



## Man vs. Wild: Reification of an Epic Struggle in *The Old Man and the Sea*.

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**ABSTRACT:** This research paper seeks to establish the battle fought between nature and man in Hemingway's novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. The prize fish of the old man and the man himself are present in the work as agencies of nature and human beings respectively. This study seeks to develop how nature just does not endure but fights back. And the ultimate loss of the much desired hunt by the assault of the school of sharks indeed vivify the battle that goes on between these two phenomena upon earth.

**KEYWORDS:** Man, Nature, Struggle, Existence, Eco-criticism.

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The year 1952 witnessed the publication of one of the most powerful works, ever written in the whole gamut of English literature, *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway. This is a parable of inner strength and courage about a Cuban fisherman's strife to bring home a great marlin that he has caught in the sea. Hemingway's presentation of the struggle of these two dissimilar enemies is no doubt great, thrilling and breathtaking. In this paper, attempts will be made to re-vivify this struggle between these two, one the hunter and the other the hunted, thereby suggesting how nature fights back. Here the battle between the old man and the marlin fish will be given much attention, more so on a physical plane.

As the story goes the readers are made acquainted with the hero of the novella, the old man, Santiago. He is what people call him a 'Salao', the worst from of unlucky. His young company Manolin only shows his faith in the old man's ability. Others merely sympathise him. But things take a different turn when after a consecutive failure of eighty four days, the old man has his luckiest day. The luckiest day of the *salao* brings him in confrontation with the great marlin fish only to turn the day bitter at last. The way he passes his time on the sea talking almost to himself at times, commenting on the sea-atmosphere, sympathising with the little sea birds, and ultimately 'enjoying' his great prey, the marlin fish are all that gives the novella all its beauty and charm. And the further robustness of the story lies inside the physical struggle that Santiago engages in with the wild animal.

This paper seeks to present the marlin fish as the wildness of nature incarnate and thereby posing the old man as a human agent indulging in a mortal fight with it. The novella centres on the pathetic struggle of the companionless old man with the equally pathetic and probably lonesome marlin fish. What this paper seeks to emphasize here is the struggle of the fish itself to stand as long as possible, undefeated. Such is the courage of the fish that the old man himself says: "I'll stay with you until I am dead" [pg.43]. The fish does not easily submit and tries its best to resist its hunter. It is as if nature itself is resisting the human actions in the guise of the marlin. This is indeed a battle between man and nature, a fight between man and the wild.

Everything that exists and operates without human intervention represents nature and wildness is one of its qualities. In this sense the wild marlin fish can be considered as a wild natural phenomenon. And *The Old Man and the Sea* presents the struggle of man and the wild. As the story goes, after a tremendous duel with the fish the old man 'wins a victory' against it. The way the fish resists his force arouses in the old man kindness and respect. The old man once says: "I love you and respect you very much" [pg.45]. He is also aware of the nobleness of the wild animal. This he accepts when he says: "...although they are more noble and more able" [pg.53]. But the greater strength of the fish stumbles before its hunter because 'they are not as intelligent as' they (the people) 'who kill them' (the fishes).

The old man wins against the wild nature temporarily. He says, "I am a tired old man. But I have killed this fish which is my brother ..." [pg.81]. This illusive notion of victory is broken at the next moment when

nature fights back. And in this final fight with the wildness in the form of sharks, the old man loses tragically and returns from the sea. The final failure of the marlin fish is itself like a conquest of the natural territory by man. But Hemingway's vision of life takes a tragic twist when sharks come only to tear apart the dead body of the marlin which was tied with the old man's vessel.

