

Symbolism in *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway

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ABSTRACT: *The Old Man and The Sea* is based on the simplest of themes possible, which was again an actual incident that Hemingway had heard of. It is Hemingway's masterpiece a novella, largely responsible for the Noble Prize that was awarded to him in 1954. The theme, therefore, is how a man alone and out of luck may persist and fights and depending upon the manner in which he fights and even at the point of being defeated, he may emerge morally victorious though for all the world he may be physically beaten.

KEY WORDS: Santiago; an Artist, Symbolism, Struggle against the Marlin, Symbolism of the Shark and in Killing the Shark, The Symbolism of the Marlin.

INTRODUCTION

Santiago; an Artist

Like all Hemingway novels, symbolism is an important element in *The Old Man and The Sea*, too, there is a dense network of symbols working through the novel. Santiago himself is a symbol. He stands for an artist in his professionalism approach to his struggle with the marlin and then the sharks.

The Title and Its Symbolism

This is a metaphor for man pitied against the forces of nature and thus stands for the human conditions. The sea is on vast possibility, with more things hidden from the human eye than are revealed. So is human life. God has planned and hidden from human view an endless array of possibilities.

The Struggle against the Marlin and its Symbolism

Santiago hooks a huge marlin, bigger than any he had ever heard of or seen. He thus meets adversary who is more than worthy to fight against. Now, as he battles against the marlin, he goes into a struggle which is symbolic of man's endless struggle for survival.

Symbolism of the Shark and in Killing the Shark

The sharks that attack Santiago's hard-won prize, the huge marlin, stands for the evil that exist in the world. The sharks that live by coverings symbolize the kind of evil that exists for itself and not as the result of anything.

The Symbol of the Marlin

The marlin also stands as a symbol for man's vision of the ultimate reality that he seeks. On the other hand, the marlin is Santiago's true brother. There is much in the character of the marlin that is also in Santiago.

Manolin, Di Maggio the Lions

Manolin is the most potent among the three. The boy is a source of inner strength. Di Maggio, the great baseball star that the Old Man admires also serves the same purpose. These lions are seen constantly appearing in Santiago's dreams as great big cats rolling and playing in the sun.

Santiago and the Turtle Symbol

Most people are heartless about turtles because a turtle heart will beat for hours after he has been cut up and butchered. That he is shown as dreaming about the lions at the end of the novel creates a fiction that Santiago shall survive. In fact, he is already half dead and shall shortly die. Hence, the boy's tears and his humoring the Old Man by keeping his allusions of future fishing trips together alive.

Santiago-A Christ like Figure

In the New Testament, Christ is crucified with two other men. The man on the left is insulting and scolds Jesus whereas that on the right defends. The Christian gospel says that the right hand is associated with goodness and the left with treachery.

The Symbolism of the Marlin

The huge marlin, in the parable of man's life represents, that distant almost next to impossible to achieve goal and killing the marlin signifies the attainment of that goal. The hardship and the pain and suffering that Santiago undergoes in his bid to capture the marlin implies how in the journey of life, how he fought with problems and difficulties is the process towards the attainment of one's goals. However, the idea and the search for a goal is an idea and noble search and, therefore, the person in quest of a designated goal is fired by passion, resolution and the will to achieve the goal. Man's purpose fires him and doesn't allow him to side track from his proposed trajectory. The Old Man's injured, bleeding hand signifies the pain that man has to pass through, his cramped left hand, his sore and aching back and muscles all signify or symbolize the suffering that man has to endure in order to attain his goal. On the other hand, the marlin refuses to be defeated. The Old Man has to struggle with him for three days and two nights and thus the marlin itself signifies the enormity of man's task and how difficult and full of dangerous risk it is to attempt to achieve a high goal. Finally, the Old Man, through grit, determination and persistence and also depending on the various fishing tricks and techniques, captures the marlin. And man in his struggle needs the help of these virtues and these qualities in order to attain success.

