



An ecological victory: Deep ecology in *The old Man and the Sea*

Arya MP

Guest Faculty, Department of English and History, Christ College (Autonomous), Irinjalakuda, Kerala, India

Abstract

This research paper is an exploration into Ernest Hemingway's classic novel *The Old Man and the Sea*, to unearth ecocritical elements that underlie the working of Santiago's (the protagonist's) journey. The theoretical framework of the paper is provided by the concept of 'deep ecology' suggested by Arne Naess. The major argument put forth suggests that Santiago's victory is not a success of the man over nature; rather a shared victory of man and nature. Santiago undergoes a transformation in his relationship with the marlin (a fish he hooks), understanding it to be his enemy initially, and later becoming his friend, brother, and finally himself metaphorically. Another argument made by the paper is a comparison between the characters to Santiago and the Biblical Jonah, also to find they are connected and transformed by the intervening elements of nature.

Keywords: deep ecology, anthropocentrism, biocentrism, biblical allusion

Introduction

Hailed as one of the world classics of all times, the novella *The Old Man and the Sea* has been subject to constant scrutiny and re-readings by literary critics and readers across the globe. Ernest Hemingway's masterpiece narrates the story of the eternal challenges and conflicts that mankind has to endure to survive in a competitive world of adversities. But for the hero, the old Cuban fisherman Santiago, it is not just the struggle for survival; it is rather a measure of proving his 'manliness' to at least himself, (if the world could be put at bay). Joseph Waldmeir, in his essay "Confiteor Hominem: Ernest Hemingway's Religion of Man", appreciates Hemingway when he writes that "Hemingway has finally taken the decisive step in elevating what might be called his philosophy of Manhood to the level of a religion".

Waldmeir's criticism of the idea of 'Manhood' in the novella may also be considered as a bone of contention in these times of renewed environmental concerns. *The Old Man and the Sea* has been generally read in terms of the structural binaries that operate in the novella, the major one being the man V/s the wild. The 'wild' here could refer to the sea, the marlin, the sharks, or even the universe considered as a whole. When the novel ends, Santiago, who carries the burden of the entire human race on his shoulders, is considered as having won the challenge by bringing the dilapidated skeleton of the marlin ashore. The fact that the marlin has been devoured almost completely by the sharks, and hence Santiago has come back empty-handed does not seem to matter in his success. This is echoed in the famous quotation from the novella that reads, "A man can be destroyed, but not defeated (103)."

The current research is an attempt to examine the much applauded success of Santiago from an alternate angle. It takes the idea of 'deep ecology' as its methodological framework. The major argument of this paper is that Santiago's realization of the 'man' being 'equal' (and not 'above') the 'wild' is the

cause of his success. In other words, Santiago's success is not decided by the fishes that he manages to kill; it derives from the deep understanding he gains of the egalitarian working of the universe. This research is also an endeavor to demystify the religious image of Jesus Christ that is often superimposed upon Santiago. The Biblical allusion of Christ winning over the evil by his resurrection that happens after three days of his murder, is replaced with the Biblical story of Jonah. Santiago's brief voyage in the sea is analyzed to find elements of this Biblical figure, to understand how it's not just Santiago's willpower and courage, but also the universe that enables him to achieve his goal.

Theoretical Framework

Deep ecology has existed in many societies as an ecological movement in practice, before it was theorized into an academic school of thought. It may be considered as an offshoot of ecocriticism, which deals with the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. It was theorized by the Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess in 1973 through his essay titled "The Shallow, and the Deep, Long-Range Ecology Movement: A Summary". He defines deep ecology as a protest against the anthropocentric models of existence in the European and American continents. David R. Keller, in his article titled "Deep Ecology", explores the origins and the basic principles of deep ecology. He underlines the notion of Naess when he writes, "Deep ecology is less a finished product than a continuing impassioned plea for the development of ecosophies (roots and branches) that merge non-anthropocentric core principles (the trunk)" (Keller 210) [3].

The eight basic principles of deep ecology has been laid out by Arne Naess. Beginning from the inherent worth that is to be revered in every living being, it also explains how the richness and diversity of life forms on earth contribute to its

completeness. The principles further points towards the needlessness of human intervention in maintaining this diversity. Unfortunately, says Naess, human beings have intervened in this equilibrium and has broken the balance of nature. This worsening interference must be checked by the conscious policy changes that must be implemented in anthropocentric societies that must become 'biocentric'. In his work "How Deep is Deep Ecology?", George Bradford argues that the philosophy of deep ecology "has as its basis the inter-relatedness of all life, a biotic equality for all organisms (including those for which human beings have no "use" or which might even be harmful to us), and a rejection of anthropocentrism (the belief that human beings are separate from, superior to, and more important than the rest of nature" (Bradford 8).

