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# Ernest Hemingway's THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA

Stanley Cooperman

欧内斯特·海明威的

老人与海



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## INTRODUCTION

When *The Old Man and the Sea* appeared in 1952, Ernest Hemingway had been an international literary celebrity for more than a quarter of a century. Wherever people read books—and in a good many places where people did not read at all—the very name of Hemingway was a legend. It was a name associated with war and courage, with love and violence, with beauty and death. From bullfight arenas in Spain to lumber camps in Canada, from the great capitals of Europe to semi-tropic villages in Cuba and the Florida keys, the word *Hemingway* was both a romance and an ideal; the matador, the soldier, the hunter, the fighter, the lover, the disillusioned realist and the doomed romanticist—it meant all of these things, and more. For Ernest Hemingway, like no other author of his time (and indeed, like few American authors of any time), had become a symbol not merely of literature and books, but of a particular way of living—and dying.

**THE HEMINGWAY LEGEND.** “The Hemingway type of man,” indeed, was even more widely known than was the Hemingway type of book, and this in itself is an indication of how completely the restless teen-ager from Oak Park, Illinois had achieved a kind of apotheosis—that is, Sainthood—unparalleled in the history of American literature. So profoundly did the legend overshadow the man, and the man overshadow his books, that it often seemed as though the books were an incidental byproduct of the life of Hemingway himself.

Perhaps the books were indeed a “byproduct,” for no man had a greater zest for life, a greater appetite for action and travel, and a greater unwillingness to be defined only as a man-of-paper. Passivity was something he avoided throughout his career, in his work no less than in his play (and for Hemingway, as for many artists, the two were closely related).

Certainly Ernest Hemingway considered life itself as a kind of “arena” in which men used their courage, endurance, and will as weapons. Certainly he considered life to be a perpetual struggle against a universe whose essential quality was one of irrational destruction, of violence without meaning. But he also considered literature as a ritual to be employed within the “arena” itself: a ritual of truth, precision, and clarity by which a man could redeem his own inevitable defeat.

**THE WRITER AS ARTIST.** Amid all the talk of Hemingway the “adventurer” or “representative of the Lost Generation,” it is too easily forgotten that he was also a careful and precise artist—a disciplined practitioner of literary craft. For Ernest Hemingway was not less “literary” than were other writers; it is simply that he approached literature as a method of direct action, a method of giving *form* and therefore meaning to an otherwise futile and violent universe.

Just as the matador in the bullfighting arena “makes love to death” and so asserts life by surrounding both with ritual, with courage, and with will, so too does the writer *act* to create a dimension of truth and clarity from a nightmare vision of blind appetite or purposeless suffering. It is for good reason that Pedro, the matador in *The Sun Also Rises*, and Santiago, the fisherman in *The Old Man and the*

*Sea*, are seen as men who are also artists—as individuals possessed of that quality of manhood essential for true living and true work. Neither Pedro nor Santiago “retreats” from the danger or cruelty or reality. They accept it with courage; they *shape* it by the power of their own will, achieving a triumph which is at once defined by their mortality, and which redeems the mortality itself.

If Hemingway made too much of literature as a kind of “fishing for the big one”; if he saw the writer too exclusively as a sort of athlete-of-books, it is possible to say that he did so only because writing, for him, was neither a “refuge” nor a retreat from life, but rather its confrontation. The writer, the fisherman, or the bullfighter is the solitary human being who faces the blank wall of time and uses his own proper weapon—bandillaro, fishing-line, or typewriter—as a means of achieving the truth of *form* and dignity which alone give meaning to man’s brief existence.

There is no doubt that Hemingway enjoyed his fame and fortune; he was far too fond of the good things of life ever to be recalcitrant about accepting the rewards of literary celebrity. The man who liked to call himself “Papa” and “The Champ” was hardly a paragon of personal modesty, and his exploits in Third Avenue bars no less than on African safaris were the delight of Sunday-supplement writers. So determinedly did Hemingway pursue his own “colorful” image, that he sometimes seemed to parody himself; the profile written by Lillian Ross for the *New Yorker* magazine in 1952 remains a delightful definition both of the author’s personal absurdities and of his charm.

