

**WHERE THE CHRIST AND THE CROSS MEETS: A  
CRITICAL EVALUATION OF HEMMINGWAY'S "THE OLD  
MAN AND THE SEA"**

**Abhik Maiti**

**Pursuing M.A in English**

**University of Calcutta**

**M.A in History**

**Rabindra Bharati University**

**Diploma in Fine Arts**

**India**

**Abstract:**

“Life is so single mindedly awful it seems a conscious, cosmic prank; it starts in pain, is pervaded by painful imitation, dislocation, guilt, desire, fear of responsibility and isolation; and it is always bestial violence and death.”

Richard Kasleany in *The Shock of Vision* sum up approximates Hemingway's view of life, which is the theme for all his novels. Being a journalist in profession Hemingway had a firsthand experience of the World War I which made him realize the inevitability of death, from this realization Hemingway constituted his philosophy for life that brutality and disappointment are the larger part of the substance of life. In this harsh universe, pleasure and pain are interwoven and inseparable no matter what happens, life goes on the first and final duty is to survive. And man attains his largest stature when he meets the hostile element with style and control. It is the inexplicable strangeness in Santiago that drives him far out into the sea, alone, after eighty four days of failure to take a fish. Though old, he cannot think of fishing in company with other fisherman. Santiago's lonely trip is profoundly self-educative. William Faulkner in an essay dated in 1952 writes, “This time, he discovered god as creator. Until now, his men and women had made themselves, shaped themselves out of their own clay. Their victories and defeats were, at the hands of each other, just to prove to themselves or to one another, how tough they could be. But this time, he wrote about pity... the old man who had to catch the fish and lose it, the fish had to be caught and lost, the sharks which had to rob the old man of his fish” Through Santiago's ambitious venture and his combat with an

unknown, more powerful adversary, Hemingway tries to show that one man alone can never win. And in victory or in failure the protagonist recognizes the need for solidarity and the fact of interdependence of all living creatures.

Hemingway introduces the old man very simply in the opening lines – “He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream.” The old man is Santiago, Hemingway’s protagonist in the novel, a simple fisherman.. Even the sail of his skiff furled around the mast, all worn and patched “looked like the flag of permanent defeat.” Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same colour of the sea and were cheerful and undefeated. Like Conrad, Hemingway too had a personal experience of the sea. His journalistic spirit had given him a broader view of the World War-I as the collapse of modern values despair and exposure, which marked vulnerability of the sea, the old man is alone in the voyage accompanied only by his old age. He is abandoned by his fellow mariners, they thought him unlucky. At times the old man talks to himself or to a small bird on his skiff which shows how lonely he is in the midst of the sea, even he thinks of Mandolin when he had successfully killed the fish. Though he has been able to kill the fish and secure it in his skiff still he had no excitement which proves the vulnerability of his victory – it is vulnerable because he is with the sin of sincerity with which he can regard himself as his victim, thus sharing the strange affinity with the fish which he had caught. So later he calls the fish his “brother”.

Santiago is the code hero. Though he is old yet he does not offer an impression of an helpless creature instead he possesses courage, honesty, endurance and skill. The old man becomes the replica that the sea itself is. He is the vast reserve of human resource. His triumph is in survival and his struggle with the sharks may leave him striped of flesh but cannot destroy the skeleton spirit which is the essential identity of all individual. From this rises the philosophy of human struggle, which Hemingway make his protagonist say “But a man is not made for defeat,” he said “A man can be destroyed but not defeated.” Thus, the novel becomes the triumph of man over the forces of nature.

Like Melville, Hawthorn and Poe, Hemingway too presents his symbolism by constructing symmetry similar to naturalistic novelist. Therefore, Hemingway presents two world of realities – the world of external reality and the inside world of human sentiment. Hemingway’s two level of realities is presents in almost all of his novels like The Snow of Kilimanjaro and The Farewell to Arms, For Whom the Bell Toll etc. In The Old Man and the

Sea “Hemingway attempts to make a real old man, a real boy, a real sea, real fish and real sharks.” Santiago, the ocean, the marlin, the sharks, the lions all become the version of the voyage into the gulf stream of the self.