Deep Ecology in the Old Man and the Sea

The Old Man and the Sea is a novel prominently known for its anthropocentric characteristics; as a work of literature that establishes the victory of the human race over nature. Here, nature is symbolized by the sea, flying fish, the warbler, the marlin, the sharks, and even the Sargasso weeds which Santiago encounters while on his short and unexpected voyage. The return of Santiago back to the mainland is considered as the ultimate success that human beings earn after the bitter warfare that s/he leads against all adversaries, of whom most components (here) emerge from nature, or are part of it. The adventurous journeys that the author himself has made stand as proofs to such a bland interpretation of his character Santiago. But a closer reading of the novel paves way to a deeper understanding of the bio-centric nature of the work. It would also throw a new light upon Santiago's success, as emerging from reasons other than his killing the marlin, and bringing at least the skeleton ashore.

The physique of Santiago is described by Hemingway by acknowledging him to be a part of the sea herself. "Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated" (6). The adjectives 'cheerful' and 'undefeated' may be analyzed as the features endowed upon Santiago by the sea. Further, Santiago's dreams are described: "He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach. They played like young cats in the dusk and he loved them as he loved the boy" (22). Santiago's dreams in his old age are different from the violent dreams of his youth. They grow more peaceful and silent, which are symbolized by the calm beaches he visualized. The lions freely roaming in his dreams signify freedom and peace that he attains after a violent youth of victory, blood, and violent successes at sea. The final refuge that he envisions is that of nature and him being a glorious part of it. The interconnectedness of human beings to nature is reflected in these observations.

The friendship and sympathy that Santiago feels for the beings of the Sea is described as follows:

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. Why did they make the birds So delicate and fine as those sea swallows when the ocean can be so cruel?' (26)

Santiago's experience at sea may be supplemented with the observation he makes of the creatures he finds in and around the sea water. For instance, when he is out in the sea, he observes a man-of-war bird circling, and understands the presence of dolphins nearby. The sea and its beings turn out to be Santiago's teachers and escorts, guiding him through adverse conditions, and aiding him to get his catch. The greatest among his teachers is the sea herself. Metaphorically thought of as the universe, Santiago "always thought of the sea as *la mar* which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her. the old man always thought of her as feminine and as something that gave or withheld great favors, and if she did wild or wicked things it was because she could not help them" (26-27).

The companionship offered by nature to its inhabitants, and the type of bondage it creates amongst them is depicted vividly in the novel. When the old man is lonely at sea, he finds companionship in a warbler that comes to rest on the skiff. Until the bird resumes its flight, Santiago keeps talking to her. He even tries to make friends with the flying fish and the dolphins; and even makes keen observations about the seaweeds for time pass, as the fish keeps hauling the skiff in its direction. But the best example of companionship may be found between Santiago and the marlin. In the absence of Manolin, it is the fish that gives company to Santiago. Though they are supposedly enemies, circumstances bring them together. Though they do not see each other, they are bonded with each other. This unusual companionship lies in the core of the novel, and explains the deep ecological aspects that may be unearthed from the novel. It needs a description of the marlin to completely comprehend the depth of this companionship.

The marlin which gets hooked in Santiago's line is as much a protagonist as is Santiago. The fish is huge in size; "he is two feet longer than the skiff" (61). There is also an elaborate description about the marlin's confidence and perseverance in dragging the skiff in his direction and not yielding to the trap for three whole days. It is this long time period that creates a sense of affection between the two protagonists of the novel, Santiago and the marlin. *The Old Man and the Sea* may be read as a novel of transformation; this transformation is very gradual; and the major characters affecting this transformation are Santiago and the marlin. Initially, Santiago is portrayed as an old man who is poor, and out of food and money for his survival. He has gone eighty-four days without having caught even a single fish, and is considered *salao* (unlucky). Hence he is attributed with the right to think of the marlin who gets hooked in his line to be his enemy. But eventually, Santiago develops a camaraderie with the marlin, as they are forlorn in the sea for three days without another human being in sight. Santiago longs for company to keep himself alive and in good spirits, which he eventually finds in the marlin. In a way, Santiago could be understood as replacing the marlin for Manolin, the young boy whom he misses throughout the journey.