Man's Need for Inner and Outer Strength

Man in his struggle against life and in his struggle to attain some kind of goal needs both an inner and an outer source of strength and stamina. This is because the goal is a high objective. So high that it is awe inspiring as much as the marlin's beauty and dignity drew the love and respect of the Old Man. For the Old Man there are many sources from which he draws strength

and inspiration. The boy Manolin reminds him of his youth, his youthful energy and the lions frolicking on the golden beaches of Africa, make him happy and energizes him, the baseball star DiMaggio born of a poor fisherman, who had accomplished many great things in spite of pain of above bone spur and led his team to victory also inspires the Old Man to go on fighting. His own experiences as a young man, like the time he had defeated a great Negro at hand wrestling after twenty-four hours which inspires him and fills him with the hope and the confidence that he can still be the champion. These examples are necessary to illustrate the fact that though man is necessarily alone and that he has to fight for his life on his own, he needs certain other things. Man needs some sort of companionship what the boy provides. He cannot be an alienated individual staying in isolation. Earlier Hemingway had portrayed a Frederic Henry, happy in isolation and desolate and unconcerned with society. Here, Santiago fully expresses his need for the boy and ultimately it is when he is in the midst of people again that he is happy. Thus, here Hemingway clearly states the need for society and in another respect, the need for a companion to draw strength from.

Again, for outer strength Santiago forces himself to eat the raw tuna, later the raw dolphin and finally the flying fish and the shrimps. He doesn't particularly enjoy them but he forces himself to eat in order to keep his strength. Similarly, man should compromise in life if he wishes to stay strong enough to achieve his goals.

Finally, Santiago also draws strength from God. He prays to God, invokes the help of the Virgin Mary promising to say "Our Father's and 'Hail Mary's'". Santiago is not religious but these promises show a belief in superior power controlling the universe and this should be every man's dogma in life. Man should believe in power, a being that controls his life and to whom he can appeal and thereby draw spiritual strength.

The Symbolism of the Sharks

Santiago achieves victory over the marlin. As he sails homeward with the marlin lashed to side of his skiff, sharks smelling the blood come and attack the marlin. Santiago puts up a valiant fight against the sharks but he ultimately loses his hard-won prize. But his loss doesn't mean that he has been defeated, because by virtue of his indomitable courage, fortitude and will he fight the sharks, even when he knew defeat was inevitable, even at the moment when he was weaponless and even at the moment, he could no longer see but hear the sharks he achieves a victory. He says, "Man is not made for defeat. A Man may be destroyed but not defeated." Later, he tells himself, "It is silly not to hope. Besides I believe it is a sin." Further he says, "I'll fight them until I die". These utterances bring out the Old Man's indomitable spirit, he knows he has been beaten but not defeated. This is in a way the ideal behavior that every man should strive to follow. The sharks on the other hand, symbolize all the opposing forces that combine to threaten man's plans or to destroy his dreams and achievements. But that the Old Man even in the face of these forces, never losing hope but drawing strength and inspiration by thinking of his youth, the lions and the boy etc, which are symbolical of how man through his will and spirit can stand firm against the onslaught of these forces. Thus, the novel affirms the spirit of man and shows how man, every individual can exist in this world.

Santiago a Christ-like Figure

Santiago at various points in the novel has been painted in the imagery of Christ. Santiago's pain and suffering is paralleled to that of Christ. His right hand is injured and bleeding and his

left hand is cramped and useless. Later, he feels as though the nails are going through his hands and into the wood. And finally, he goes home bearing the mast on his shoulder like the cross. There are other similarities in the character too. For example, he has attained humility without loss of pride, he is full of love and compassion and he suffers like Christ in his suffering and loss martyrdom comparable to Christ. These aspects are again to be applied to notion that the story is a parable of man's life on earth, because Christ Himself was the ideal man and all man should strive to follow His examples.

A Parable

The Old Man and the Sea means more than it directly says. According to several critics, for example, there is a close parallel between Santiago, his marlin, and the sharks on the one hand, and Hemingway, his fiction, and the critics on the other. According to Mark Schorer, this novel is not only a moral fable but a parable. "It is an old man catching a fish, yes; but it is also a great artist in the act of mastering his subject, and more than that of actually writing about the struggle. Nothing is more important than his craft, and it is beloved; but because it must be struggled with and mastered, it is also a foe; enemy to all self-indulgence, to all looseness of feeling, all laxness of style, all soft pomposities." Another view has been expressed by Harvey Breit. According to this critic, Hemingway has tried "to fuse, under a sustained pressure, the opposite elements of experience and vision, of prosaic event and dramatic or poetic insight. Hemingway has attempted to annihilate the shadow which falls between the idea and the reality, between the essence and the descent." The realities in *The Old Man and the Sea* have to do with the craft of fishing. But in all Hemingway's best work, these particular occupations and professions are transposed into universal meanings: "In *The Old Man and the Sea*, the mystique of fishing, with its limited triumphs and tragedies, is transposed into a universal condition of life, which its success and shame, its morality and pride and potential loss of pride.