Like the Mark Twain of “Fennimore Cooper’s Literary Offenses,” Hemingway demands that romances obey the practical law of cause-and-effect behavior. The stripped plot of *The Old Man and the Sea* is almost as clean of clinging encumbrance as the marlin’s “great long white spine with a huge tail at the end” and Santiago had determinedly bends all his strength and accrued experience to the task of playing the fish well . This is what he was born to do; and in doing it he is not just doing, but realizing his being. His action takes on symbolic reverberations when Santiago humanizes and identifies with the great fish on the end of the line: “His choice (the Marlin’s) had been to stay in the deep water far out beyond all snares and traps and treacheries. My choice was to go there and find him beyond all people. Now we are joined together and have been since noon. And no one to help ether one of us”

The antagonists confront one another for a split second, and then the battle of skill and intelligence against brute strength continues. With the fish being harpooned, the winning part of the drama is concluded; for in the end the winner must take nothing.

This novella is probably Hemingway’s most evocative construction, tense and clean on the surface, but suggesting myriad layers of meaning jut out of reach in the murky levels fathoms beneath. “I tried to make a real old man, a real boy, a real sea and a real fish and real sharks. But if I made them good and true enough they would mean many things.” *The Old Man and the Sea* should be approached as an open-ended allegory whose ultimate meanings recede beyond reach. This does not rid us of the obligation to catch what we can, of course; but it reminds us that a real fable will change its shape as the needs and experience of its readers change.

Structurally, the novella follows the traditional pattern of the quest or the journey. Santiago has an unexplainable “call” or vocation to be a fisherman and to meet the marlin in the deep water. Santiago is not just a fisherman; he is *The Fisherman* – the one chosen from all the others because of his superior merits of skill and character. The great marlin will not come to a great fisherman; he will only be caught by a great Man. In Emersonian terms, Santiago is valuable because he is not a fisherman, but *Man-Fishing*; and Santiago’

soliloquies in the skiff, in which he sees his profession in organic relationship to the rest of life, bequeath to his ordeal something more than exceptional competence and stamina.

As he fights the fish – a solitary old man with a straw hat desolate on the great sea – he is not alone. A literal cord joins him to his “brother,” the fish. Other equally strong cords bind him to the “things” of nature – the Sun, the Moon, and the Stars; the sea life and the birds; his town, his neighbors, the boy, and his past. It is as “whole” man that he meets the fish and brings him back; and it must be as Man, not fisherman, that his experience be measured. The quest hero must be set apart from men and from their daily pursuits and receive his final rites of purification far out in the wilderness, beyond the glow of lights from Havana. He must be tortured with pain and hunger and thirst; he must be reduced to naked will and the capacity to reflect. And then, when he is thoroughly read, the last barrier is stripped off. He loses for a moment – a barely perceptible but determining moment – his precious sense of individuality. His will remains through the pure momentum of his determination.

“You are killing me, fish, the old man thought. But you have a right to. Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than you, brother. Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who.”

This is the final requisite for success in the quest. In this moment Santiago loses Santiago, merges into his struggle with the fish merges into the fish and the universal struggle of life, and becomes elemental Man and quest hero.

But this successful catch, this angling vision into the heart of mysteries, cannot be brought back whole to the community of men. Living within the blanketing hum of everyday reality with solid earth beneath their feet, men cannot see what they have no eyes for, nor can they understand what they have not been prepared to understand. For the tourists who mistake the marlin’s skeleton for that of a shark; there is no reason they should have known the difference, just as most men cannot discern the difference between the gleam in a maniac’s eye and that in a saint’s or a mystic’s. The kind of experience that Santiago undergoes is incommunicable, but it is not without value to the community of men. He has been a champion of mankind for men and not for himself. He has brought back from his isolation a fragmented gift offering to his fellows, an imperfect symbol to suggest where he has been and what he found there. The ripples of the great marlin’s dive will radiate in ever-

expanding circles, and each of the community of men will be the measure of what he can find there.

Santiago is neither saint nor martyr. He loses three hundred dollars worth of marlin, he suffers great pain and severe tribulation, but he is never shaken at his inner center by his deprivation. He is a man; he does what he is born to do; and, in doing it, he achieves being.

