

Allegorical Interpretations In Hemingway's *The Old Man And The Sea*

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Abstract

The story of the old Cuban fisherman comprising of hardly 100 pages, a classic of American literature, has an abundance of meaning upholstered into it rather than a clear surface meaning. Hemingway's code hero, Santiago, has a crucial message to convey to the worldwide readers. It is clear that, on one level, even when a man is in the midst of defeats and insults, with strong determination he can win moral victory when he proceeds headstrong with courage and determination. On the other level, the novella offers an allegorical interpretation entirely personal to the author, Hemingway, "as an account of his own struggle, his determination and his own struggle and his literary vicissitudes" (Ramji Lal, 71) The assertion of moral and religious ideas, setting it apart as the best manifesto of parable, before readers, the hidden meaning of the novella is unlayered through the paper one by one. The 1952 parable of man against nature in a poignant novelette, *The Old Man and the Sea*, has innumerable allegorical interpretations and has employed Christian ideals and belief to its core.

Keywords: Cuban fisherman, Code hero, allegorical interpretation, Manifesto, Parable

An epic metaphor for life, a Greek tragedy, a Christian tragedy, the heroism of a simple man and his long evolution from the days of total darkness filled despair, *The Old Man and the Sea* remains as the clear cut representation of life as a constant struggle against unconquerable natural forces in which always victory wins, "The first and final thing you have to do this world", he once said, "is to last in it and not be smashed by it, and it is the same way with your work." (80) The strong determination of Santiago "no man was ever alone on the sea" and his isolation which revealed to him that it is better "to have someone to talk to instead of speaking only to himself and to the sea". (112) The popular term "allegory" employs representations of character in a plot to reveal an inner interpretation in addition to the surface meaning and stands as a literary device that uses "symbolic representation to tell a story" (Nelson, 223). Ernest Hemingway is known for his simple prose where he constantly used allegories in his works whether it is epic or any universal stories with limited number of words. Here, in *The Old Man and the Sea*, two parallel stories are moving on simultaneous level - one on the surface level and the other on the symbolic level. This is an excellent example of the Hemingway's use of representation on symbolic level. Many critics and theorists have discussed theoretical analysis on Hemingway's use of Christian symbols in their works. Some of the critics have interpreted *The Old Man and the Sea* as a "direct, symbolic retelling of Christ's Crucifixion and Resurrection", which clearly position the novella as an allegory. (Nelson, 225)

A parable in the true sense, the novella projects the ultimate reality of life and teaches a moral lesson. Santiago, the marlin and the sharks and Hemingway and his fiction and the critics have a close parallel and thus

in opinion of Mark Schorer, the novella is a parable in addition to being a moral fable:

It is an old man catching a fish, yes; but it is also a great artist in the act of mastering his subject, and more than that of actually writing about the struggle. Nothing is more important than his craft, and it is beloved; but because it must be struggled with and mastered, it is also a foe; enemy to all self-indulgence, to all looseness of feeling, all laxness of style, all soft pomposities. (108)

In all Hemingway's best works, the occupations and professions are taken over to have universal meanings and considering this short novella the craft of fishing is the crux. This natural parable shows a natural tragic pattern and also how an individual strives in midst of difficulties in life. Just like common man endures all the hurdles of life from beginning of one's life till its end, the old man also wages war against the Marlin and sharks day and night. Between one day and another, battle starts, grows and subsides throughout one's own life. In everyday life, many people experience different forms of both Marlin and sharks confronting them at different phases of life. Just like in one's ordinary life, so much difficulty is there while a little enjoyment value is present in our day to day life comparing to the poor unlucky old man.

There is two levels of symbolism and story in the novella and also parallel between Hemingway and Santiago is strongly evident. Hemingway is well known for his use of symbolism in novellas since the 1940s (second part of his career). The two levels of symbolism and as well as the story level has been carefully studied for the comprehensive understanding of its art. The novella is:

reasserting the set of values, the philosophy which permeates all of Hemingway's work, is built upon the

great abstractions – love and truth and honor and loyalty and pride and humility- and again speaks of the proper method of attaining and retaining these virtues, and of the spiritual satisfaction experienced by one who possess them.(Meyers,109)

The conflict in the story is between himself and a force which one cannot call as a natural force but it is more like what is an abstraction. The story thoroughly offers the moral that, what matters is their struggle which is fought in one's life and not the victory.

