

10-1-2018

Human values in Ernest Hemingway novel The old man and the sea

nuh abraham alghazw

Assistant Professor, Al-Hof University, Saudi Arabia

Follow this and additional works at: <https://jfa.cu.edu.eg/journal>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

alghazw, nuh abraham (2018) "Human values in Ernest Hemingway novel The old man and the sea," *Journal of the Faculty of Arts (JFA)*: Vol. 78: Iss. 4, Article 3.

DOI: 10.21608/jarts.2018.83531

Available at: <https://jfa.cu.edu.eg/journal/vol78/iss4/3>

This Book Review is brought to you for free and open access by Journal of the Faculty of Arts (JFA). It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the Faculty of Arts (JFA) by an authorized editor of Journal of the Faculty of Arts (JFA).

Human Values in Ernest Hemingway's

The Old Man and the Sea^(*)

Nouh Ibrahim Saleh Alguzo, Ph.D.

Associate Professor of English

Al-Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University

Al-Ahsa Campus

Department of English

Eastern Province, Hofuf 31982

Saudi Arabia

الملخص

القيم الإنسانية في رواية إرنست همنغوي

الرجل العجوز والبحر

على عكس الباحثين الذين يدرسون رواية إرنست همنغوي الرجل العجوز والبحر كقصة بسيطة تروي تجربة صيد السمك لرجل عجوز في تيار الخليج، يدرس هذا البحث القيم الإنسانية في القصة والمتعلقة بالتواضع والصبر والعزم والفخر. يمكن مشاهدة هذه القيم في القصة من خلال شخصية صياد السمك العجوز الذي لا يفقد الأمل أو الثقة بالنفس بعد سوء الحظ لمدة أربعة وثمانون يوماً. بالرغم من الضعف الجسدي، لم يتخل الرجل العجوز عن حلمه بصيد سمكة كبيرة لكي يثبت للصيادين الآخرين أن العزم والأمل أمور ضرورية في حياة البشر. تتضمن القصة أيضاً أن سمك القرش الذي يهاجم صيد الرجل العجوز يمثل قوى الشر في الطبيعة التي تحاول أن تمنع البشر من تحقيق أهدافهم. وبالتالي، يقدم همنغوي سمك القرش كمخلوقات مفترسة وشريرة تقتل بدون رحمة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القيم الإنسانية، البحر، أخلاقية، سمك القرش، سمك

المارلين

(*) Bulletin of the Faculty of Arts Volume 78 Issue 6 July 2018

Abstract

Unlike scholars who read Ernest Hemingway's novella *The Old Man and the Sea* as a simple story that narrates the fishing experience of an old man in the Gulf Stream, this paper examines the human values of humility, patience, determination and pride in the story. These values can be seen in the character of the old fisherman who does not lose hope or self-confidence after eighty-four unlucky days. Despite his physical weakness, the old man does not renounce his dream of catching big fish to prove to other fishermen that determination and hope are important in the life of humans. The story implies that the sharks that attack the catch of the old man represent the evil forces in nature that attempt to prevent humans from achieving their goals. Therefore, Hemingway presents the sharks as predators and malicious creatures that attack without mercy.

Keywords: human values, sea, morality, sharks, marlin

The American novelist Ernest Hemingway was one of the avant-garde of the twentieth century who achieved great success through his life. As a result of witnessing World War I, Hemingway wrote novels like *A Farewell to Arms* and *The Sun Also Rises* to describe the horrors of war and the struggles of human beings in an inhumane and destructive world. In his parable novella *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway recounts the story of an old fisherman and his struggles with the forces of nature rather than focusing on war. This novella is an autobiographical story that is based on Hemingway's fishing experience in Key West, Florida. Many scholars read *The Old Man and the Sea* as a simple story about the experience of the old fisherman in the Gulf Stream. Stanley Cooperman claims that "Hemingway was attempting to deal with the problem of old age" (216). Gregory Stephens and Janice Cools also note, "one may still say with some truth that Hemingway used *The Old Man and the Sea* as a means of revising his code of 'grace under pressure' to consider how a man manifests this grace when facing defeat or old age" (77). William Cain adds, "In *The*

Old Man and the Sea Hemingway recounts Santiago's story to express the majesty and the pointlessness of human effort" (117). Other scholars like Jeffrey Herlihy focus on the religious symbolism in the story. Herlihy says: "Hemingway, a convert to Catholicism, draws heavily on religious symbolism in *The Old Man and the Sea*" (32). I would argue in this paper that Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is not a simple story about the life of an old fisherman or a religious story, but a story that establishes the human values of endurance, determination, pride, and humility.