It was not enough, however, for Ernest Hemingway to be a “celebrity.” He was a writer, and the job of the writer is to write. Behind all the public clowning and Sunday-supplement posturing, apart from

his various roles as Soldier of Fortune or grizzled Old Warrior, Hemingway remained true to that area of his being which was neither public nor posture: that part of himself which, alone in the "arena," had to carve out a ritual of meaning from blankness.

"A writer is driven far out past where he can go, out to where no one can help him," said Hemingway in his 1954 Nobel Prize speech. And in this acknowledgement of the essential loneliness and the ever-present danger of failure which must accompany true work, Hemingway was reminding his public—and himself—that every artist must indeed be Santiago the fisherman in *The Old Man and the Sea*; that is, an individual who attempts to transcend his own limitations.

**"SUCCESS" AND THE ARTIST.** Hemingway was not unaware of the danger of celebrity itself—the fact that "success" all too often destroys that very talent which it rewards. Along with the laurel of success come great pressures for smugness and laziness, and—perhaps most important—a kind of fear of "risking" the possibility of failure. Let the writer become too "comfortable" in his success, and he—like the matador who "plays it safe" or the fisherman who stays "too close to the shore"—suffers a kind of corruption for which no amount of public gesturing can compensate.

"He had destroyed his talent by not using it, by betrayals of himself. . . by laziness, sloth, and by snobbery, by pride," he says of the writer in *The Snows of Kilimanjaro*, adding that "the thought of his own death obsessed him. . . ." This was a warning that Hemingway gave to himself many times in his life, with an intense honesty characteristic of the man no less than of his work. And "the thought of death" was far more vital for Hemingway than it would have been had it related to a mere morbidity of attitude.

Death, in a basic sense, is the ultimate honesty, the final "fact" which cannot be falsified or cheated. Faced with the fact of his own death, a man must see his own life clearly and truly; only when the writer—softened or protected by "being taken care of"—forgets his own identity, does he make "an attitude that you cared nothing for the work that you used to do, now that you could no longer do it."

This would seem to be a peculiarly solemn self-reproach from a Romantic Adventurer—or perhaps not so peculiar after all. For Hemingway was, from the very beginning of his career, preoccupied with his craft, his art, his work. Even as a young man in Paris after World War I, Hemingway demonstrated a capacity for hard work, for artistic discipline, for voracious reading and calculated writing. Literature was never far from his mind, and he was occupied with far more than Parisian bar-hopping. His friends of those Parisian days, for example, make up a veritable "who's who" of literature: Ezra Pound, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ford Maddox Ford, Edmund Wilson, Gertrude Stein and many others—a long list of novelists, poets, and critics, and an impressive one.

**POST-WORLD WAR I DAYS.** During his post-World War I days in Paris, indeed, Hemingway was formulating the aesthetic basis of his own work, while immersing himself deeply in the work of other writers—writers of the past as well as of the present. From Mark Twain to Henry James, from the English "metaphysical" poet John Donne (who wrote in the 17th century) to the Russian writer Turgenev (who wrote in the 19th), artists of a vast variety of epochs and cultures were grist for the young Hemingway's literary mill. The flyleaf quotations on his novels, which range from Donne to the *Book of Ecclesiastes*, have an oddly "literary" tone for a writer so often praised—and too often caricatured in the praise itself—as a sort of



Huckleberry Finn with a beard.

It was Gertrude Stein, in fact, who once described Hemingway—despite his posture of impatience with bookish pursuits—as being a man of “museums,” and this description hardly fits the Sunday Supplement portrait of Hemingway the Adventurer. In Paris, Hemingway himself was later to remember, “I was trying to write, and I found that my greatest difficulty (apart from knowing what you truly felt, rather than what you were expected to feel, or what you had been taught to feel) was to note what really happened in action, what the actual things were which produced the emotion which you experienced. . . . I was trying to learn to write, commencing with the simplest things. . . .”