The accomplishment of the long battle with the marlin had put the old man in awe. He could not believe that he has killed the fish and has fastened it to his skiff: "the old man looked at the fish constantly to make sure it was true." Almost an hour before this, the first shark hit the fish. When the old man saw the fish for the first time he knew that it was the biggest fish he had ever seen or caught. We see the old man going through a mental as well as a moral conflict for engaging in battle with such a great creature of nature. It is as if he waged a war against a wildly pathetic animal and thereby evoking a sense of wrongdoing or rather sin in his heart. The readers can see how at times the old man blames himself for trying to reach out so far in the ocean. The old man is troubled in heart when he thinks it is not merely for livelihood that he had to kill the fish but to further satisfy the ego of the fisherman self within. This arouses in him a sense of guilt but at the very next moment the old man thinks that it is indeed a fisherman's duty to fish. And he is a born fisherman just as the fish is a born fish.

With the final submission of the marlin fish the battle does not come to an end. Rather it furthers the trouble of the old man in a more exhausting way. The blood of the marlin fish left traces in the blue ocean inviting the deadly sharks to follow the skiff. This seems to be another battle between the old man and the pack of wild sharks. It appears that the wildness of the sea does not wish to allow the old man to relish his hard-earned victory. The sharks come in numbers and tear the flesh of the marlin. The old man is denied a win against the wild nature. And his ultimate defeat against the wild is apparent when he pathetically says, "they beat me, Manolin" [pg.107]

This paper seeks to magnify the daring battle fought on the part of the wild fish without any intention to belittle the equally great courage and philosophy shown and propagated by the old man. This may be true that Hemingway wanted to show the indomitable forte of human being but the uncompromising nature of the wildness must not pass unnoticed. The intention behind this article is to point to that ravishing quality of the wild. Man can be destroyed not defeated and the wildness of nature does not submit either. It fights back.

Then again, when peeped through the lens of eco-criticism, the novel emerges with different layers of understanding. Any mind aware of the poetics of eco-criticism, may find this small piece of great artistry, simply superb. Eco-criticism mainly teaches us to deal with texts with necessary values added to ecological factors thereby admitting how nature is treated in a piece of writing and people's behaviour towards nature. M.H Abrams says that eco-criticism designates the critical writings which explore the relations between literature and the biological and physical environment including an awareness of the devastation being done on that environment by human activities. If one studies the poems of Wordsworth, one will find how the poet has treated nature with love and gratefulness, for he believed nature never betrays the heart that loves her. But what is the attitude of Hemmingway's hero in this short novel towards nature? There is no doubt about the fact that we will not find any wordsworthlike compassion towards nature here. Here the theme itself is not calm and serene rather the robustness of attitude and behaviour is all that vie with nature in the form of its flora or fauna.

As already noted, the primary concern and centre of the novel is the havoc battle between the old man and the fish/sea (?). The sea represents the flora and the sea-beast i.e., fish, the fauna. Hence it is a battle undertaken from these two aspects of nature and wildness of nature as the title already suggested. The novel is not about taming and hunting the fish only but also forcing the sea itself to submit to Santiago's will. If studied seriously, the myth of human struggles against various odds of nature will appear a recent and new phenomenon. Rather, as Darwin suggested, that any living beings must compete with the other to continue living with its existence. And with human existence, this is no exception. Since the beginning of time, man has had different kinds of enemies to fight battles on. And people living as farmers or fishermen have to face a direct duel with nature because they are the solely dependent on the resources of nature whereas other people who live outside those identities can buy their hard-labour born fruit at an auctioned price in today's life of capitalism. In this present novel we find the old man being challenged by his recent bad-luck or we may get to the extent of saying that his old age has left him invalid in stamina. No matter what happened with him before, the easiest guess can suggest that he must have been a fisherman of high calibre and hence his recent failure in the art which he must have mastered o very well, will put him in contrast with his former self. And Hemmingway has chosen a great way of putting so many struggles (the old man and the sea/fish, man and nature, man with his former identity, man with his community etc.) in the wrapper of a more serious battle of contemporary concern.