Hemingway introduces the old man, Santiago, from the very beginning of the novella as a patient and confident man. The old man lives a lonely life on the sea after the boy, Manolin, who used to help him in fishing was forced by his parents to go in another boat because the old man was unlucky. Hemingway begins his story by describing the bad luck of the old man:

He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish. In the first forty days without a fish the boy's parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally *salao*, which is the worst form of unlucky, and the boy had gone at their orders in another boat which caught three good fish the first week. (3)

The unlucky days of the old man do not make him lose confidence or hope that he will take a big catch one day. It would be important to note here that the old man does not fish for entertainment, but because fishing is a source of living for him. The description of the sail of the old man gives us a clear image of his life: "The sail was patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat" (ibid. 3). The story of the old man gets the readers emotionally involved as if they are part of the fishing experience. William Cain says: "What Santiago feels Hemingway has felt, and that is why this writer can strike the phrase that instills in us the same feeling" (115). The unlucky life of the old man and the fact that his sail "looked like the flag of permanent defeat" reminds us of the hopeless

life of Hemingway who received deep wounds during World War I after volunteering in the American Red Cross and as a result committed suicide in 1961. Cain comments, “Hemingway was a fisherman, hunter, ambulance driver, war reporter, soldier; he was wounded and injured countless times” (118). While Hemingway loses faith in the institutions of Western civilization, his hero in *The Old Man and the Sea* sustains his confidence and prefers to fight till the end.

The novella emphasizes the importance of obedience to parents in the life of humans. In the dialogue of the old man with the boy about the reasons that made him quit going fishing with the old man, the old man tells the boy: “I know you did not leave me because you doubted” (4) and the boy replies: “It was papa made me leave. I am a boy and I must obey him” (4). Despite the love and respect that the boy has for the old man and his belief that the unlucky days will come to an end, the boy announces that his obedience to his father is more important than fishing with the old man. No doubt that fishing with the old man has taught the boy lessons about humility and self-restraint. Gregory Stephens and Janice Cools comment, “Fishing has taught the boy lessons about being in nature and the power of faith. As the old man returns from eighty-four days without a catch, the boy reminds him of the time they went eighty-seven days without fish, only to have their luck turn” (79). Therefore, when the boy says that his father “hasn’t much faith,” “No, but we have”, (4) the old man responds. This implies the humility of the boy and his devotion for the old man who taught him fishing.

Hemingway gives us a clear image of the poverty and loneliness of the old man to describe his patience and endurance. The old man lives a simple lifestyle in a small hut and there seems no one to take care of him except the boy. The hut of the old man is described as follows: “The shack was made of the tough bud-shields of the royal palm which are called guano and in it there was a bed, a table, one chair, and a place on the dirt floor to cook with charcoal” (8). Furthermore, the shirt of the old man is patched and looks like his sail: “His shirt had been patched so many times that it was like the sail and

the patches were faded to many different shades by the sun” (11). The description of the old man as poor and unlucky implies the suffering and pain he had through his life. Furthermore, it refers to the kindhearted old man who only kills fish to pay for his life expenses. Gregory Stephens and Janice Cools note, “throughout much of the text, Santiago’s compassion is that of the hunter who kills cleanly” (84). Therefore, Hemingway never attempts to present his hero as a killer or enemy of nature but as a compassionate and honorable man.

The boy and lions represent sources of hope for the old man that make him endure the pain in his body and continue fishing. The boy encourages the old man when he says: “There are many good fishermen and some great ones. But there is only you” (15), and the old man responds: “Thank you. You make me happy. I hope no fish will come along so great that he will prove us wrong” (15). This implies that the boy is the apprentice of the old man and it was the old man who taught him fishing and humbleness. The old man always misses the boy, as a companion and a friend, when he fishes alone in the Gulf Stream because the presence of the boy gives him hope. Furthermore, the dream of the old man of the lions playing on the beaches of Africa reminds him with his youth and physical strength. The old man dreams of the lions that “played like young cats in the dusk and he loved them as he loved the boy” (17). Kenneth Johnston comments, “the old man’s recurring dream of the young lions playing upon the beach in Africa may be likened to a kind of shield against the assault of old age, a harking back to a period of his youthful courage and invincibility” (390). Therefore, the old man cheers himself with images of lions because he understands the bond between himself and the lions that symbolize leadership and strength.

