“背景中的文学”丛书

Understanding The Old Man and the Sea

A Stuent Casebook to Issues, Sources, and Historical Documents

《老人与海》解读

[美] 帕特里夏·邓拉维·瓦伦蒂 著
(Patricia Dunlavy Valenti)

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Introduction

Shortly after *The Old Man and the Sea* had earned Ernest Hemingway the Nobel Prize for literature in 1954, he was interviewed by Robert Manning, who turned notes from that interview into an article for the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1965. Manning recounts the following incident, which had occurred while he was visiting Hemingway at Finca Vigía—the name of his villa in San Francisco de Paula, Cuba—nine years earlier:

> [Hemingway] reached for the mail, slit open one from a pile of fifteen letters. It was from a high school English teacher in Miami, Florida, who complained that her students rarely read good literature and relied for "knowledge" on the movies, television, and radio. To arouse their interest, she wrote, she told them about Hemingway's adventures and pressed them to read his writings. "Therefore, in a sense," she concluded, "you are the teacher in my tenth grade classroom. I thought you'd like to know it." Hemingway found that letter depressing: "Pretty bad if kids are spending all that time away from books." (Manning 107)

Little could Hemingway have guessed that by the beginning of the twenty-first century, books would have even more competitors for kids' attention. In addition to movies and television, video games,

the Internet, myriad sports and club activities claim the time students might dedicate to reading works of fiction.

But teachers today still know exactly what that teacher who corresponded with Hemingway knew: Some students who won't read anything else will read works by Ernest Hemingway. Hemingway's life as a reporter and a war correspondent, as an ambulance driver in World War I, as a hunter and fisher of big game—in other words, his life as a blustering "real man"—appeals to even the most disaffected young person. Hemingway's no-nonsense style, devoid of apparent sentimentality, conveys narratives about war, love, death, and loss in a form acceptable even to adolescents typically discomforted by confronting these issues. Entering Hemingway's fictional universe, students have no fear that they will be embarrassed by an author who gives way to emotional display while exploring the courage and tenacity needed to endure life's strife and pain. Remarkably, even Hemingway's story about an old man who drifts at sea for three days in a failed attempt to catch a fish has appealed to adolescents for over five decades.

I first read this novella when I was a student in about seventh or eighth grade. Hemingway's language and the intensity of the situation he depicted stayed in my imagination with such clarity that when, several years ago, I read the novella again, I was amazed by my almost photographic recollection of lines and scenes. From my current vantage point and with the insights I have acquired through years as a college professor who teaches literature, supervises student teachers, and works with practicing teachers, I now see in *The Old Man and the Sea* opportunities for numerous lessons suiting a variety of learners. Teachers can tap the students' interests in history, geography, marine biology, sports, film, food—and, yes, literature—through a study of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Indeed, teachers may lure even the most recalcitrant students into reading the novella when his or her interest in baseball is captured.

When the Spencer Tracy film version of *The Old Man and the Sea* was released in 1958, it was promoted as an action-adventure movie. This publicity tactic obviously misrepresented the film as well as Hemingway's text, but readers of Hemingway's fiction do expect his plots to contain action, adventure, and romance. Those readers may be disappointed with the stillness of *The Old Man and the Sea*, a text that explores interior states and invisible vic-

tories. But *The Old Man and the Sea* is, nonetheless, a novella that can attract the very group of readers who are addicted to high-speed action in both life and film.

First of all, *The Old Man and the Sea* presents situations and emotions already known to many students (and their teachers). The novella represents a familiar family constellation. Many young people do not live in nuclear families; many live with grandparents and, like Manolin, experience their most important relationship with a much older adult, quite possibly an adult who is not related to them. *The Old Man and the Sea* allows such a student to enter into a world where this kind of relationship is valued and nurturing. Many young people believe that their efforts have not been, are not, and will not be requited by external reward or vindication. *The Old Man and the Sea* provides an arena to explore such feelings without preaching or formulaic answers.

Many high school students resent or reject the effort they must invest in reading classical literature, however worthwhile that effort is known to be. *The Old Man and the Sea* presents its narrative in uncomplicated, unadorned prose. Even the weakest reader should have no difficulty comprehending the literal meaning of this text, and without comprehension of literal meaning, as educators know, there can be no literary interpretation or progression to higher-order thinking skills. Thus this novella can be the first rung on the ladder of greater appreciation for other classical texts and works by other canonical writers.

Many of the students in today's classroom belong to "ethnic minorities"—a term that is meaningless in numerous school districts where the majority of students are not Caucasian. Indeed, Hispanics constitute the fastest-growing ethnic group in the United States today, and Hispanics are the majority population in many school settings. *The Old Man and the Sea* opens the dialogue about various Hispanic customs and the Spanish language. Many classrooms contain Cuban American students who can share their expertise about the culture implied by the novella's setting. Students from other Hispanic cultures can continue the exploration with information from their backgrounds. The student whose first language is Spanish will be the star of a lesson on this novella when she or he is asked to pronounce Spanish words, thereby demonstrating that second-language acquisition is of value to *all* students, not

merely those who do not speak English. *The Old Man and the Sea* will thus become a step in fostering multilingual, multicultural knowledge.

