

Nature in the old man  
and the sea: from  
transcendentalism to  
hemingway's  
modernis...



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Thoreau writes that “ This curious world we inhabit...is more wonderful than convenient; more beautiful than useful; it is more to be admired and enjoyed than used.” This seems to be a philosophy that Hemingway’s character, Santiago, would adopt. Throughout the novella, “ The Old Man and the Sea”, Santiago is constantly on the same existential plane as nature. He views the sea and nature itself as an equal and arguably as a superior. Whether the origin is out of senility, out of loneliness, or out of genuine brotherhood with nature, Santiago treats nature (more specifically, the sea and the wildlife that it shelters) as an actual entity in which he harbors genuine love for.

Hemingway himself was often intimate with nature; it is no secret that nature has had enormous influence on his prose. Important to note is that, “...of all the Hemingway protagonists, Santiago is closest to nature—feels himself a part of nature; he even believes he has hands and feet and a heart like the big turtles’.” (Hovey). There is a sense of unity amongst Santiago and the natural world. Crucial to the understanding of Santiago is Hovey’s saying that he “ feels himself a part of nature”. There are several nods to this unity in the text itself in which Santiago’s behavioral patterns are paralleled with nature’s. The book reads regarding Santiago before his voyage, “ His hope and his confidence had never gone. But now they were freshening as when the breeze rises.” (Hemingway 13). Hemingway shows the correlation between the breeze and Santiago’s refreshed confidence because of it. The related connotations between “ freshening” and “ the breeze” are likely not accidental either. The implication here is that the weather has a direct impact on Santiago’s mood. The refreshing breeze rolls in, thus Santiago’s attitude is refreshed. The reader may see another

example of this relationship in yet another quote in which the old man is sleeping the night before he plans to go far out into the ocean: "...the old man was asleep in the chair and the sun was down." (Hemingway 18). A more subtle example, it is still difficult to ignore that Santiago's sleeping patterns mirror the cycle of the sun; the same sun which gave Santiago earlier in his life, "[the] skin cancer [that] the sun [brought] from its reflection on the tropic sea [unto] his cheeks." (Hemingway 10). The sun has left a physical imprint on Santiago's body. That, however, is not the only physical relationship between him and nature. The book reads, "...[his eyes] were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated." (Hemingway 10). Santiago also walks around barefoot and urinates outside. Even his house is constantly open to the elements, as he leaves all of the openings ajar. When Manolin talks to Santiago, he says, "...you went turtle-ing for years off the Mosquito Coast and your eyes are good." (Hemingway 14). When all of the other fishermen that went turtle-ing had poor eyesight, the sun spared Santiago's for no reason that is apparent to the reader. Yet another example of the synchronicity between Santiago and nature is seen regarding, once again, the old man's sleeping patterns: "Usually when he smelled the land breeze he woke up and dressed to go and wake the boy." (Hemingway 25). There is a plethora of examples that show Santiago and nature being unified or, at the very least, connected behaviorally and physically.

This gives us some insight too as to why Santiago is such a skilled fisherman. Manolin says, "There are many good fishermen and some great ones. But there is only you." (Hemingway 23). The reader may be asking himself why

is there only Santiago? What separates him from any other fisherman? It is subconsciously implied that no other fisherman could have handled the marlin; so why Santiago? Besides his experience (which several of the other “old fishermen” share), there is no real defining feature that he owns that separates him from anyone else except for the fact that he has a deep affinity with nature. Beegel takes it a step further in saying, “Given the nature of the sea in Hemingway’s novella, this is not a “safe” romance at all but a story about the tragic love of mortal man for capricious goddess.” He suggests even that there is romance between Santiago and the sea. Hediger further enforces this claim in saying, “With such cognizance, Hemingway treats animals neither as pawns in a human competition, nor as beings so entirely foreign that he believes himself outside of the natural economy in which life depends upon other forms of life.” Despite the extent of the relationship, it cannot be denied that there is, in fact, a relationship; and this relationship appears to be the only thing which allows Santiago to reach legendary status as a fisherman.

Even before the reader gets into the real meat of Santiago’s journey with the marlin, the relationship is clear. However, once one does get further along in the novella, it is enforced almost to excessiveness. The duration of his trip with the marlin was almost a sort of communion between him and the other animals of the sea. Santiago is constantly referring to fish as his brothers: “They [dolphins] play and make jokes and love one another. They are our brothers like the flying fish.” (Hemingway 48). He also says that, “He was very fond of flying fish as they were his principal friends on the ocean. He was sorry for the birds...” (Hemingway 29). Regarding these seabirds,

Santiago extends a helping hand: “‘ Stay at my house if you like, bird,’ he said. ‘ I am sorry I cannot hoist the sail and take you in with the small breeze that is rising. But I am with a friend.’” (Hemingway 55). About his “ friend”, the marlin, Santiago has much to say: “ Now we are joined together and have been since noon. And no one to help either of us.” (Hemingway 50) and that “ I wish I could feed the fish, he thought. He is my brother.” (Hemingway 59).

