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### Elements of Naturalism in *The Old Man and The Sea*

#### **Abstract:**

Every decade has witnessed emergence of varied philosophies that elucidates ways to arrive at the meaning of life. Naturalists too have tried doing the same. The naturalist philosophy pioneered by Emile Zola is based on the proposition that life is an enduring struggle against nature. It further explains how nature influences man's existence, with a meticulous stress on the hostility of nature to man. Determinism is emphasized upon leaving no room for free will of an individual. The philosophy is detrimentally relevant on date too, considering the times now, that increasingly stands witness to the inhuman nature of the human beings. Man's inherent desire to remain the powerful and overpower the nature with his indomitable spirit continues. The naturalist philosophy, however, negates the free will of man and supports the inherent susceptibility of man to be the victim of heredity and circumstances. "The Old Man and The Sea" by Ernest Hemmingway demonstrates the endless struggle of man against the indomitable nature thereby substantiating the naturalist philosophy. The paper draws attention to the naturalist philosophy propounded in the aforementioned work authored by Ernest Hemmingway.

Keywords: Determinism, hereditary, environment, Naturalism, Philosophy.

## Introduction

Naturalism is a way of "imagining the world and the relation of the self to the world" (Howard 9). The individual engages in both an external struggle with the environment and an internal conflict with his/her self in relation to his/her natural and social surroundings. Each human being is determined by heredity and environment and "subject to the social and economic forces in the family, the class, and the milieu into which that person is born" (Abrams 153). Lars Ahnebrink, in June Howard's *Form and History in American Literary Naturalism*, concludes that the naturalist author "portrays life as it is" in accordance with determinism. The naturalist believes that a human being is "fundamentally an animal without free will" (Ahnebrink 36). Naturalistic themes, thus, include an opposition between "human will and 'hereditary and environmental determinisms that both shape human beings and frustrate their desires" (Howard 40). The French novelist Emile Zola was the pioneer in considering human beings to be determined by naturalistic forces beyond their control. According to Zola, determinism "governs the stones of the roadway and the brain of man" (Zola 17). Just as heredity is influential in the "intellectual and passionate manifestations" of human beings, so too are the surroundings and social conditions that he/she is a part of (Zola 19-20). Donald Pizer states that there is no single definition of naturalism but a "variable and changing complex set of assumptions about man and fiction" which comprises, what he calls, "a naturalistic tradition" (Pizer 11). Naturalism considers human beings to be determined by their heredity and environment. The individual is at the mercy of determining social and economic forces.

Naturalism, nevertheless, is found to be a variant of realism by many. The theories were established as more or less the same and hence contestations about the new terminology for a variant of the existing philosophy existed. The feature of naturalism was presumed to be

overlapping with that of realism. However, the debates surrounding the difference between naturalism and realism was ideally reciprocated by the theorists of respective philosophies by citing the distinguishing features. The realistic novels supposedly represent life as it really is with life like characters and very much possible events positing itself in opposition to romantic fiction that represent life more fantastically, adventurously, picturesquely or heroic in nature as against the actuality. Naturalism followed realism and it advocates more precise depiction of life than realism. In other words it is extended version of realism. Unlike realism, it is not the special selection of subject matter; it is a mode of fiction with a particular philosophical notion. The notion holds that a human being exists entirely in the order of nature. Naturalist philosophy presents human behavior as determined by two kinds of forces – internal forces like heredity and other compulsive instincts like hunger, passion, sensuality and the external forces of environment such as the social and economic forces in the family, the class, and the milieu. Naturalist novels appear to be pessimistic in vision as the ending of naturalistic novel is usually tragic despite the heroic efforts. The novels paint the losing struggle of the individual mind and will against gods, enemies and circumstances. The fundamental distinction is a realistic novel portrays the society while the naturalistic novel portrays the nature. The pessimism and deterministic ideas of naturalism pervaded the works of writers' viz., Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, Jack London, Henry Adams, Theodore Dreiser, and Hemingway etc.

Ernest Hemingway (1899-1961) was also one of the outstanding American writers with naturalistic tendency. He was known as what Gertrude Stein had called “a lost generation.” A few view his works as pessimistic in nature. The novels contain a modern world filled with sterility, inevitable failure and death, which is just the view of naturalism. His primary concern was an individual's “moment of truth,” and his fascination with the threat of physical emotional

or psychic death is reflected in his lifelong preoccupation with stories of war. American society had two major events – industrialization and World wars after which America as a nation declined economically. The radical change that the American society was witnessing then was captured by the writers who lived through the times. The novelists who thus made a shift in the thought moved to being realists or naturalists. Each novelist has his/her own new styles to capture the changing society in their novels and thus a huge transformation in the American literary canon was notably felt. The American literature got accelerated as American society increasingly became the victim of socio - economic problems. The society stood witness to the wide disparity between the poor and rich of the society. America was increasingly divided between the liberal and conservative groups. There was a shift in paradigm. The writing minds sought for philosophies to explain the ways of society they lived then. Naturalist philosophy made its way in the works of Native Americans during the same period. Naturalism is a theory in literature emphasizing scientific observation of life without idealism or avoidance of the ugly. American literature naturalists dismissed the validity of comforting moral truths. Attempts were made to achieve extreme objectivity and frankness, presenting characters of low social and economic classes who were dominated by their environment and heredity.

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man the Sea* is a naturalistic novel that examines the natural laws and social conditions that confront Santiago in his struggle to kill a huge marlin. It was his seventh work and an acclaimed novella that aided him in regaining the fame as a writer of substance. The novel was first published in America. The plot of the novella revolves around Santiago who was looked down upon for his failure at catching fish despite going to the sea everyday for eighty – four days.