Our exploration of *The Old Man and the Sea* and all of the issues raised above will allow the student of the work to access it from a variety of perspectives.

Chapter 1 examines the novella's formal elements of plot, setting character, point of view, and style. Additionally, this chapter situates Hemingway's work in the traditional literary genre to gain a fuller understanding of thematic nuances. Students will augment their skills in close reading and sensitivity to language and sentence structure. The "Topics for Written or Oral Exploration" section invites the student to engage in analyzing the novella by comparing it to other texts, including film and the text of their own lives.

Chapter 2 demonstrates that Hemingway embedded in the novella a full array of marine life proper to Cuba and its coastal waters. This chapter discusses numerous marine organisms well beyond the two most obviously associated with this work, the marlin and the shark. Teachers will be able to develop numerous multidisciplinary lessons using information from the interview inclded on marine organisms. And by more fully understanding the geography and climate of Cuba, students can assess the plausibility and realism of setting in the novella, characteristics of writing to which Hemingway always aspired.

Chapter 3 explores the historical factors that would have affected many facets of life for a man such as Santiago. His health, housing, and material resources were the result of a two-tier economic structure during the period before Fidel Castro's rule—the period of the novella's composition. This economic structure supported the few very rich (represented fleetingly by the tourists in the story) and the great masses of the very poor (represented by Santiago himself). Documents from contemporary travel magazines and from the writings of Castro, among others, demonstrate how different people viewed material circumstances in Cuba. For example, Santiago's palm hut, his *bohío*, is a picturesque element for one writer and a symbol of ignominious poverty for another.

Chapter 4 distinguishes the ethnic influence at play in the text. Cuba's African and Spanish heritages have yielded a culture wherein language, religion, gender attitudes, and food reflect racial and

national origins. This chapter is calculated to give students an appreciation for cultural differences. At the same time, students are invited to interrogate the presentation of the "other" (Santiago) through the eyes of one from a different culture (Hemingway).

Chapter 5 examines not only baseball, but also the other sports mentioned in the novella. Allusions to baseball pervade the text, and although some of these references may be readily recognizable to today's audience, others were obscure even to the audience contemporary with the novella's publication. Newspaper and magazine reports illustrate the nature of baseball and its star players as they were viewed at the moment of the novella's composition. But baseball is not the only sport that informs this text. Arm wrestling and game fishing provide a context important to a valid thematic interpretation of *The Old Man and the Sea*. The ethos of the sportsman saturates this text. Without reflecting upon the documents that explain this ethos, we cannot understand the text.

Chapter 6 calculates how setting, plot, and character would have been affected by situating the novella in Castro's Cuba. Cuban economy as reflected in the tourist and commercial fishing industries, for example, would necessarily require a very different portrayal in Castro's Cuba. One quickly understands that the portrayal of activities that lack political consequence in Hemingway's text would become politically charged activities when played out within an evolving Communist nation.

I would like to conclude this introduction by acknowledging the help of many people. First of all, at the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, I am grateful to Jenny Bruns, my undergraduate research assistant during the summer of 2000; Robert Canida, Electronic Resources/Access Services librarian, for help with Interlibrary Loan Service; Cindy Saylor, Instructional Services/Reference librarian for help in locating copyright holders; Bonnie Kelley for assistance in preparing the chapter on the Cuban environment; Sarah-Lynn Brown for drawing the map of Cuba; Marie Oxendine for the illustration of marine organisms; Liliana Wendorff of the North Carolina Governor's Advisory Council on Hispanic/Latino Affairs for her thoughtful response to Chapter 4; Tina Emanuel, Computer Support Technician, for interview transcription; and the graduate students in EED552, "The Teaching of Literature," during the spring of 1999 and of 2001. These graduate students, who are practicing middle grade and high school teachers, opened my eyes

to myriad possibilities for interdisciplinary study provided by any literary text. Among that group of graduate students, I particularly wish to thank Michael Roberts for his help with information pertaining to sports and Jan Gane, Ginger McMillan, Elizabeth Spangler, and Sandy Smith, whose comments on the novella helped to inform the preceding paragrah. I also wish to thank Karen Spach, a graduate student in diet and nutrition at the University of Wisconsin and members of the staff at the National Baseball Hall of Fame and the International Game Fishing Association for their cordial assistance in various aspects of my research.

I wish to thank my husband, Peter, for his help with the information on baseball for Chapter 5. Both he and my son, Marco, are ardent fans of the game, and I acknowledge here that whatever insight into baseball I may have communicated in this book derives from their appreciation of the sport.

Finally, I wish to pay special tribute to Dr. Arlyn Moeller, whose sudden death in December 2001 precludes his seeing his interview published in Chapter 3. Readers will glean from this "examination" of Santiago the compassion and insight that characterized Dr. Moeller's treatment of patients for over forty-five years. He will be sorely missed.