The pervasive equanimity that is such a marked characteristic of *The Old Man and the Sea* keeps it from breaking through into the realm of great tragic poetry that rests just one layer lower beyond the reach of Santiago's harpoon. The travail can be seen as a religious one, an introspective one, or an aesthetic one. The Christological pattern functions to reinforce by extended tonality; the archetypicality of Man's struggle for a dignified survival in a non-human universe. There is something of both Christ and Faust in Santiago, but the first has been tempered of his passion, and the second has suffered a loss in his pride; Santiago is a kind of serene and loving Ahab, and Melville's "Tahiti, full of peace and joy," is his true spiritual home where lions gambol like lambs on the yellow beach.

In Jungian terms, every quest and confrontation is a discovery of self; and Santiago can fish the interior depths of himself for his "brother" – self since he is "whole" now and without fear of his own dark places. "Fish... I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends" But if the marlin is a "secret sharer" in Santiago's interior consciousness, so must the other creatures in and above the sea also be.

There is more than one buried self in the undiscovered country of the mind. The marlin is killed "for pride" and because Santiago is a fisherman and this act makes him fully realized. The Mako shark with his eight rows of teeth is also an "other" self, but a hostile one. That Santiago can recognize his beauty and nobility and kill him with respect, as well as with enjoyment, is an indication of the man's developed wholeness.

Yet more remarkable than Santiago's killing of the fish, is his suffering. Etched on the reader's mind is the image of the old man as he settled against the wood of the bow – the big fish towing the cord tight across the old man's back – and took his suffering as it came telling himself, "Rest gently now against the wood and think of nothing". Suffering and gentle and wood blend magically into an image of Christ on the cross. Ignoring all the pain and tiredness the old man prepared to kill the fish. It was by the noon time of the day when no man's shadow is rendered soul-less which made the old man too soul-less when killing the fish, so he pushed his harpoon into the fish's heart. For a moment after the death of the fish, the

tension is released, but the pain continued and then the shark came with the smell of the fish's blood. The metaphor of blood has an in suitable association with Christ. The killings of fish are the killing of the Albatross in Coleridge's *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. The old man here is the Ancient Mariner who like Santiago had performed a sin. Here, Hemingway tries to do in prose what Coleridge has done in poetry. "Ay", he said aloud. There is no translation on for this word and perhaps it is just a noise such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hinds and into the wood." He fought the sharks through afternoon, into the sun-lit day and night, until he was almost dead; but the "pain of life" in his hands and shoulders told him otherwise. He fought until he was left without a weapon. Then he knew he was beaten and turned the skiff home. The sharks bit into what was left of the great fish, but the old man did not heed them. He was past everything now. Finally sailing into the little harbor, making the boat fast and stepping ashore, he shoulders the mast and started to climb. "It was then that he knew the depth of his tiredness," as he looked back at the heavy and the white skeleton of the great fish. He claimed again, bearing his mast like a heavy cross. Hemingway has presented an allegory by showing the old man's struggling against nature represents that every man is in his own cross. Here the victor and the victim are presented as the cross and the Christ. The two states are interrelated. The fish becomes the mankind of which Santiago is the savior.

Despite the suffering and seeming defeat of the old man, the final effect is that of a triumph which is invested not with violent ritualized quality of the bull fights of *Death in the Afternoon*, but with a warm autumnal glow. The old man beating off the sharks is like life rebelling against death. The old man and the great fish are lashed together and are steering on towards home, just as earlier they had been bound by the "pain of life," and thus have become the symbol of life; while the sharks now symbolize death which must be resisted even though it will vein. Even the old man's killing the fish is the preservation for sustenance and it is the way every creature live on. The old man in severe hunger ate the flesh of the fish, though he considered him to be his brother. But in such on extreme situation one sacrifice's one's brother only to secure one's own life. As Arsat said in the *Lagoon* "We are sons of the same mother – and I left him in the midst of enemies."

Yet that afternoon the old man was dreaming of the lions on the beaches of Africa establishes the desire for immortality and the fact the "man can be destroyed but not defeated." Santiago will now fulfill his dreams his dreams through the boy. Mandolin is the

young Santiago, who with the vitality of life will explore the sea accompanying the old man in his lonely voyage. Mandolin is the new mankind of which Santiago is the Christ and from now they will fish together for Mandolin “still have much to learn.”