### **The Old Man and the Sea**

The novella opens painting an old Cuban fisherman with low appetite in a pitiable state of mind. As the story unfolds, he is introduced as a fisherman who has not caught a single fish in 84 days. A young apprentice of his is introduced to the reader. He is the only sympathetic individual in the whole novella. Though he is by the old man to learn the art of fishing, he is found to be assisting the old man in his daily necessities too. Santiago, the old man and the young apprentice Manolin share a cordial relationship with each other, despite being disapproved by the boy's parents.

The old man regularly sleeps dreaming of the lions he used to see back in the day in Africa. He wakes before sunrise and does what fishermen do—get in his boat and head out to fish. The old man is ridiculed by the fellow fisher-folk for his failure at sea. The novella consists largely about the old man's struggle at the sea which lasts over three days. The struggle between the old man and the giant marlin is otherwise seen as a battle of strength and of will. The old man, though doesn't see an enemy in the giant marlin, doesn't give up on the combat with the whale. His determination to return to the shore only after a huge catch enables him to fight the giant marlin and sustain for three days. The old man straps the fish to the side of the boat and heads home. On the way, he is attacked by sharks, who slowly but surely eat away at the marlin while the old man, starving and exhausted, tries to beat them off with a harpoon, a club, and finally nothing but a simple knife. By the time he makes it back to shore, there is nothing left of the fish but a skeleton. The novel, however, doesn't end on a happy note. The readers are left disappointed seeing the old man's three days' struggle going in vain.

The old man returns to the shore with the skeleton, the only remains of the giant marlin. The old man goes to sleep and dreams of the same lions of his youth. The work concludes that man

struggles for survival but that he cannot conquer nature; the latter prevails in this struggle. However, he can fight for victory which belongs to culture.

Santiago's defeat at the hands of nature propounds the deterministic aspect of naturalism. Natural forces can neither be understood nor comprehended. Human beings can at the least react toward the exterior but will remain overwhelmed by the forces of nature. The third person narrative lends objectivity to the narrator. The distancing and indifferent attitude of the narrator also favors the novella falling categorically into the naturalist works. The food and the threat for the fisher folk is the vast sea. The vast sea is representative of hostile circumstances a man lives in. And the naturalist philosophy propounds a view that negotiates human beings as victims of heredity and circumstances. The natural forces are out of control. The central character Santiago is determined by the harsh conditions of poverty that drove him to the Sea. Frustrated and determined by the natural elements, Santiago is depicted in terms of mere higher order animals who fail to discover any consolation in traditional religion. The defining traits of naturalist works are the unwillingness to concede defeat; unmoved determination; pride of the self – capability; the characters are common place; characters human – like with inherent flaws and the tragic ending despite the heroic feat in adversity. Santiago who finds nothing in *The Old Man and The Sea* throughout the previous 84 days, is a common man with a self-denial on his own failure. Yet he never gives in to failure. He cruises further into the sea than he ever has before with expectations and lot of hope of getting a fish and in the end, finding the catch of his life which he hoped to redeem him from the lost pride. His determination to catch the fish and bring it ashore is a naturalist phenomenon. Santiago has a determination to go fishing after eighty-four days failed. Although an old man, he had reviving spirit in him:

*“He is a great fish and I must convince him, he thought. I must never let him learn his strength nor what he could do if he made his run. If I were him I would put in everything now and go until something broke (p. 23).*

*“I’ll kill him though,” he said. “In all his greatness and his glory.” Although it is unjust, he thought. But I will show him what a man can do and what a man endures. “I told the boy I was a strange old man,” he said. “Now is when I must prove it.” The thousand times that he had proved it meant nothing. Now he was proving it again. Each time was a new time and he never thought about the past when he was doing it (p. 24).*

For a period of three days and evening of struggle with the giant marlin, he stands defeated owing to the sharks who eat away the giant marlin. Santiago is presumably optimistic; his dreams of the lion and comparison with Joe DiMaggio suggest the same. Despite the suffering and the failed attempt to bring the giant marlin ashore, he remains hopeful and fancies on going for another expedition with the young apprentice. Santiago is a typical naturalist character for he is a poor, low class common man and at the same time rebuked by the fellow folk. There is a mixed attitude towards the protagonist i.e., of admiration, contempt and inquisitive about the eccentric personality he flaunts. The protagonist thus rightly hints at the naturalist character with susceptible traits. Determinism is basically the opposite of the notion of free will. For determinism, the idea that individual characters have a direct influence on the course of their lives is supplanted by a focus on nature or fate. Human beings are living in a natural environment like animals. They can react toward the exterior and interior forces but they are helpless before these forces (Lin Xianghua, 1989, p.528). One of the aspects of naturalism emphasizes the powerlessness of the human beings as a result of social forces, social factors, social pressures and tendencies (Farrell 9).

## Conclusion

The naturalist author leads the reader to believe that a character's fate has been pre-determined, usually by heredity and environmental factors, that the destiny of humanity is misery in life and oblivion in death and that he/she can do nothing about it. Hemingway is a “naturalist”, for he opposes the theory of “special creation”. He believes that it is the mechanism of the laws of Nature that ultimately proves victorious in every contest between Nature and its creation. No matter how much a man struggles, whatever tricks and methods he employs, the power of Nature is domineering. The novel *The Old Man and the Sea* is a representation of life as a struggle against unconquerable natural forces in which a kind of victory is possible.

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