



"A Critical Study of Symbols of Struggle and Redemption in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*"

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Abstract

This research explores the significance of symbols in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, a novella that chronicles the battle between an aging fisherman, Santiago, and a giant marlin. Through an analysis of key symbols, the marlin, the lion, the shark, and the mast this study reveals how Hemingway uses natural imagery to deepen the narrative's thematic complexity. The marlin symbolizes both Santiago's noble adversary and a reflection of his inner struggles, emphasizing the virtues of persistence and self-confrontation. The lion, appearing in Santiago's dreams, represents lost youth, pride, and spiritual renewal, while the sharks embody the destructive forces of nature and humanity, including envy and criticism. Finally, the mast, resembling Christ's cross, signifies sacrifice, suffering, and redemption, elevating Santiago's journey to a universal allegory of the human condition. This analysis demonstrates how these symbols enrich the novella's exploration of endurance, dignity, and the quest for meaning in the face of adversity.

Key Words: Struggle, Redemption, Dignity

1.1 Introduction

Hemingway also utilizes natural symbols and characters as symbols, often describing them in relation to place, city, and nature. Therefore, this research analyzes the importance of symbols in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. *The Old Man and the Sea*, short heroic novel by Ernest Hemingway, published in 1952 and



awarded the 1953 Pulitzer Prize for fiction. It was his last major work of fiction. The story centers on an aging fisherman who engages in an epic battle to catch a giant marlin.

1.2 Symbols in The Old Man and The Sea

The Old Man and the Sea is rich in meaning. Virtually every element operates on two levels, revealing a deeper symbolic meaning beneath its literal function. Nothing that happens in the novella is only what it seems. Instead, the novella is an allegory, elevating the story of Santiago's epic struggle with the marlin to humankind's universal struggle for survival.

The Marlin

The marlin is the giant, 18-foot fish that battles with Santiago in the middle of the ocean for three days and three nights. Although Santiago hooks the marlin on his first afternoon at sea, the marlin refuses to come to the surface and instead pulls Santiago farther and farther from land. Santiago admires the marlin's beauty and endurance, and considers it a "noble" adversary, telling the fish repeatedly that though he loves it, he must kill it. In the end, the big fish, the marlin, is shown as Santiago's equal rival. Fighting against such a tough opponent brings out the best qualities in a person—like bravery, persistence, and care. Additionally, because Santiago starts to see the marlin as a reflection of himself—he thinks of the marlin as an old male fish—the marlin begins to symbolize Santiago himself too. This means Santiago's battle with the marlin is really a battle with his own inner struggles. It's not just about physical strength but more about enduring and refusing to give up. Santiago's fight with the marlin is about confronting and conquering his own weaknesses just as much as it is about catching the huge fish. Through this process, by not giving up to either the fish or the weaknesses in his own body and mind, Santiago rises above those weaknesses.

“He is wonderful and strange and who knows how old he is, he thought. Never have I had such a strong fish nor one who acted so strangely... He cannot know that it is only one man against him, nor that it is an old man.”

The Marlin is a good opponent of Santiago, worthy of fight. It is a symbol of dignity and pride. The Marlin is in contrast to the sharks that are shameful rivals, not commendable to Santiago's endeavors. Magnificent and radiant, the Marlin represents a perfect rival.

In the world's reality where, “Everything kills everything else in some way”, Santiago feels truly fortunate to wind up against an animal that draws out the best in him. The Marlin brings out his qualities of courage, talent, fortitude, love, and regard.



The Lion

In both his bed in the village and aboard his boat, Santiago dreams vividly of lions lounging along the sandy beaches of Africa, a scene etched in his memory from his youthful days aboard a ship that sailed and fished the African coast. These majestic creatures hold significant symbolism for Santiago. On one level, they represent his bygone youth, a time of innocence and vitality now lost to the passage of time. Additionally, the term "pride" used to describe a group of lions serves as a subtle nod to Santiago's own pride, his dignity and self-respect as a fisherman and a man.

Interestingly, Santiago's affection for these fierce predators also parallels his complex relationship with the marlin. Despite recognizing the marlin as a formidable adversary, one he admires and respects, he ultimately must confront it and end its life for his own survival. This duality reflects Santiago's deep connection with the natural world, where admiration and necessity often intertwine.

As Santiago faces the reality of his advancing age and the loss of his companions, his dreams of the lions become a poignant reminder of what once was and what he has now become. No longer able to witness the lions in person, they exist solely in his dreams, a bittersweet manifestation of his longing for the past and his acceptance of the present.

Yet, the significance of these dreams transcends mere nostalgia. At the conclusion of the novella, Santiago's dreams of the lions take on a newfound sense of triumph and rejuvenation. By overcoming the monumental challenge posed by the marlin, Santiago experiences a spiritual renewal, a rebirth of sorts. In this light, the lions symbolize not just a longing for the past, but also a beacon of hope for the future—a future where Santiago can continue to find meaning and purpose in his enduring struggle against the elements and himself.

“He 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. 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.”

The Shark

Symbolizing the brute force of destruction, the sharks are mindless creatures following their base instincts: the bloodlust that lures them to their prey. Yet their very bloodlust also lures them to their death. As they take bites out of the marlin in a feeding frenzy, they come close enough to the skiff for Santiago to kill them. What sustains them kills them. Neither their lives nor their deaths serve any purpose. Defeating them with sheer



willpower and innovation, Santiago not only survives himself but also defends the magnificent marlin. He brings home the skeleton and thus captures the creature's majesty and glory.

