



Symbolism in Ernst Hemingway's - *"The old Man And The Sea"*

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Abstract

Literature reflects the human lives and the society with its characteristics while gives the pleasure for the people. To tackle with different themes and subjects, writers use vivid styles, literary devices and language aspects. In American literature that has derived through its major eras such as Realism, Naturalism, Rationalism, and Romanticism, some authors tend to be used symbols to give an artistic beauty and a depth to their creations and for any other purposes such as criticizing society behind those symbols to avoid troubles and problems that may fall upon the writer. In this point of view, among the writers who belong to Romantic period, **Ernest Hemingway is signified for his mastery of using symbols.**

Ernest Hemingway's famous novel "The Old Man and the Sea" tells the story of Santiago ("the old man"), a poor fisherman who lives somewhere in the tropic sea near Havana. For 48 days he hadn't caught a fish and his apprentice, a boy called Manolin who sailed with him, changed to another boat so the old man is completely alone. One day he catches a very big fish and has a three day long struggle with it until he finally kills it. He ties it on the side of his boat but since the fish has lost much blood many sharks are attracted and attacked on it. In the end Santiago reaches the harbor after a fierce fight with nothing but the bones of his catch.

When talking about the nature in "The Old Man and the Sea" it is quite obvious to first of all have a look how the nature is presented in the novel. . The relation between the animals and Santiago is more like a friendship. We can see that e.g. on page 45 of the book where a little bird comes round to Santiago's skiff. A small bird came toward the skiff from the north. He was a warbler and flying very low over the water. The old man could see that he was very tired. The bird made the stern of the boat and rested there. Then he flew around the old man's head and rested on the line where he was more comfortable. 'How old are you?' the old man asked the bird. 'Is this your first trip?' The bird looked at him when he spoke.

It looks like the old man feels pity for the little bird. He talks to him like if he really could understand. This shows that the animals, especially the fish like we see later in the novel, are like fellow-sufferers to Santiago. In his “world” every element is somehow united in harmony or love almost. He feels for the bird like he feels for any other creature he “meets” during his time on the sea. He calls the flying fish “his principal friends on the ocean” (p. 22), and he’s sorry for the turtles that are killed by other fishermen from other boats. Here one clearly sees that the old man is not like most of the people who have no feelings for animals and think of them to be minor or less worthy than a human being. We get the impression that Santiago really is nothing more or less than one of the creatures in the sea. It can also be seen that every element (including Santiago) is combined in a unity. We can also say that the old man totally depends on the nature because it provides his livelihood. From this point of view nature can be called a **living donor**.

There’s of course not only this positive image of nature. It can be destructive and hostile as well. Certainly it’s not always a pleasure rowing on the ocean in search of fish. The nature that seems to be so peaceful at first sight is also sometimes like an enemy. When we just look at the first page of “The Old Man and the Sea” we see that nature brings misfortune. Santiago “[...] fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days [...] without taking a fish.” (p. 5)

It becomes clear that man, even though he’s a part of nature, is sometimes totally inferior to it. Because of his experience we can’t assume that Santiago is a bad fisherman; being “unlucky” (p. 5) just shows us that you can never rely on your skills when you’re in the nature. You never know what happens, and therefore Santiago’s destiny is closely connected to the “tempers“ of his environment. The cruelty that goes along with nature from time to time is shown when the old man’s outer appearance is described. His whole body shows signs of the destructiveness of nature. The sun assailed his skin, leaving “[...] brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer [...]“ on him. His “[...] deep-creased scars from handling heavy fish on the cords“ (p. 5) somehow witness the long struggle Santiago had with nature. Of course there are also the sharks that take away the old man’s catch in the end. It looks like nature takes away what it gives. The sharks too are a part of this unity; here they represent the destructive force of nature. **Destruction and creation are closely connected to each other and are both a part of this nature.**

It’s like everything has a fixed role to play in this “community”. Santiago’s role is to overwhelm the marlin; the marlin’s role is to escape the old man; the bird (p. 27) has to catch the fish to survive, but he has no chance because the “[...] flying fish are too big for him and they go too fast”. It’s the principle of hunting and being hunted. The smaller one is always inferior to the bigger one.

Another aspect of nature as it is described in “The old Man and the Sea“ is its **changelessness**. The boats go out to the sea, the sun rises (“[...] it rises always and sets and rises again without change of rhythm” [2]), the fishermen catch their fish, they row back to the land, the sun sets. It’s like a routine that is repeated endlessly. Changeless is also what describes Santiago’s life the best way: Fishing is probably the only thing he ever learned and the only thing

he has done his whole life long. It can be assumed that the old man starts fishing again as soon as he recovers from the strains on the sea. **And since the ocean is unchanged for centuries this changelessness is represented in the sea itself.**

Here we learn that he knows the sea very well. Even at night, in absolute darkness, he knows which animals surround him; feeling the morning coming certainly tells us that Santiago is really close with nature. As a result of that he is able to read the signs of nature. The birds e.g. give him a hint where exactly fish can be found (p. 30): “Now the old man looked up and saw that the bird was circling again. ‘He’s found fish,’ he said aloud”. The fish are actually a very good help.