This study will now try o understand the relationship between man and nature in the novella. The old man's journeying in the seas not only connotes his experience of hunting but also the intimacies he shares with other creations in nature. He sympathizes with all of them at various levels. As the novel depicts we find him being accompanied by the small sea-birds in the all aloofness of the deserted sea. He even seems to appear as

talking to them and often missing their presence when they are not around him. Then comes the crucial point, which may baffle any Hemmingway reader, the point at which the hunter begins to feel himself empathetic towards the hunted. Yes, Santiago's musing on the ability of the fish to withstand the trouble that he was causing him and vice-versa evokes a sense of non-sense on the part of the old man to the reader for such foolish blabbering. He is a fisherman, and he should not be friends with fishes. Otherwise how is he going to survive? And this question of survival puts the cause of the fisherman in a justifiable base.

In the popular sense of our recently developed awareness and caring attitude towards the about-to-extinct animals may remind one, of the wise saying by the English literary master Shakespeare, 'to love that well which thou must leave ere long.' So how will one react to this American fiction telling the story of a man who seems to be canonized for his robust struggle and metareal victory so far as the realms of literature are hinted? Should we really applaud him for his great catch, or we reprove him for his condemnable act done against the sea ecosystem and widely speaking our environment? When disusing such ethical issues the readers may find it difficult to consider all these questions and even doubt the necessity of all this. And there will be chances in the honest doubts of the readers to take it granted that nature is given less value and the hunting outshines or more accurately say outweighs the struggle for existence of the marlin fish. Because there is something grounded in our psyche since inception, and George Orwell put that so nicely as saying that "all animals are equal and some animals are more equal than others." And the truism of human beings to always remain at the top of all creations releases him from all moral responsibilities and care towards the other fellow living animals.

But Hemmingway is a master in story-telling. His ideas and weaving of them are not easy enough to let anyone question his ethics of writing and attitude. And this is proved as one reads and more importantly meditates on the ending of the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. The epic battle as already shown above leaves the old man bamboozled at length, for he cannot save his catch from the other predators that came in school. Here the reader finds a condition where it seems that man and nature vie with each other to establish their own supremacy. The sharks that came to tear the marlin fish's body apart work like the agents of nature unleashed, as if to teach the old man a lesson. The old man faces a successful failure in preying the fish. And from this bold turn in the story, the writer's nature consciousness can be smelled and penetrated. He is writing a story for an old man, charts his failure, brings up his lucky day and then dooms him in failure again. And within this texture, though of a very small size it may appear, there are unsaid things which better hit our psyche when hinted, not described. Hemmingway's most celebrated theory of writing that a considerable part of it lay invisible like an ice-berg under the ocean can justify our digging deeper themes in this novella. There is no denying the fact that there are issues of environment and man intervention into that environment inside the story. Even one can situate places in the story where the protagonist is flabbergasted having killed the great marlin. The sublime nature of the sea as well as that of the fish is peeped through Santiago's eye. His respect for the wild animal and his compassion for the other creatures he sees over the sea points to his reverence for nature. But as one must engage in struggle to live on, the old man has no way out but to fight no matter what his subject of fighting is.

To conclude this study of man and nature, one cannot help but remind the reader that man and nature must coexist even at the expense of some part of each other. It is as if the world is created in such a way that man must confront nature at every step. And what man itself is other than being part of the nature? Hemmingway's story covers this type of nature where, the man, the fish and the sea, all emerge into a single-whole. When the fish is overtaken by the man, the man himself in his part is overtaken by his failure and compunction. But is it a defeat that the fish initially and the old man later on face? Are they both defeated in their own turn? Now speaking physically, the answer must be a big NO. They are never defeated but that they are destroyed. That is why the novelist whimpers out that man cannot be defeated but destroyed. And in this writing, it will be no transgression in saying that nature, even in its wildest form, also cannot be defeated but only destroyed. And to support this argument one can point his finger towards the scene where the carcass of the fish is torn asunder and brought into a mere skeleton. The old man also leaves the sea with destruction at his back maybe to dream only of the lion-cubs and his destroyed youthful life. Hence the reader must taste such kind of literary pieces to find the pleasure of seeing Bear Grylls between the lines of a well formed story.

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- [7]. (Part of the title is inspired from a popular television series 'Man vs. Wild' shown in the Discovery Channel, cast by Bear Grylls.)