Santiago throughout his journey refers to the marlin as his brother and asks how he is feeling. And for this fish that he is slowly killing, he feels vast sympathy and even shame. The ocean or, perhaps more appropriate: la mar (“ He always thought of the sea as la mar which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her.”), seems to be his true “ home” (Hemingway 29). The floorless shack he lives in with the ajar openings is merely a rally point; a place to rest until he can go back out to the ocean. In his little town, the old man is mostly sad: people pity him, he is (in a general sense) incapable, he is alone but for Manolin, and he is poor. Santiago has spent all of his life in the ocean. It is crucial to note that Santiago spent nearly four days out at sea with nothing for nourishment except what he had eaten the morning of his voyage and a single bottle of water. It can be difficult to truly realize the scope of what an expert Santiago was at sea since the readers only hear remarkably meek complaints; thus, this fact seems to get set to the wayside. But put it into perspective: this old man who is pitied goes out to sea for almost four days, with the majority of the trip spent wrestling with an absolutely massive marlin. He had a bottle of water for nourishment, and, by means of the ocean, he resourcefully and skillfully managed to get

enough food to sustain himself. To emphasize once more: all of this was done by the old man while struggling with a marlin whose size met legendary standards. This, among other things, shows the immense skill Santiago has for his trade (he says he was simply doing, “ That which [he] was born for [to be a fisherman].”); however, it goes beyond that (Hemingway 40). Santiago’s journey, and more importantly his utter complacency in it, shows his supernatural connection with nature, for if anyone else had been in his place, they surely would have failed.

Santiago shows love for many of the sea animals: the birds, the flying fish, the dolphins, the turtles. But the animal, that is the one he felt the deepest connection with, was the marlin. He is non-stop talking to the marlin: whether he is apologizing to it, telling it that it his brother, or merely conversing with it for conversation’s sake. The death of the marlin, however, is when the raw intimacy between the two comes out. Hemingways writes during Santiago and the marlin’s final bout that, “ There are three things that are brothers: the fish and my two hands.” (64). This is near the end of the marlin’s life, and, when speculating what will become of the fish’s life, Santiago calculates how much the fish will be worth. Following this he says, “ But are they worthy to eat him? No, of course not. There is no one worthy of eating him...” (Hemingway 75). Santiago bestows upon the marlin a sort of honor; and since this fish is his ultimate catch, his final masterpiece, the honor given to the marlin could be a scapegoat for Santiago’s “ pride long gone” (Hemingway 93).

Their relationship is by all means a close one, but upon the climax of their struggle, the reader sees something that almost transcends a two-way

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relationship and becomes a sort of unity. Santiago says, “ But you have a right to [kill me]...brother. Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who.” (Hemingway 92). This interchangeability and complete indifference to something as significant as death shows an immense sense of unity. To Santiago, it does not matter who kills who since they are one in the same. Continued on the same page, Santiago talks about “...how to suffer like a man. Or a fish, he thought.” (Hemingway 92). On a much more subtle scale, Santiago still shows the interchangeability and synchronicity between him and the fish. He does this by putting the act of suffering as equal between a man and a fish, more specifically himself and the marlin. In this short, seemingly insignificant, sentence (or rather sentence fragment), Santiago shows that their suffering is equal. To suffer like a man or to suffer like a fish are the same for him. Not only does this show his unity with the fish, it shows Santiago as being almost more a part of the animalistic nature rather than the humanistic nature. To further concrete this unity, Hemingway writes about the fish after it had been attacked by sharks: “ He did not like to look at the fish anymore since he had been mutilated. When the fish had been hit it was as though he himself were hit.” (103). Santiago felt the blow in his honor vicariously through the fish’s suffering and mutilation, which was in turn parallel to his own. Though he himself was not physically altered by the sharks, it did not matter. In the same sense that it did not matter who killed who, it did not matter who was mutilated. Once the marlin was completely stripped of everything, Santiago says, “...you’ve killed a man.” (Hemingway 119). “ Fish” and “ man” are interchangeable in this. Santiago himself did not receive a single bite from the sharks; however, he stills says “ you’ve killed a man.” A final note is this: though Santiago did not die in a physical

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sense, he returned to his town days later with several physical ailments. His hands were sliced with fish wire, he was dehydrated, his back was in severe pain, and he was coughing up something that he described as tasting like pennies. The fish, who he was physically and spiritually connected to, died; the final passage of the text describes Santiago dreaming his recurring, paradisiacal, and clearly symbolic dream, that emerges only upon Santiago nearing old age, of the heaven-like and youthful lions playing on the beach.

To Santiago, nature is not a concept; it is an entity. One that is, if not equal and if not superior, one in the same with him. Their behaviors are in sync, their social actions are existentially equal, and Santiago considers himself a part of nature, as opposed to an outsider that believes that he, more or less, exercises control over it. This synchronicity and admiration for nature that is embedded in *The Old Man and the Sea* is reflective of Hemingway's contact with nature and transcendental influences. Hemingway, like Thoreau and Emerson and several others, believed that nature was something more than just that; it was something to spend time with, to love, and to treat as a part of yourself. They looked at nature as something that transcends the physical world into the mental and the spiritual.

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