The old man challenges the forces of nature by deciding to fish far beyond other fishermen with an attempt to end his unlucky days. At the same time, he remains aware of the bond between man and nature expressed through his appreciation of the beauty of nature. The old man considers the flying fish as his “friends” and feels pity for the

small birds, “he was very fond of flying fish as they were his principal friends on the ocean. He was sorry for the birds, especially the small delicate dark terns that were always flying and looking and almost never finding, and he thought, the birds have a harder life than we do except for the robber birds and the heavy strong ones” (20). The old man understands that he is part of nature just like the flying fish and the birds that search for food in the vast sea. Therefore, he feels that animals and birds have souls and struggle to remain alive just like human beings. Furthermore, the old man tries to forget his loneliness through reminding himself of the importance of unity between man and the natural world.

Hemingway criticizes the cruelty and callousness of human beings after World War II through *The Old Man and the Sea*. Stanley Cooperman says:

The preoccupation of Ernest Hemingway with individual courage, will, and endurance – the need for self-contained action, ritualized form, precision of motion (and emotion), and – perhaps most important – the fear of complex motivation and the insistence upon the absolute necessity for initiative as a definition of manhood – was seriously threatened in the years preceding and following World War II. (215)

Hemingway does not only attempt to emphasize the ideas of “courage, will, and endurance” as Cooperman argues, but also criticizes the image of human beings as killers and heartless after WWII through introducing to his readers the story of the old man who can be seen as a symbol of humanity and mercy. Unlike other fishermen who are introduced as killers in the novella, the old man is presented as kindhearted and merciful. The contrast between the old man and other fishermen goes as follows: “Most people are heartless about turtles because a turtle’s heart will beat for hours after he has been cut up and butchered. But the old man thought, I have such a heart too and my feet and hands are like theirs” (27). Therefore, the old man can be seen as lover of nature rather than cruel through his

attempts to catch fish.

The old man risks his life by fishing beyond the limitations of fishermen to satisfy his pride and prove his heroism. B. S. Tillinghast says: "Probably no other American writer is as closely associated with the concept of the hero as Hemingway. His characters aim high and take great risks. Even when his characters fail, they usually have a moral victory" (38). Despite the physical weakness of the old man, Hemingway introduces his hero to the readers as spiritually strong and faithful. The old man is a brave man with extraordinary abilities who never renounces his dreams. Therefore, the pride of the old man motivates him to succeed though he loses his catch in the end.

Hemingway teaches humanity moral lessons through describing the experience of Santiago in his old age maintaining the codes of fishing. The old man pities the marlin he hooked, "then he began to pity the great fish that he had hooked. He is wonderful and strange and who knows how old he is, he thought" (38). The feeling of pity the old man shows toward the fish may be related to his belief in the brotherhood between man and nature. The old man says: "I wish I could feed the fish ... He is my brother" (47). Furthermore, the old man announces that using the bait with the hidden hook is a kind of "treachery" when he states: "When once, through my treachery, it had been necessary to him to make a choice" (39). This justifies the right of the fish to defend himself against the "treachery" of the old man that can be seen through pulling the skiff of the old man for three days.

Through his life on the sea, the old man develops a feeling that killing nature is sin. He declares: "Perhaps I should not have been a fisherman ... But that was the thing that I was born for" (40). As a fisherman, the old man realizes that he can only stay alive by killing. Glen Love reminds us of the belief of Hemingway that "it is a sin to kill any non-dangerous game animal except for meat" (209). Gregory Stephens and Janice Cools comment, "begging the pardon of an animal one kills for food is common to the ethics of indigenous hunting" (84). The old man has compassion for creatures of the sea though he fully

understands that he is there, just like all other fishermen, for killing. Carlos Fuentes argues, “we survive because we kill nature. We cannot escape this need and it damages our soul” (24). Gregory Stephens and Janice Cools also explain that “*The Old Man and the Sea* reveals the damage to Santiago’s body and soul from killing the part(s) of nature he most loves” (87). It would be important to emphasize the idea that the old man does not become violent through his attempts to catch fish, but rather a merciful fisherman who promotes the ethics of fishing. The damage to the soul of the old man, as some scholars argue, implies that he is part of nature and that killing the nature he loves makes him lose part of himself.