Hemingway's statement is a capsule definition of what not only he, but other writers both in the United States and abroad, were trying to achieve during the post-World War I period; that is, an end to literary rhetoric, and a leaner, more objective, more concrete language that would not so much talk about emotion, as recreate it. The “objective correlative” of T. S. Eliot, for example, has much in common with Hemingway's “cinematic prose” —a detached, carefully accurate use of language as camera, so that the reader would not be “told” about a particular value or emotion, but rather would see the exact sequence of fact, object, and action which created the emotion itself.

**THE DISTRUST OF RHETORIC.** Hemingway's distrust of literary rhetoric was shaped by his distrust of all abstractions which would substitute slogans for experience. The flatulent non-reality of verbalized Patriotism, Bravery, Love, Sacrifice or Nobility had been exposed, in the mass machinery of technological warfare, as a kind of

sentimentality which falsified what it could not endure, and profited upon what it sanctimoniously mourned. Hemingway, and other writers of his time, insisted that phrase-mongering was the occupation of the politician or professional Patriot; it was not the instrument of the writer. The literary artist, indeed, would not use words for obscuring the reality of experience, but would use them as precisely and as economically as possible. Young writers had seen all the sacred abstractions and fine-sounding phrases of political, religious, literary, and military leaders end in the dung-heap of the World War I corpse-factory; they demanded not more, but fewer words — words whose meaning would be clear and unmistakable, directed toward defining experience and truth rather than avoiding both.

The fact remains, however, that not every experience has a “meaning” that is equally clear, nor a “truth” that is equally simple. Experience itself may be ambiguous and truth may be complex; it is one thing for a writer to render complex experiences accurately, but quite another for him to insist that the valid experience must be uncomplicated. Hemingway’s own refusal to deal with areas of complex being rather than simple action produces a certain limitation in his work; there is more to life than endurance, and there is more to dying than being killed. And perhaps one might also say that there is more to growing old than the attempt to recapitulate the powers of youth—a fact which Hemingway seemed to find difficult to accept in his own lifetime, and which renders Santiago, in *The Old Man and the Sea*, in some ways pathetic rather than noble.

**LIMITATIONS.** That Hemingway’s work has limitations is obvious enough, and it is unfortunate that efforts to define these limitations have often aroused passions which have nothing to do with the work itself. Something of a “Hemingway cult” has arisen, a sort of

club encouraged by men who often seem more like cheer-leaders than literary critics. Hemingway himself, of course, was partially responsible for this development; haunted by fear of failure of all his life—failure of art, failure of nerve, failure of other and perhaps more intimate areas of existence—Hemingway could tolerate little criticism.

Too often he reacted to challenges either with denunciation or sulking, and questioned the motives, not to mention the manhood, of those who actually cared enough about his work to read it instead of merely praising it. His use of baseball-boxing-hunting jargon in the most absurd circumstances indicated that Hemingway had come to believe in his own “colorful” public image; unleavened by self-perspective or self-humor, the mannerisms had become the substance. “I trained hard and I beat Mr. de Maupassant,” he bombulated to Lillian Ross of the *New Yorker*; “I’ve faught two draws with Mr. Stendhal and I think I had an edge on the last one.” Only Hemingway could have said it, and only Hemingway could have believed it.

It is always difficult, of course, to know when a writer’s subject becomes an obsession, but Hemingway’s insistence, and re-insistence, and re-re-insistence on “virility” and “manhood” do have their ludicrous aspects; and one cannot escape the conclusion that his perpetual assertion had its basis in some murky sub-stratum of anxiety. Certainly the Hemingway hero is too often either unaware of—or a refuge from—what is ultimately the most “dangerous” area of existence: the complexities of the human soul.

Action itself, after all, may be a narcotic—a way of making it unnecessary to “confront” any experience that cannot be handled as one handles a gun or fishing-line. It is possible for a man to be so frightened of life that he has to run out and shoot or kill something; so un-

aware of life that his entire nature is defined by endurance or assertion; and so singledimensional in his own self-hood that he comes to use ritual as a substitute for reality rather than as a way of shaping it.