The next indispensable aspect of Hemingway's writing style is the incorporation of Christian symbolism. Throughout the story, Christian religious symbols are prevalent which are closely interwoven with the story which clearly has an allegorical intention on Hemingway's part. One can see that Santiago is a fisherman as well as a good teacher who teaches the young boy not only how to fish and also have to make a living. Santiago has taught the boy to leave with pride and humility which is necessary to lead a good life. During the trials with the marlin and the sharks, the old man's full energy is drained as his hands pain terribly, his back is lashed by the line; he gets an eye-piercing headache; and also he spits blood. He hooks the fish at noon and after third day; he kills it with a harpoon. Hemingway's comment has a close suggestion with the Biblical account of Christ crucifixion:

As he sees the second and third sharks attacking, the Old Man calls aloud, "Ay," and Hemingway comments: "There is no translation for this word and perhaps it is just a noise as a man might make involuntarily feeling the nail go through his hand and into the wood".(Ramjilal,109)

When he returns to his hut, he carries his mast on his shoulders and he rests many times as he climbs up the hill, and no one is in vicinity to help him. He lies on his bed once he reaches the bed "with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up". Christ's crucifixion is greatly tinged sharp with the incidents in the novella with different symbols. Santiago is Christ-like figure and his qualities are even further emphasized with the symbolic elements added to the plot as he "carries his mast cross-like up the hill to his shack and as he lies exhausted on his bed.(*The Old Man and The Sea*, 77)" His hands are wounded and he sleeps "face down with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up"(110). Old Man has been crucified by the forces of an arbitrary and violent universe which in turn shows the humility and love of Christ himself.

Fish has been illegitimate symbol for Christian religion since the beginning of it and also even before its commencement. The Christian symbolism is very

prevalent throughout the novella in the basic idea of the "fish". The sacrificer- sacrificed phenomenon within the formal Christianity and also among the Trinity can be formalized within the realms of meaning. The process is closely parallel with the Christian sacrifice of the Mass especially the Roman Catholic service where one can observe a juxtaposition of the priest man with Christ at the moment of transubstantiation.

Not only the widely used Christian symbolism is found but the careful execution of the numerology is employed in the novella as Hemingway has it done in three, seven and forty. In Old and New Testaments, these numbers are the key numbers. Thus, in Christian religion these numbers are highly relevant. The first reference comes at the outset itself when the story opens with the old man without any fish for forty four famine days and with the boy forty more. Just like Yona was in the stomach of a huge fish for three days, the old man's trial with the great fish lasted exactly three days and three nights. If the careful evaluation is done, the fish is landed on the seventh attempt; seven sharks are killed and the old man has to rest from the weight of the mast five times but Christ has only fell three times under the cross. There is a consistent equal importance on the number themselves in the novella.

The classification of the book as a Christina allegory rather than conveying the novella as a typical author's commentary on all the previous work maybe also taken into account as Hemingway's work operate both on the level of philosophy of manhood and also to the level of religion. Hemingway has dual aspects to examine ie. Man as a man. First, how he constructs man with a man and next how man is in relation with other things of this world. But Hemingway never interpolated into the realm of God or his thoughts voluntary or involuntary. The characters of Hemingway never reject God nor or accepts it. The characters may at times pray to God when they are in deep crisis but never depends on God's divine intervention nor readily accept it. A Hemingway hero asserts his own manhood and in the midst of obstacles he stands headstrong alone. Santiago has struggled three days with the sharks killing the possible number with "a broken knife and lost harpoon". The novella is a mirror to the real life situation of every man where he or she has to fight relentlessly solely without any external aid and assert their individuality in this world. Comparing the heroes of different Hemingway's works like in *Death in the Afternoon*, the protagonist is a cowardly bull fighter who praised to the Virgin Mary before the fight. Hemingway considers it as unmanliness to kneel before God. Manual in "The Undeafed", also Jake Barnes moves forward in their life despite a heap of troubles

laid before them. Santiago, Barnes and Manual are similar characters in these aspects.

Hemingway has formulated some rules for the attainment of manhood and for living. The rules are dominated through the work along with the ritual and sacrifice to a great extent. Just like in "The Undefeated" and *The Sun Also Rises*. The preparations of Santiago's great struggle are:

Before it was really light he had his baits out and was drifting with the current. One bait was down forty fathoms. The second was at seventy- five and the third and fourth were down in the blue water at one hundred and one hundred and twenty-five fathoms. Each bait hung head down with the shank of the hook inside the bait fish, tied and sewed solid and all the projecting part of the hook, the curve and the point, was covered with fresh sardines. (*The Old Man and the Sea*, 25)

The adamant determination of the old man is reflected in these lines as Hemingway where the old man hooks the fish and secures the lines and also how patiently he waits for the fish to swallow the bait and he "with three times" later setting the hook, then placing the lines across his back and shoulders. He did this so that the line will not break and to give in when the fish lunges. The detailed description of the bull-fight and how the fish is killed is also given in Hemingway style. Clearly, there are three levels of studying this novella. Hemingway was not a believer of Christ at the time of writing the novella nor was he at the time of *The Sun Also Rises*. But the novella stands as a Christian allegory and also one can say it is based on Christian symbolism. 'I am not religious,' he said. :