The Old Man and the Sea does not promote for savagery or brutality when the old man struggles to catch the marlin for three days. William Cain claims that “*The Old Man and the Sea* is a theater of cruelty with a flesh piercing array of images and terms that complicate the novel’s renderings of nature’s wonder and humankind’s courage” (120). He also adds: “The killing of the marlin is savage and heartbreaking, brutal and erotic” (121). However, nowhere in the novella we find that killing the marlin is “savage” or “brutal”, as Cain claims. On the contrary, the old man feels sorry for the marlin and emphasizes his nobility and greatness. The following passage describes the feelings of love and sympathy the old man shows to the marlin, “then he was sorry for the great fish that had nothing to eat and his determination to kill him never relaxed in his sorrow for him. How many people will he feed, he thought. But are they worthy to eat him? No, of course not. There is no one worthy of eating him from the manner of his behaviour and his great dignity” (62). The old man believes that humans do not recognize the value of the fish because he considers the fish as “more noble and more able” (51). The old man also wishes that he could feed the fish that has the hook in his mouth in the deep waters for three days. Therefore, it would be erroneous to consider killing the fish brutal or inhumane. This reminds us of the belief of Hemingway who was “fully aware of the fact that eating requires killing” (38). At the same time, Hemingway followed the rule

of killing only for meat and we can see this in the character of his hungry and poor hero who was only searching for food in the vast sea.

The old man emphasizes the mutual pain he feels with the marlin and the deep attachment to nature. The old man speaks to the fish: "You're feeling it now, fish ... And so, God knows, am I." (44). The old man feels the stiffness in his back and the cramp in his hand, but he learns confidence and patience from his life on the sea. The man says: "he [the marlin] was such a calm, strong fish and he seemed so fearless and so confident. It is strange ... 'You better be fearless and confident yourself, old man'" (69). Sergio Bocaz argues that "the contact with nature is in itself a kind of purification" (52). This implies that the lonely life of the old man on the sea cleanses his soul and sustains the ethics of fishing. Philip Melling notes, "In Hemingway's work, those who have offended the sea rarely escape its retribution ... The sea has a moral and providential presence in the novel" (22). This could be the reason that the old man loves the sea and attached to its creatures to avoid the vengeance of nature.

Hemingway emphasizes the idea of the brotherhood between man and nature that can be seen in the character of the old man and the way he treats the marlin and other creatures of the sea, and at the same time, he introduces the sharks as enemies of nature and the forces of destruction in the life of humans. The old man highlights the idea of brotherhood between humans and nature even after catching the marlin because of his belief that all creatures have souls just like human beings. He says after catching the marlin: "With his mouth shut and his tail straight up and down we sail like brothers" (83). On the other hand, the old man expresses his fear of the sharks when he says: "Unless sharks come ... If sharks come, God pity him and me" (55). The old man describes the sharks as predators, who threaten both the marlin and his life,

The shark was not an accident. He had come up from deep down in the water as the dark cloud of blood had settled and dispersed in the mile deep sea. He had come up so fast and absolutely without caution

that he broke the surface of the blue water and was in the sun. Then he fell back into the sea and picked up the scent and started swimming on the course the skiff and the fish had taken. (83-84)

The old man links the sharks to the dark powers in nature that appear from the deep dark waters, to kill and start corruption in nature. No doubt that the old man, who was unlucky for eighty-four days and three other days struggling on the sea till he caught the marlin, views the marlin as his fortune that would change his life. However, the sharks find in the catch of the old man an easy prey to satisfy their avaricious desires.