**FLIGHT FROM COMPLEXITY.** Throughout Hemingway's work there is a certain flight from all complexity, human or nonhuman, and this produces a thin aesthetic. So often do Hemingway's heroes remind themselves "not to think" that we have no choice but to believe that they really mean it. True, Hemingway did place his heroes in situations where "thinking" is not necessary—situations where will and endurance become the primary human values. What such "placing" indicates, however, is the fact that Hemingway arranged his "stage-sets" very carefully indeed. Far from dealing with "real life" as such, he simply refused to deal with an aspect of real life—or even real struggle—that calls for a wider arsenal of spiritual and intellectual weapons than those at the disposal of his protagonists—or of Hemingway himself.

This reservation applies to his language as well. It may be true that, as Hemingway said, good prose is like an iceberg, with only a small part showing on the surface. But it is also true that icebergs must remain in chill and arctic waters—or they melt. If the "hard" surface of Hemingway's prose is in some ways admirable, in other ways it is the product of weakness rather than strength.

This is not to say that Hemingway's work is to be dismissed as insignificant. Indeed, it was precisely because Ernest Hemingway was an artist that he could turn his own failures, his own fears, into an art which is both significant and true. But in order to understand what he *did* produce, it is necessary to have some idea of what he

*could not* produce. In short, Hemingway made the best possible use of his limitations, but we must recognize the limitations in order to appreciate the use to which he put them.

**BASIC ELEMENTS.** Three elements in Hemingway's life shaped many of his attitudes, and indeed shaped much of his work: the fact that he was "blown up" in World War I, suffering a painful and terrible wound without any "stance of manhood" whatsoever; the fact that his father committed suicide; and the fact of his own age—and the fears created by age itself. Like Frederick Henry in *A Farewell to Arms*, like Jake Barnes in *The Sun also Rises*, like Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*, the fear of "letting go" and the fear of "thinking" were always close to Ernest Hemingway. The nightmare of chaos, of passivity—of loss of will, loss of initiative, loss of the "masculine role"—was a terrible nightmare, and one to be avoided at all costs. That Hemingway evolved his own solutions to this nightmare, and based his art upon them, is something for which everyone interested in books and people must be thankful. But we need not assume that the solutions were universal ones, nor need we shrink from examining the art itself.

Santiago the fisherman, after all, like so many Hemingway protagonists, is the result of a deliberate simplification of the nature of manhood, the nature of age, and the nature of human identity itself. If *The Old Man and the Sea* remains one of Hemingway's best works, it may well be because the novel (actually a "novella" or long short-story) is less ambitious than either of the works preceding it: *Across the River and Into the Trees*, and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*.

No longer making any effort to deal with political or psychological complexities, Hemingway—with the character of Santiago—pro-

duced a lyric rather than an epic work, a prose-poem that frankly limits reality (or the scope of reality) in order to achieve a symbolic recapitulation of that same problem by which Ernest Hemingway had been hag-ridden ever since World War I: the problem of manhood—what makes it, and how it is to be preserved in the face of age, or illness, or the passivity which sooner or later must accompany both.

That Santiago, the “Old Man” in Hemingway’s last novel, does maintain his manhood in the face of old age, makes a moving and powerful story. That his resources for so doing are themselves limited, however, may be indicated by the fact that not even Santiago-Hemingway could face the final nightmare of loss of initiative, of the reduction of will. On August 31, 1961, Ernest Hemingway, the Old Man—the Grand Old Man—of American Literature, died of a self-inflicted gun-shot wound. “Young lions” were not enough, either as memory or dream.