But I will say ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Mary's that I should catch this fish, and I promise to make a pilgrimage to the Virgin de Cobre if I catch him. That is a promise. He commenced to say his prayers his prayers mechanically. Sometimes he would be so tired that he could not remember the prayer and then he would say them fast so that they would come automatically. Hail Marys are easier to say than Our Fathers, he thought. Hail Mary full of Grace the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for the death of this fish. Wonderful though he is. With his prayers said, and feeling much better, but suffering exactly as much, perhaps a little more, he leaned against the wood of the bow and began, mechanically, to work the

fingers of his left hand. (*The Old Man and the Sea*, 62)

Hemingway was a great seer who had a lucid philosophy of life or an ethic which can be addressed as a religion of man. But Hemingway was not at all religious as already discussed. He was not an Orthodox religious person but nevertheless a mild religious adherent. In all his works, he celebrates the religion of man and in *The Old man and the sea*, he celebrates it even more than any other of his previous works. It is a book which elevates the philosophy to a religion by the use of allegory. It is also the book which enables the readers' new viewpoint of religion. In his works, he have never criticized the religious priests but had a deep respect for them.

The inspiration of the story was first printed in the course of an article on deep sea fishing written for a periodical in 1936. For many years, Hemingway had this thought in his mind and churned it thoroughly to convert it into a good mould of a story. After the completion of the story, he added new colors and dimension to the story and it was merged well with all the symbolic devices even though he was working with his previous novel, *Across the River and into the Trees*.

Christianity offers every work in terms of good/evil dichotomy as in Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*. There was this Worldly Wise man on the good side and also Mistrust and Timorous on the bad side. *The Old Man and the Sea* is a parable on the theme of fighting the good fight and that's why when it was published it was an immediate success and also hailed as a masterpiece. The story on the literal level is a simple narrative which deals with how an old man single handedly fights with a huge fish for three days and nights in the Gulfstream North of Havana. Clearly does more than it is more than that because it is a Dantesque allegorical story. The peak achievement of this career can be interpreted allegorically and the literal along with the symbolic meanings to operate continuously and consistently.

Taking a close look at Hemingway's previous novel as a fragment of symbolism is seen in *A Farewell to Arms* where rain represents disaster. Also the physical mutilation of Jake Barnes and Harry Morgan symbolise the emotional and economic crippling of these two types of hero. Also the heroines of the novel Catherine and Maria represent home and peace in the midst of foreign wars. In *Across the River and into the trees*, when Renata dreams about Colonel's split hand in the hand of Christ, the amount of symbolism is made clear. The technical failure of previous novel *Across the River and into the trees* is a ready proof of how Hemingway can be paralleled to the defeated old man.

His hope, faith, and the charity of heart which binds him to his brother, the fish, Santiago is endowed with Christian values. Santiago believes it is a sin to have done such a thing to the marlin. Hemingway carefully examines the vices and also power also the particular heroic traits of humanity though guided by only compassion and respect. Hence a different shade to the parable. Santiago's moral victory is bestowed with Christian virtues throughout the novella and he loved the fish like his own brother (*The Old Man and the Sea*, 95). Santiago is filled with simple faith, hope and charity of heart.

With courage and resolution, Santiago always wins moral victory even though he is a thoroughly defeated by every force of nature. Even though Santiago is shattered physically considering the fatigue old man can endure during the battle of three days, he is not defeated in spirit as he reaches the shore with the skill of fish as a symbol of victory which transforms the initial thought of "permanent defeat" (*The Old Man and the Sea*, 8).

Conclusion

A double allegory, in the topic of symbolism, the novella has been a continuous classic and the impact that Hemingway himself has created meticulously with deep symbolism along with meanings. The book becomes a double allegory where the man struggle with the life and the artist's struggle with his art. *The Old Man and the Sea* is a simple prose which has a touch of the Holy Bible in it and it is abundant with the Christian undertones. One can observe it in Santiago's Franciscan communion with the fish and the birds of the Gulf stream and the close parallel between Santiago's journey and *Ulysses* and *Inferno*. Ulysses' journey ends in shipwreck, a total disaster and it is usually interpreted that the wreck is symbolizing a disaster of a quest for scientific knowledge uninhibited by humane and religious feeling. Santiago also sails for far away in the sea and ends in disaster. The outset offers the novella as a story about the sea, fishermen and fish as Santiago introduces himself with the moral truth and declares, "But man is not made for defeat, a man can be destroyed but not defeated" when he fights against the sharks.

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