The three levels of transformation undergone in the relationship between Santiago and the marlin are as follows: from an enemy to a friend, from a friend to a brother, and finally, from a brother to his own self. Initially, Santiago starts conversing with the marlin only as a means to entertain himself, and as a normal human act to tempt the marlin into the hook. "Come on", the old man said aloud. "Make another turn. Just smell them. Aren't they lovely? Eat them good now, and then there is the tuna. Hard and cold and lovely. Don't be shy fish, eat them" (39). These words used as means of alluring the fish slowly turn into genuine concern, once the marlin gets hooked and start dragging the skiff in another direction. The first stage that of friendship, develops during the very first day. He informs the warbler who rested on his skiff that he was with 'a friend', the friend being the marlin. Santiago realizes that they are bound to be together for an indefinite period of time. "Fish", he said softly, aloud, "I'll stay with you until I'm dead". He'll stay with me too, the old man thought and he waited for it to be light" (50).

The sympathy that Santiago feels for the marlin slowly turns into empathy. It is his long-term experience in the sea which makes Santiago assume that the fish that has been hooked is a marlin. When he realizes that it was impossible for him to drag the marlin into his skiff, he slowly starts feeling sympathy for the fish. He imagines the marlin to be huge in size and in strength. Santiago gets only a sudden peek at the marlin when it jumps up for the fraction of a second. The only force that keeps Santiago confident enough to not give up and keep trying is his intelligence. "I wish I was the fish, he thought, with everything he has against only my will and my intelligence (62). But then he realizes that the wisdom and dignity of the fish in enduring through the toil of life makes him more worthy than most human beings. "But are they worthy to eat them? No, of course not. There is no one worthy of eating him from the manner of his behavior and his great dignity (74). A move from the anthropocentric attitude to the bio-centric attitude may be observed from this instance.

One of the key factors that Arne Naess emphasizes in his principles of deep ecology is the acceptance and empathy that each living being must have for its fellow beings. This understanding is a hallmark of the friendship that develops between Santiago and the marlin. Santiago says at one point, "I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends" (52). Further, Santiago befriends a small warbler that finds rest on his boat amidst flying, telling him, "Take a good rest, small bird. then go in and take your chance like any man or bird or fish" (53). He also invites the bird to take its time before flying off, begging pardon for not being able to serve him better, "Stay at my house if you like, bird. 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" (53). The friend that he mentions is the marlin. Thus, in a gradual relationship that develops between the marlin and Santiago transforms from sheer enmity to a friendship.

From friendship, Santiago slowly moves one step further in his understanding of the marlin. The thought occurs to him while he has the tuna to quench his hunger. He thinks of the hunger of the fish and wishes that he could feed him, since he was his own brother (57). Later, when one of Santiago's hands cramps, he thinks to himself: "There are three things that are

brothers: the fish and my two hands" (62). When instances of tiredness and failure appear, he gives confidence to himself assuring that he will kill the fish for sure, "in all its greatness and glory" (64). To this he adds, "Although it is unjust" (64). This realization that Santiago reaches is, in fact, a turning point in the novella, as it awakens a feeling of brotherhood in him for a creature that was initially his enemy.

As Santiago recounts his past experiences, he thinks, "man is not much beside the great birds and beasts" (66). In his final attempt to kill the fish, it gives him a hard time.

You are killing me, fish, the old man thought. But you have a right to. Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or nobler thing than you, brother. Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who. (92)

And soon after he kills the fish, he admits to himself that he had killed his brother, and now has to do the slave work. Once he pulls the fish close to the skiff, he thinks of his desire to touch and feel the marlin. It is not his desire to weigh his catch that makes him want to feel the fish. "I think I felt his heart. When I pushed on the harpoon shaft the second time" (95). The old man's relationship with the marlin becomes so intense that he feels as if he has murdered his own brother, or perhaps himself. There is a constant feeling of remorse at having killed the fish. At some point during his return, Santiago feels one with the fish he killed. "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).