A lot of analysts looked at “The Old Man and the Sea” in terms of **symbolism**. I think especially the **Christian symbolism** is evident. If you just take the scene where Santiago returns to the shack you come across many symbols related to Christ. Some Christian symbols can be found in the description of nature as well (I’ll come to that later). Since the topic of this research is the significance of nature I now try to point out some of the symbolic features of nature as it is presented in the novel. It is obvious to first of all have a look at the sea. It is the most important element in the novel. You just have to see that the title of the book is “The Old Man and the Sea” and not “The Old Man and the Fish” or anything like that. I think this is pretty interesting. Why did Hemingway choose that title for the novel? Since the story is all about a three-day long struggle with a marlin the title isn’t that evident. So then the sea must be a very important component in the novel. First of all we must say that the sea is the biggest “thing”(both in type and in area) that we have on earth. It takes up 71% of the earth’s surface. Because of that someone who is out on the sea easily gets a feeling of being lost or at least being much smaller than the mighty sea. It must be called a hostile element as the human being is a creature that is originally living on the land. The land is our “home” but the sea was always something frightening, unfathomable and mysterious. Consequently, the sea is in fiction often used as a symbol of life. A journey on the sea is like a symbolic journey through life. The participants experience life with all accompanying things just like Santiago on the sea. The ocean in “The Old Man and the Sea” certainly symbolizes **life itself and the role the individuals play in life.**

The boats on the sea represent the people in real life. There are two kinds of people: those who have an active part in life and those who are merely observers of it and are very passive. Some boats are silent and paddle in the sea within the area where they know to be safe. They don’t test their boundaries. Boats represent journey and often adventure or exploration as well. Those who don’t go out far can’t explore life thoroughly and gain less experience. Others like the old man again see their life as a challenge. They go far out and risk their life. There are no boundaries that can stop them; they go where they want to go and not where the ocean wants to take them. Santiago shows no fear. He isn’t like the other boats that stay within the surrounding they know best. We find this idea of challenge on page 13:

‘Keep warm old man,’ the boy said. ‘Remember we are in September.’ ‘The month when the great fish come,’ the old man said. ‘Anyone can be a fisherman in May.’

It is possible that the birds (p. 22) symbolize certain people, too. They could represent the weak and less experienced people who easily get lost on their journey through life. “Why did they make birds so delicate and fine as those sea swallows when the ocean can be so cruel?” (p.

23) Getting lost here means being “swallowed“ by the ocean; in real life it could also symbolize death or failure of a person. But certain people (e.g. children) with few experience can be “destroyed” more easily.

The stars can be interpreted as Santiago’s guides through life. “Once he stood up and urinated over the side of the skiff and looked at the stars and checked his course.” (pp. 38/39) In this scene two contradicting actions are brought together: Santiago is doing something physical (urinating) and spiritual at the same time. Looking at the stars and checking the course can symbolize taking a look at one’s life, especially when a sea journey is representing a life journey. The human being (its physical and spiritual nature) is here represented in the person of Santiago.

The sea is besides that considered as the mother of life. The ocean is the beginning of life on earth; life originates from the sea. The fishermen in their boats profit by it and supply the people ashore with the fish that is provided by the ocean. Therefore both the ship and the sea symbolize fertility. In Santiago’s “world” the sea is considered as a woman. **This opinion goes along with the idea that the sea is the mother of life.**

The symbol fish and the symbol water are both connected in life. Both symbols are related to Christianity. The following sentence which can be found on page 75 of the novel reminds me of baptism: “He lifted some sea water with his left hand and put it on his head.“ Washing his hands in water (page 47: “[...] he washed his hand in the ocean [...]“) can symbolize purification. The fish is even more connected with Christianity since it symbolizes Jesus Christ. We can read in the Bible that Jesus told Peter (the first apostle), a fisherman by trade, that he would become a “fisher of men” if he were to follow Christ. “San Pedro was a fisherman as he was the father of the great DiMaggio.“ (p. 90)

A very important part in the book is Santiago’s dream about the lions. Since that dream is mentioned so often it must have a relevant influence on the story, and this must be the reason why we can interpret it in so many different ways. **It is obvious that the lions can be seen as a symbol as well, mainly because a dream is always symbolic.** The dream gives us an idea of how Santiago sees his part in life. The first time the dream is mentioned on the pages 18/19. One day he falls asleep and dreams of Africa and lions on a beach that play “[...] like young cats in the dusk [...].“ This is pretty odd because normally you won’t expect to find any lions on a beach. Besides that they don’t behave like we would expect them to behave. They are more like cats than like predacious animals. Thus they could represent the violent forces of nature tamed, which is of course only an ideal but impossible in nature. **The lions could also be Santiago when he was a young man and in possession of more strength.** This is quite obvious because a lion symbolizes strength and courage. Since the lions in Santiago’s dream are found on the beach (a place where those creatures normally wouldn’t go) they probably represent the same sort of people like the boats that go “too far out” on the sea. **The people in life who are very passive and don’t test their boundaries are also represented by the tourists at the end of the novel.**

In summary it must be said that there are two possible ways to look at how nature is presented in “The old Man and the Sea”. On the first sight there’s the nature “as itself” the author

tells the story of an old fisherman catching a big marlin. Hemingway describes the relation between the main character and the fish. We get an impression of how Santiago's environment looks like and "learn" about the struggles a man experiences on the ocean. There he is told about the often destructive forces of nature as well as the "friendly" side of it. Santiago and the fish turn out to be quite equal, they have the same "aim" - both try to survive. Besides that we could see that Santiago is a very experienced fisherman; he for example is able to read the "signs of nature". On the other hand side nature can be seen as a symbol. If we interpret the novel in terms of symbolism we come to the conclusion that life is represented in the story and the part people play in it.

The character of Santiago hints at Hemingway's own view of life. It can be assumed that he preferred the way the old man lived his life. Hemingway himself was very adventurous. He was involved with bullfighting and deep-sea fishing and he also fought in the Spanish Civil War. His writings reflect those experiences. Through his novels the readers gain an understanding of Hemingway's life. Hemingway challenges the readers to take risks and, in other words, dare them to go out to sea and catch their own marlin.

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[1] Gurko, Leo. *Ernest Hemingway and the Pursuit of Heroism*. New York: 1968, p. 162

[2] *ibid.*, p. 160

[3] Benson, p. 17