## REVIEW OF HEMINGWAY'S LIFE AND WORK

Dr. Clarence E. Hemingway was a physician in Oak Park, Illinois. He was also an enthusiastic outdoorsman, and a very domesticated—perhaps over-domesticated—husband to Grace Hall Hemingway, a religious and pious woman. The Hemingways had six children, and Clarence never failed in his duties as head of the family. He was a good provider, a sentimental husband, and an affectionate father. In short, he was a “solid” and well-trained citizen who somehow felt it necessary to escape from the domestic hearth at every opportunity, using the Great Outdoors as a means of asserting whatever element of manhood or independence he felt was lacking in his family-directed (and perhaps woman-directed) home.

This conflict in his father—the conflict between the independent, masculine world of the outdoors, of hunting and fishing and physical endurance, as contrasted with the over-domesticated and somehow less manly town life—was later to be remembered by Ernest Hemingway, for whom “the mountains” were always to be a symbol of masculine clarity and purity, while “the plains,” or the city, were to remain a symbol of feminine complexity and danger.

**HEMINGWAY AND HIS FATHER.** Young Ernest, the second of the Hemingway children (born July 21, 1898), was at any rate profoundly influenced by his father. Despite the efforts of Grace Hemingway to raise her son with a “genteel” education (she had ambitions to provide Ernest with a musical education), he followed the example of Clarence, and—very early indeed—made it clear that the

only "instruments" he valued were fishing-rods and guns; well cared-for, religiously used, and almost ritualistically maintained.

The typewriter too, however, was to become an instrument for the young Ernest Hemingway. Although he was never a very "popular" boy at school, he quickly demonstrated his ability to write accurately and well, and became the editor of his school paper. That he got the job was a tribute to his skill rather than his social success, for either through choice or nature (and perhaps a combination of both) he was never a member of the "in" crowd. Indeed, his school experience was often lonely and not always pleasant, but it did provide one lesson that Hemingway was never to forget: life is a hard contest which only the toughminded are likely to survive.

Certain aspects of Hemingway's life at this time reflected his growing restlessness. He determined, for example, to learn boxing, but was by no means a "natural" fighter; indeed, he achieved some mastery of boxing only at the cost of a broken nose and a serious eye injury. He actually ran away from home twice during his school years, and spent months "on the road" working at a variety of temporary and often laborious jobs.

**THE WAR "ADVENTURE."** Like so many young men of the American midwest, Ernest Hemingway was bored and waiting . . . waiting for some chance of adventure, for "winning his spurs" in a situation that would combine glory with danger. The European War seemed to offer just such a chance, and when America entered The Great Crusade in 1917, Hemingway promptly tried to enlist. His eye injury, however, kept him out of the service, and he had to settle for a job as cub reporter on the *Kansas City Star*. But it was impossible for Hemingway to remain in Kansas City while thousands of other



Americans were going off to earn their “red badge of courage” in battle and adventure. He volunteered to serve as an ambulance driver on the Italian front, and left this country with high expectations: if he could not be a soldier, he would nevertheless taste the bitter glory of war.

It was a very brief taste indeed, and far more bitter than glorious. For, only a few weeks after arriving in the combat zone, Ernest Hemingway was “blown up” by a stray shell, receiving a serious wound which was to leave scars on his mind and spirit no less than on his body. It was, in many ways, an absurd wound, and one that had very little to do with “soldiering” at all: the mortar had punctured Hemingway’s body with little bits of metal without even being aware of his existence. At the time of his wound, furthermore, he had been engaged in an activity which (under the circumstances) was rather ludicrous: he had been “blown up” while handing out chocolates to Italian soldiers.

According to Hemingway’s own testimony, he was never to forget the impact of that experience. It was not so much the pain that he remembered, as the manner in which the pain was inflicted—a helpless, passive *receiving* of a blow from an invisible “fist” of machinery and death. Indeed, it was the passivity rather than the pain which was to remain a nightmare for Hemingway throughout his career.

A situation in which a man could be flung on his back to receive rather than give a final blow threatened far more than life: it threatened manhood itself; and in a very real sense Hemingway’s life—and his work—was to be devoted to finding and exploring those areas of existence in which men could take the initiative from pain and death by surrounding it with form, with ritual, with *willed endurance*.