In his article titled "Beyond Anthropocentrism", John Seed, a deep ecologist, writes:

"I'm protecting the rainforest" develops into "I'm part of the rainforest protecting myself. I am that part of the rainforest recently emerged into thinking." What a relief then! The thousands of years of imagined separation are over and we begin to recall our true nature. That is, the change is a spiritual one, thinking like a mountain, sometimes referred to as "deep ecology". (Seed 2)

Seed's observation about the process of deep ecological transformation that happens in a human being happens in the life of Santiago. The marlin that was initially his enemy/prey, slowly transforms into his companion, later his brother, and finally himself. The enmity develops into sympathy, further to become empathy, making the transformation complete.

Santiago is troubled with remorse after he has killed the fish. He considers whether he has committed a sin by killing the marlin. The concept of sinning is constantly discussed in the novel, in the consciousness of Santiago. He weighs it in his mind and tries to calm himself down with his philosophy of life.

He thought much and he kept on thinking about sin. You did not kill the fish only to keep alive and to sell for food, he thought. You killed him for pride and because you are a fisherman. You loved him when he was alive and you loved him after. If you love him, it is not a sin to kill him. Or is it more? (105)

With a delicate poke on established religion, Hemingway portrays Santiago as dismissing the idea of sinning, and replacing it with the natural law of life. "Do not think about sin. It is much too late for that and there are people who are paid to do it. You were born to be a fisherman and the fish was born to be a fish" (105). Santiago also consoles himself thinking that it was in self-defence that he killed the fish, and "everything kills everything else in some way" (106). So much of self-consolation is required on the part of Santiago to justify his act of killing the fish. This regret itself is unlikely in other fishermen, who are anthropocentric, unawares. This brings out the deep ecological understanding that takes shape in Santiago through his adventure with the marlin in the sea.

As a minor argument, this research is also an attempt to re-define some Biblical allusions that have been popular from the novel, on the lines of deep ecology. *The Old Man and the Sea* has been a novel subject to a lot of religious criticism. Santiago has been, in many instances been paralleled with Jesus Christ, as has been researched by Sandamali K. P. S. in her article titled "Symbolism in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*" (128). Santiago's three-day adventure in the sea is compared to the period from the crucifying of Christ to his resurrection. His wounds and struggles are symbolically compared with the holy wounds of Christ. Though the story of Christ does find a matching parallel in Santiago, there is also another Biblical character who share his story with him.

Jonah, who appears in the *Book of Jonas* in the Old Testament, is a character in context. Jonah is appointed by God to go to Nineveh to preach repentance to them. Instead he boards a ship to Tarshish; the ship faces a storm and Jonah is swallowed by a huge fish. Three days later, he is vomited on the shore of Nineveh, where he does his former assigned task. In the novel, Santiago undergoes the same storm that hits Jonah's ship; the only difference is their intention. The novel is indicative of the courage and will-power of Santiago in achieving his goal. But a comparison with Jonah makes us believe that it is not just his 'manliness', but also the working of the universe that helps him achieve his goal. In the absence of any other human being, it is in the marlin that Santiago finds company; not to forget the warbler who kept him company initially. Jonah thrives inside the fish, and Santiago thrives along with it. The time period with the fish becomes a time of enlightenment both for Jonah and for Santiago. Jonah goes to his unfulfilled mission, and Santiago realises that he is still a good fisherman who is not *salao* (unlucky).

Conclusion

Deep ecology stresses the importance of understanding the inherent worth that lies in each living being. It also emphasises the need for mutual understanding and co-existence of strengths. Santiago's transforming relationship with the marlin ranging from an enemy to a friend to a brother, and finally to himself is the core finding of the deep ecological reading of the novel. There are also supporting characters like the warbler and the sea who dawn many realisations on Santiago. He slowly understands that even when he is left alone in the middle of life (sea) to fight for himself, there are elements in the universe that help him keep alive and gradually emerge successful. Instead of human

companions, nature and its inhabitants row him into a new horizon, where he overcomes his state of shame.

Further, in the case of Jonah and Santiago, nature unveils its power of educating them through their experiences while at sea. Sea herself becomes a teacher, and so do the fishes they encounter. For one, it is the vehicle of God that reveals His miraculous greatness. For the other, it is the companion that never lets him alone in the face of adversities. Both Jonah and Santiago emerge victorious after their experiences. One of them is empowered to carry on his mission, and the other has a renewed awareness of his ability to survive and win his goals. Ecological elements act as favourable catalysts that transform the lives of the human beings involved in the struggle. Thus, *The Old Man and the Sea* stands analogical to the *Book of Jonah* as far as the interference of the ecological elements are concerned, earning both novels the label of being texts that contain 'deep ecological' meanings.

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