“An hour after Santiago killed the marlin, a big Mako shark appears, having caught the scent of the marlin's blood. As the shark bites the dead marlin, Santiago rams his harpoon into the shark's head. The shark thrashes, dies, and sinks, but the harpoon rope breaks and Santiago's harpoon is lost with the shark.”

The sharks, mere scavengers driven by their constant hunger, emerge as Santiago's most formidable foes. Despite Santiago's efforts to fend them off, they mercilessly tear apart the marlin's body, leaving him heartbroken. While the marlin is depicted as both a worthy opponent and a noble companion to Santiago, the sharks are portrayed as nothing more than ruthless predators.

These shovel-nosed sharks can also be interpreted as symbols of nature's destructive forces, as well as the destructive tendencies of humanity. Some liken them to the people of Jerusalem, whose envy and rivalry culminated in the crucifixion of Jesus. Additionally, there's a school of thought suggesting that the sharks symbolize literary critics, whom Hemingway believed feasted on the works of genuine artists without contributing anything original themselves.

“Santiago tries to remain hopeful. He considers it silly, or even sinful, to not be hopeful. But he begins to wonder whether it was a sin for him to kill the marlin. He knows that he did not kill the marlin just to feed himself and others, but also out of pride and love. He wonders whether it is more or less of a sin to kill something you love. He feels no guilt, however, for killing the shark, because he acted in self-defense. It occurs to him that "everything kills everything else in some way," but then he reminds himself that it is Manolin who keeps him alive.”

In a different interpretation, the sharks also symbolize all the critics Hemingway faced in real life. Hemingway hadn't produced much writing publicly in many years, and his most recent publication had received a negative reception. This novella seems to liken those critics to sharks who circle and pounce.

The Mast

In the concluding moments of *The Old Man and the Sea*, we witness Santiago's profound exhaustion as he wraps up his arduous journey. With great effort, he removes the mast from his skiff and begins the laborious task of hauling it up the beach to his modest shack. What strikes the observer is the manner in which Santiago carries the mast, with one end balanced on his shoulder, reminiscent of the depiction of Jesus carrying his cross on the road to Calvary.



This deliberate parallel drawn by Hemingway between Santiago's burden and the iconic imagery of Christ's passion is deeply significant. By likening Santiago's struggle to that of Jesus, Hemingway elevates the narrative to a universal level, imbuing it with themes of sacrifice, endurance, and redemption. The mast, once a mere tool of Santiago's trade, transforms into a potent symbol of suffering and salvation, echoing the enduring motif of the cross in Christian theology.

Through this symbolic gesture, Hemingway invites readers to contemplate Santiago's ordeal not merely as a fisherman's tale but as a profound allegory of the human condition. Santiago's journey becomes emblematic of the trials and tribulations inherent in the human experience, offering insights into the nature of suffering, resilience, and ultimately, transcendence. In Santiago's solitary struggle against the forces of nature, we find echoes of the timeless struggle for meaning and purpose in the face of adversity.

Thus, the image of Santiago laboring under the weight of the mast serves as a poignant reminder of the inherent dignity and nobility of the human spirit, capable of enduring hardship and finding redemption even in the most trying of circumstances. In Santiago's silent determination and quiet dignity, we glimpse the essence of the human quest for meaning and significance, a quest that transcends the boundaries of time and place, resonating with readers across generations and cultures.

“He started to climb again and at the top he fell and lay for some time with the mast across his shoulder.”

The mast of the old man's skiff is an allusion to the Christian cross, which in turn symbolizes pain and suffering for a greater good. The three bleeding wounds Santiago suffers as he sails underneath the mast of his skiff allude to the three wounds of Jesus Christ as he was nailed to the cross, suffering to atone for humankind's sins. At the story's close, Santiago's act of carrying the mast to his shack mirrors Jesus' carrying of the cross, suggesting Santiago's acceptance of his destiny akin to Jesus' acceptance of his. Santiago's resolve to continue fishing, regardless of his circumstances, reflects his solitary and determined nature. He doesn't seek assistance or miracles, nor does he strive for improved fortunes. Instead, he embodies the essence of human existence: the relentless struggle for survival, unflinchingly undertaken. Santiago's actions symbolize a profound acceptance of life's challenges and a commitment to persevere, embodying the timeless resilience of the human spirit.

1.3 Conclusion

The Old Man and the Sea stands as a powerful exploration of human resilience, dignity, and the eternal struggle for meaning. Through the symbolic elements of the marlin, the lion, the sharks, and the mast, Hemingway crafts a narrative that transcends the literal story of Santiago's battle with nature. The marlin



symbolizes both a worthy adversary and Santiago's internal conflict, while the lions represent lost youth and a renewed sense of purpose. The sharks, in their mindless destruction, embody the forces that seek to undermine human efforts, and the mast, reminiscent of Christ's cross, serves as a profound symbol of sacrifice and redemption. Together, these symbols deepen the novella's exploration of survival, suffering, and spiritual transcendence. Through Santiago's journey, Hemingway invites readers to reflect on the universal human experience, reminding us of the dignity in perseverance, the nobility in struggle, and the possibility of redemption even in the face of overwhelming adversity.

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