

M.A. II
Source &
Different themes
in the Old Man & the Sea

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Special Introduction 99

The source of the story

The story of *The Old Man and the Sea* has been based on real experience of a fisherman who hooked a huge marlin. Hemingway published the incident in *Esquire* 5 (April, 1936) which describes the Gulf Stream (on the Blue Water).

"An old man, fishing alone in a skiff out of cabanas, hooked a great marlin that, on the heavy sash-cord handling pulled the skiff far out to sea. Two days later the old man was picked up by fishermen 60 miles to the head and the forward part of the marlin lashed alongside. What was left of the fish, less than half, weighed 800 pounds. The old man had stayed with him a day, a night, a day and another night while the fish swam and pulled the boat. When he had come up the old man had pulled the boat up on him and harpooned him. Lashed alongside, the sharks had hit him and the old man had fought them out alone in the Gulf Stream in a skiff, clubbing them, stabbing them, banging at them with an oar until he was exhausted and the sharks had eaten all they could hold. He was crying in the boat when the fisherman picked him up, half crazy from loss, and the sharks were circling round the boat."

Different themes in the novel

The novel has a number of themes. In fact, the story has allegorical significance. Various cities have fathomed the depth of the underlying meaning in the novel and have expressed different views. Clinton S. Burhans, Jr. throws light on the critical comments of Philip Young, Leo Gurko and Carlos Baker on the creatures who share with him a world of inescapable violence—though, in the main, each views these qualities from a different point of the literary compass. Young regards the novel as essentially classical in nature, Gurko sees it as reflecting Hemingway's romanticism; and to Baker, the novel is Christian in context and the old fisherman is suggestive of Christ." In fact, various interpretations offered are not at variance and accentuate one or the other shade of meaning.

According to Burhans, the novel reveals the theme of individualism and interdependence. The old man struggles hard with the big marlin, but in moments of his loneliness he thinks of the boy, the birds, the lions, etc. In his sequestered life and lonely voyage on the ocean, he has experienced kinship with the sea, the birds, the fishes and the memories of his youth. The theme of strong individualism and a sense of universality, and the love of all creatures has provided unity and coherence to the novel.

Another important theme of the novel is the human struggle against the forces of the world. Santiago's struggle on the ocean symbolizes his struggle with the world. "A man can be destroyed but not defeated" is the message of the novel. Then, Santiago's struggle also represents Hemingway's struggle with his material. Santiago's fight with the sharks can be seen as Hemingway's bold stand against the ruthless critics who tried to demolish him and destroy his reputation. The novel can also

be studied as a parable of youth and age. Besides this, the image of Christ is also seen in the character of Santiago's. There is the image of crucifixion Christ. The motifs of crucifixion are also present.

Blending of naturalism and symbolism

The novel blends naturalism with symbolism. Santiago's fight with Marlin, a real incident, has been the basis of the novel. Hemingway tries to make a real old man, a real way, a real sea and a real fish and real sharks. But if he made them good and true enough they would mean many things. Santiago's struggle with the fish is man's struggle with the natural forces which he vanquishes and defeats. It is also an artist's struggle with his work and art, and the destruction of the marlin by the sharks implies the critic's attack on the work of the art. The critics are unfavourable and adverse in their judgement. There is an allusion to the Christian symbolism also in his work. During his struggle with the marlin, his palms are bleeding and the cry of 'Ay' uttered by Santiago at the sight of the sharks recalls the imagery of a person into whose palms and wood the nails are being driven. While climbing his hut, he stumbles and brings to our memory the image of Christ ascending the Calvary mountain carrying his own wooden cross for crucifixion. The old man lies down exhausted with his arms spread out straight and the wounded palms upwards in his hut. He has been seen in the image of Christ. The sea, *aquamala*, the whore is the image of a woman from whose womb the marlin comes out.

As a narrative

The novel is a fine piece of narrative. It has been suggested by critics like Kenneth Graham that *The Old Man and the Sea* should not be studied only as a parable full of universal significance but as an exceptionally vivid re-creation of series of events which are given reality for us as we read by Hemingway's careful use of sensuous description. There are universal meanings that emerge from the story. But they must be seen to emerge, to come out of the experienced action of the plot, and not to be imposed by the author or solemnly extracted by the critic. It is in the very sense of emerging of significance slowly and even painfully struggling to be borne through events and facts, that the real value of the story lies.

The Old Man and the Sea is full of facts : surprising and precise facts that appeal to our sense of wonder and our instinctive love of practical knowledge. The power of the fiction depends on the skill with which these facts are used. They are not offered for their own sake : The book is hardly intended as a manual for us to study on how to catch marlin, or how to survive in an open boat. By appealing to our love of practical knowledge, Hemingway implicates our imagination in what is happening. That is, the facts are fundamentally a device, a technique of reassuring our sense of everyday values. They persuade us unconsciously to accept more readily everything that is less normal in the story : everything that Hemingway has invented, and made more dramatic than in everyday life. Therefore, the many facts about fishing and about the sea have a double function : they satisfy our sense of the real world, and they persuade us to