as cruel and chaotic—spawning poisonous creatures, sudden storms, and hurricanes. Santiago's reflections about a feminine sea arise during a critique of younger fishermen. Those who "had motorboats… spoke of her as *el mar* which is masculine. They spoke of her as a contestant or… even an enemy" (*OMS* 29-30). Santiago's view of the sea—"The moon affects her as it does a woman" (30)—is not mere poetry, but an ethic that guides the way he thinks about the sea and interacts with the creatures who live in her waters. This feminized

approach is immediately apparent: Santiago works *with* the sea, "drifting with the current"—letting the current "do a third of the work".

There is a mutual wounding of the hunter and the hunted, so much so, the thin line that distinguishes between them is blurred. Santiago is out further than ever to explore the sea's riches and the sea too is hostile withholding them from the aged agon. Whereas in earlier Hemingway works the protagonists (matadors and trophy hunters) seemed to do most of the stabbing and shooting, in *The Old Man and the Sea* the inflicting of wounds is mutual. Through a shared, mutually imposed suffering, Santiago develops a deeper understanding of his brotherhood with animals. Santiago eventually discovers, under duress, a sense that the great fish is his equal, and in some ways his superior. But meanwhile a theater of cruelty is in full effect; no quarter is given in the search for the big one. There is the routine but gory detail of sardines "hooked through both eyes" to serve as bait (*OMS* 31). When the sardines secure bigger bait (an albacore tuna), Santiago "hit him on the head for kindness and kicked him" (39). Bait has no agency, although eventually, by the law of the food chain, Santiago's bigger bait will attract a bigger beast—one capable of fighting back and forcing Santiago to re-examine his killer's kindness. This shared pain carves new perspectives in his thinking. Santiago speaks of "three things that are brothers: the fish and my two hands" (64). They are united by the line that joins them, and as they pull against each other, it cuts their flesh, making them "blood brothers" as well as competitors who inspire each others' valor. It is in this context that Santiago wants to show the fish "what kind of man I am." This desire to perform a proof of masculinity only arises when one respects or admires the opponent.

And yet, problems remain. The novel opens up more questions than it resolves. Gendering the sea as feminine does not resolve the problem of man's violence toward nature, but raises even more disturbing questions about right relationship than gendering the sea as el mar. Our culture generally accepts male-on-male violence—such as the cock-fi ghting and arm-wrestling in Old Man—provided it conforms to the rituals of warfare, chivalry, or sportsmanship. We perceive such violence as the "natural" outcome of male competition for territory and sexual prerogative,

although neither instinct bodes well when directed against nature. Conversely, male-on-female violence is taboo, "unnatural" because the biological purpose of male-female relations is procreation, not competition.

The Use of Symbols

A great work of art more often than not serves a symbolic function and *The Old Man and the Sea* is no different. But when asked whether the novella can be considered to be a metaphor for something else, Hemingway was categorical in his denial. He remarked, "*There isn't any symbolism. 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."*

But despite this refutation from the author himself, readers and critics alike have striven to identify certain strands within the text which make this work a Christian parable of heroism and humility. Elements within the text have risen beyond their surface interpretation to acquire symbolic importance and value. None more so, than the great American baseball player, Di Maggio.

Joe Di Maggio, features in the story as a constant source of inspiration to the battered Santiago. He invokes the baseball legend to draw emotional and spiritual sustenance during moments when all hope seems lost. Di Maggio, 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. 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 whose return to baseball glory at the fag end of his flagging career insinuates a phoenix like return for Santiago as well. And yet, it stands for something more poignant and to a certain aspect, sinister. Santiago's fixation with Joe DiMaggio is not a casual one. Carefully nurtured, it is a creation of the movies, radio programs, newsreels, and mass circulation newsprint which, during the post-war period, became an integral feature of the new diplomatic landscape of the United States as the language of American sport, music, film, and entertainment, were all potent weapons in the fight against Communism.

The Old Man and the Sea, as had been mentioned earlier in the article, can be read as a document espousing typically Christian values. Perhaps in part because of its theme of the redemptive value of suffering, it has been read as a Christian allegory. The protagonists name is that of St. James in Spanish. The associations with fish, the mention that the old man's instinctive utterance of "Ah", maybe reminiscent of the sound emanated by Christ when the nails went through his flesh are all tell- tale hints to this claim. They are further emphasized by the symbolic value of the old fisherman as he carries the mast cross-like 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 his figure is Christ-like 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. Williams adds another dimension when he points out, "*The eighty-seven-day period may be the sum of Jesus' forty days in the desert, the forty days of Lent, and the seven days of Holy Week. The second, eighty-four-day period needs the three days of Crucifixion to match the first:*
Santiago as acolyte must pass the three-day test of his "crucifixion" to become the peer of Santiago as Christ. A simpler and yet completely complementary view is that the two long periods present the view of life as an ordeal that eternally repeats itself."(Williams 2008: 40)

Not only is Santiago symbolic of Christ, but to some extent, in his portrayal are implicit autobiographical elements of the Hemingway coming to terms with a hostile reaction from critics and readers to his previously published novel. Santiago is a projection of Hemingway himself. It is only half developed, sometimes almost ostentatiously visible In this, Santiago is Hemingway, once the greatest of all in his métier but now fallen and derided Hemingway, who will come back from scorn and again defeat all others with a master achievement; Hemingway, who considers he has done it and sees his just prize wrested from him by a hostile reviewing establishment. Santiago is thus Hemingway as artist—and champion—as well as the universal artist.