Hemingway highlights the importance of confidence and hope in the life of humans; however, he suggests that there will be little hope to fight dangerous and fierce creatures like the sharks. Unlike the marlin who is a noble and worthy opponent, the sharks are malicious and unworthy opponents. The fight between the old man and the sharks is an unjust fight because the sharks come in groups. It would be important to note here that the hero of Hemingway starts to lose hope only after seeing the sharks, “the old man’s head was clear and good now and he was full of resolution but he had little hope” (85). He adds: “He [the old man] hit it [the shark] without hope but with resolution and complete malignancy” (86). The old man hits the sharks without mercy as an attempt to protect his catch. This brings to our minds the way the old man was merciful to the marlin, an image that is different from the way he treats the sharks. Another reason that the old man does not want the sharks to feed on his catch is that he does not want to see the marlin disfigured. Therefore, the old man feels sorry when he was not able to defend the marlin after the attack of the sharks. Gregory Stephens and Janice Cools refer to the humility of the old man when he says: “humility has to be a cornerstone of mature heroic grace, as in the moment when a ‘beaten’ Santiago apologizes to the marlin half-eaten by sharks” (78). The cruelty of the sharks is described as follows: “‘He [the shark] took about forty pounds,’ the old man said aloud. He took my harpoon too and all the rope, he thought, and now my fish bleeds again and there will be others. 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" (86). The sharks disfigure the beauty of the marlin, and the old considers that as destruction of the beauty of nature. The old man describes the sharks as evil, ugly and cruel creatures that are unworthy to eat the marlin. Therefore, the sharks act like thieves who steal the old man's triumph and success. Moreover, the sharks can stand for the evil people in real life who envy others for their success to prevent them from achieving their goals.

The end of *The Old Man and the Sea* can be seen as success rather than failure because the old man does not lose honor or confidence after the sharks destroy the marlin. The old man announces: "Man is not made for defeat ... A man can be destroyed but not defeated" (87). The old man does not renounce fishing after he loses the marlin in the fight with the sharks. When the old man returns to the village, even though he was physically exhausted, he still plans to fish. The old man tells the boy: "We must get a good killing lance and always have it on board. You can make the blade from a spring leaf from an old Ford. We can grind it in Guanabacoa. It should be sharp and not tempered so it will break. My knife broke" (106). Stanley Cooperman comments on the old man as a triumphant hero, "this triumph, of course, is a victory in spiritual terms – for it is only in spiritual terms that a victory can ever be real" (219). Therefore, the old man proves that man can fulfill his dreams through commitment, endurance and determination.

In conclusion, Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* does not only recount the experience of an old man fishing in the Gulf Stream, but rather a story that teaches morals. After eighty-four of unlucky days, the old man proves, after catching the marlin, that physical weakness can not prevent man from achieving his goals. Moreover, the old man learns from his struggles with the sharks that a man should be well armed to counter the evil forces in nature. The old man does not lose hope, confidence or faith after the sharks destroy the marlin and resolves that in his next fishing adventure he will not lose battle with the sharks.

References

- Bocaz, Sergio H. “*El Ingenioso Hidalgo Don Quijote de la Mancha and The Old Man and the Sea: A Study of the Symbolic Essence of Man in Cervantes and Hemingway.*” *Bulletin of the Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association* 25.2 (1971): 49-54.
- Cain, William E. “Death Sentences: Rereading *The Old Man and the Sea*” *The Sewanee Review* 114.1 (2006): 112-125.
- Cooperman, Stanley. “Hemingway and Old Age: Santiago as Priest of Time.” *College English* 27.3 (1965): 215-220.
- Fuentes, Carlos. *The Buried Mirror: Reflections on Spain and the New World*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin, 1992.
- Hediger, Ryan. “Hunting, Fishing, and the Cramp of Ethics in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea, Green Hill’s of Africa, and Under Kilimanjaro.*” *The Hemingway Review* 27.2 (2008): 35-59.
- Hemingway, Ernest. *The Old Man and the Sea*. Beirut: York Press, 1996.
- Herlihy, Jeffrey. “‘Eyes the Same Color as the Sea’: Santiago’s Expatriation from Spain and Ethnic Otherness in Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*” *The Hemingway Review* 28.2 (2009): 25-44.
- Johnston, Kenneth G. “The Star in Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea.*” *American Literature* 42.3 (1970): 388-391.
- Love, Glen. “Hemingway’s Indian Virtues: An Ecological Reconsideration.” *American Literature* 22.3 (1987): 201–213.
- Melling, Philip H. “Cultural Imperialism, Afro-Cuban Religion, and Santiago’s Failure in *The Old Man and the Sea.*” *The Hemingway Review* 26.1 (2006): 6-24.

Nouh Ibrahim Saleh Alguzo : Human Values in Ernest Hemingway's 19

Stephens, Gregory and Janice Cools. "'Out Too Far': Half-fish, Beaten Men, and the

Tenor of Masculine Grace in *The Old Man and the Sea*". *The Hemingway Review* 32.2 (2013): 77-94.

Tillinghast, B. S. Jr. "Five Perspectives for Introducing Hemingway." *The English*

Journal 72.8 (1983): 38-39.