NOTE

Page references are to the Scribner edition of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

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A Literary Analysis of *The Old Man and the Sea*

In many ways, all that can be known of *The Old Man and the Sea* is revealed in its title. Possibly Ernest Hemingway's most enduring work of fiction, *The Old Man and the Sea* is a very simple, brief story of an old man, a Cuban fisherman named Santiago, whose life differs greatly from the lives of the young Americans who read about him today. Santiago is a poor, solitary man whose possessions consist of little more than the clothes he wears. But Santiago is rich in determination and perseverance, and he refuses to succumb to a streak of bad luck. When the novella opens, he has gone eighty-four days without catching a fish—without, in other words, success in making a living as a fisherman. On the eighty-fifth day, Santiago sets out to sea again—alone—and, after an enormous struggle, he catches the biggest marlin he has ever seen or imagined, only to have it destroyed by sharks. At the end of the story, Santiago's material situation is no different than it was at the beginning. He is alone in his shack without having brought to shore a fish to sell at market.

If readers judge Santiago only in terms of his material success, then he is indeed a failure in a pointless story. But Hemingway prevents readers from accepting that position by taking them through every moment of Santiago's three days and nights at sea and forcing them to assess the worth of Santiago's actions and the

eventual outcome of his efforts by other than exclusively material standards. Readers come to respect Santiago for his indomitable will, self-discipline, and focus. These characteristics cause readers to question with Santiago the meaning of both his achievement and his loss.

EXPOSITION OF ELEMENTS OF FICTION

Longer and more complex than a short story but shorter and more compact than a novel, *The Old Man and the Sea* can be classified as a *novella* or *novelette*, a work of fiction typically fifty to one hundred pages long. As such, *The Old Man and the Sea* lacks the chapter divisions that organize events in a novel. The story's events can, however, be divided according to points in time. *The Old Man and the Sea* begins on land, and five days later it ends on land. Examining the narration of the first day and night on land, the reader obtains those facts needed to understand what will come. This is where the *exposition*—the presentation of the introductory material of a work of fiction—occurs and where the reader is grounded in the novella's characters, setting, conflict, and tone. With an understanding of these elements of fiction, the reader can begin to interpret the novella's *theme*—that dominant, abstract idea made concrete and comprehensible through all the elements of plot, setting, character, and point of view.

Plot can be defined as that sequence of events that reveals the basic conflict of the narrative, whether that conflict be between the person and self, society, or environment. *Setting* refers to where and when the narrative takes place. Specific place or places, geographical location, environmental characteristics, and daily manner of living, as well as the particular time or period of history in which the narrative occurs, all constitute aspects of its setting. The element of *character* is created in a number of ways—by what characters say, by what characters say about other characters, by what characters do, and by what the narrator reveals about the characters. *Point of view* determines the manner by which the reader is presented the materials of the story. The narrator may be an omniscient third person outside the story who possesses all knowledge of the characters—their thoughts and actions—and all knowledge of events, whether they be past, present, or future; the omniscient narrator may also limit this knowledge to the revelation

of a particular character's perspective. Another way authors deliver a narrative is through the first-person narrator who is also a character in the story and who must necessarily limit the presentation of the story to what is plausible knowledge for that character.

Although much of the exposition in *The Old Man and the Sea* is presented through *dialogue*, or conversation, between the two main characters—Santiago, the old man, and Manolin, the young boy—the bulk of the story is presented through a third-person narrator. This technique limits the unfolding of events to the workings of Santiago's unconscious and conscious mind. Santiago's unconscious is rendered through the presentation of his dreams. Santiago's conscious thoughts are presented through the limited omniscient narrator. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, however, this narrative point of view often employs a *stream of consciousness* technique, which presents the random and associative quality of a character's conscious thoughts. For example, while at sea, Santiago realizes that his thoughts hop from his quest for marlin to his recollection of an arm wrestling match or Joe DiMaggio's bone spurs. Frequently, these thoughts—sometimes spoken aloud to himself or formed as mental conversation—are signaled by the use of direct quotation, but just as often Hemingway makes the transition between the narrator and the protagonist without the benefit of quotation marks. For instance, immediately after the marlin takes Santiago's bait, Hemingway writes: "This far out, he [the marlin] must be huge this month, he [Santiago] thought. Eat them, fish. Eat them. Please eat them" (41). The first sentence renders Santiago's thought indirectly, but the second, third, and fourth sentences present what amounts to direct quotation of Santiago's thoughts about the marlin taking the bait without the conventional signal of quotation marks. This technique, used repeatedly throughout the novella, forges a seamless transition between the narrator's third-person omniscient point of view and Santiago's words and thoughts. Thus, although the plot of this novella suggests a high level of action—even adventure—the actual drama in *The Old Man and the Sea* occurs in Santiago's mind as he analyzes the tasks before him, recalls past situations, and contemplates the meaning of events.

Santiago is introduced as an impoverished old fisherman. His skin is furrowed and weathered by exposure to the elements, and his body, though very thin, reveals traces of its former prowess.