The Vainness of Human Wishes

From one point of view, the theme of this novel reduces itself to the vanity, or the vainness, of human wishes. The story of Santiago shows not only natural tragic pattern, as the individual human life may do when seen as a whole. It can also stand as a natural parable. In this story, as in the life of man, the battle commences, grows and subsides between one sleep and another. In human experience there are many forms of both marlin and shark. Much is to be endured, and perhaps relatively little is to be enjoyed between the commencement of our human effort and its end.

Two Levels – Symbolism and Story

Since the nineteen-forties there had been an increasing emphasis on Hemingway's use of symbolism in his novels. The view has been gathering strength that Hemingway's work should be studied on the symbolic as well as on the story level for a full appreciation of its art. And of all Hemingway's books, *The Old Man and the Sea* demands most to be studied on both levels.

Based on the Great Abstractions

The Old Man and the Sea is a very good Hemingway story. It is swiftly and smoothly told; the conflict is resolved into a struggle between a man and a force which he scarcely understands, but which he knows that he must continue to strive against, though knowing also that the struggle must end in his defeat. The defeat is only apparent, however, for, as in the short story

called "*The Undefeated*," it becomes increasingly clear throughout that it is not the victory or defeat that matters but the struggle itself. Furthermore, *The Old Man and the Sea* while reasserting the set of values, the philosophy which permeates all of Hemingway's work, is built upon the great abstractions – love and truth and honour and loyalty and pride and humility – and again speaks of the proper method of attaining and retaining these virtues, and the spiritual satisfaction experienced by one who possesses them.

The Use of Christian Symbols

Christian religious symbols run through the story. These are so closely interwoven with the story as to suggest an allegorical intention on Hemingway's part. Santiago is a fisherman and he is also a teacher: he has taught the boy not only how to fish – that is, how to make a living – but how to behave as well, giving him the pride and humility necessary to a good life. During the trials with the great fish and with the sharks his hands ache terribly; his back is lashed by the line; he gets an eye-piercing headache; and his chest shrinks and he spits blood. He hooks the fish at noon, and at noon of the third day he kills it by driving his harpoon into its heart. As he sees the second and third sharks attacking, the Old Man calls aloud, "Ay," and Hemingway comments: "There is no translation for this word and perhaps it is just such a noise as a man might make involuntarily feeling the nail go through his hand and into the wood." On landing, Santiago carries his mast on his shoulders and goes upward from the sea towards his hut; he is forced to rest several times on his journey up the hill, and when he reaches the hut he lies on the bed "with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up." All these details are obviously reminiscent of the Biblical account of Christ's crucifixion.

From Man to Fish, And Back to Man

The Christian symbolism so evident here shifts from man to fish and back to man throughout the story. This apparent confusion is consistent not only within the Hemingway philosophy as an example of the sacrificed phenomenon but within formal Christianity as well, if the doctrine of the Trinity be accepted. Furthermore, the phenomenon itself closely parallels the Roman Catholic sacrifice of the Mass, wherein a fusion of the priest-man with Christ takes place at the moment of Transubstantiation.

The Use of Numerology

Along with the Christ symbols is a rather intricate numerology which, while reinforcing the symbols, depends on them for its importance. This numerology is not formalized, but it is carefully set forth. Three, seven, and forty are key numbers in the Old and New Testaments, and in the Christian religion, and Hemingway makes a judicious use of them. The Old Man, as the story opens, has fished alone for forty-four famine days and with the boy for forty more. The Old Man's trial with the great fish lasts exactly three days; the fish is landed on the seventh attempt; seven sharks are killed; and although Christ fell only three times under the Cross, whereas the Old Man has to rest from the weight of the mast five times, there is a consistency in the equal importance of the numbers themselves.

Two obvious questions now arise: Is the story, as it appears at first glance to be, a Christian allegory? Has the old master, a tough guy (Ernest Hemingway), decided in the words of Colonel Cantwell, 'to run as a Christian?' If the answers to these questions are "no", a further question arises: What then is the book's message?

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