The fathomless sea is the beauty of life. Man is the mariner sailing towards himself recognizing the worth of a destination as a departure. The sea is the inexhaustible reserve of spiritual sufficiency and the ‘Oceanic Impulse’ bears man back to his roots, as the depth of the sea is the womb from which one immerses as a being. Therefore the old man and the sea are into a mutual relationship. As Maurya in *Riders to the Sea* says, “They’re all gone now and there isn’t anything more the sea can do to me.” Now, she no longer needs to fear the sea, as she can now ‘see’ within. Therefore, every time the old man revisits the sea, its depth shall increase and each time he would explore into the deeper recess of the self.

A closer reading of *The Old Man and the Sea* makes a persuasive case for placing Hemingway firmly within the Transcendental Aesthetic tradition. In this reading Santiago is the artist who must go for out on the seas of his experience, plumb its depths with precise care and craft to capture the biggest fish in his artistic world (the artistic vision and the artistic shock), and bring what he can of it back to his readers as an offering of fellowship and as a stimulation to human excellence. One of the purest descriptions of the Transcendental Aesthetic is Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *The Artist of the Beautiful*. In that story the artist is a watchmaker who isolates himself from the community, sacrificing his health and years of youth to create something beautiful.

Santiago too like the watchmaker had caught “a far other” marlin than the skeleton that is the awed talk of the fishing harbor. The bright and perfect conception and the experience of reality that are the artist’s reward for his devotion and sacrifice are as far beyond the symbol that he gives to men as the shiny peak of Kilimanjaro is beyond the heat and disease of the plain.

## Works Cited:

- Sandamali K. P. S. Symbolism In Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man And The Sea. INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENTIFIC & TECHNOLOGY RESEARCH VOLUME 4, ISSUE 12, DECEMBER 2015. Print.
- Debata Pradeep Kumar. Theme of Heroism in Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea. Language in India. October 2013. Print.
- Pavla Buchtová. The interpretation of Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea. MASARYK UNIVERSITY IN BRNO FACULTY OF EDUCATION Department of English Language and Literature. [https://is.muni.cz/th/79881/pedf\\_m/DIplomova\\_prace.pdf](https://is.muni.cz/th/79881/pedf_m/DIplomova_prace.pdf).  
Web
- Class lectures. Professor Partho Mukherjee. St.Xaviers College.
- Michael Hollister. Analysis of The Old Man and the Sea <http://www.amerlit.com/novels/ANALYSIS%20Hemingway>. 2012. Web
- Lichtenstein Jesse, Hopson David, Flanagan Patrick. The Old Man and the Sea. Spark notes. Spark Publishing A Division of Spark Notes LLC 76 9th Avenue, 11th Floor New York, NY 10011. 2002 Print.
- Saeed Momtazi. Destroyed but not defeated: Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea : A psychotherapeutic story. <http://www.clas.ufl.edu/ipa/2003/hemingway%20T.O.and%20T.S.html> Web.
- Xie Yaochen. Hemingway's Language Style and Writing Techniques in The Old Man and the Sea. CCSE JOURNAL. Volume 1. Number 2. December 2008. Print.
- Yan Hediger. Hunting, fishing, and the cramp of ethics in Ernest Hemingway's THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA, GREEN HILLS OF AFRICA, AND UNDER KILIMANJARO. University of Colorado. Print.
- Robert Adon Fink. THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA; A DISTILLATION OF HEMINGWAY'S CARIBBEAN TETRALOGY. Texas Tech University. <https://ttu-ir.tdl.org/ttu-ir/bitstream/handle/2346/13706/31295000931104.pdf;sequence=1>.  
Web.
- Gregory P Fernando. Rasa Theory Applied to Hemingway's 'The Old Man and The Sea' and 'A Farewell To Arms'. 19 August 2003. St Clements' University. Print.
- The Old Man and the Sea (Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations ) Blooms Literary Criticism; New edition (July 1, 2008) Print.

Volume IV  
Issue IX  
September

**IJELLH**  
International Journal of English  
Language, Literature and Humanities

**ISSN** INTERNATIONAL  
STANDARD  
SERIAL  
NUMBER  
INTERNATIONAL CENTRE  
**2321-7065**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed & Refereed Journal

Dasgupta Sanjukta, THE NOVELS OF HUXLEY AND HEMINGWAY A STUDY IN TWO  
PLANES OF REALITY. Prestige Books, New Delhi, 1996. Print.