

Paper I – Understanding Prose Fiction

The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemmingway

Q. Discuss the themes and motifs of the novel, “*The Old Man And The Sea*” in your own words.

Answer:

Themes are the fundamental and often universal ideas explored in a literary work. Motifs are recurring structures, contrasts, and literary devices that can help to develop and inform the text’s major themes. They try to give the reader some message intended by the author. Every single literary piece has at least one theme in its content. It is one of the most important literary elements of prose fiction. Ernest Hemmingway’s world-famous novel, “*The Old Man And the Sea*”, has many layers of themes and motifs hidden inside the text. Some of these themes are discussed below:

The Honour in Struggle, Defeat & Death:

From the very first paragraph of this novel, Santiago is characterized as someone struggling against defeat. He has gone eighty-four days without catching a fish—he will soon pass his own record of eighty-seven days. Almost as a reminder of Santiago’s struggle, the sail of his boat resembles “the flag of permanent defeat.” But the old man refuses defeat at every turn: he resolves to sail out beyond the other fishermen to where the biggest fish can be found. He finally catches the giant marlin after a brutal three-day fight, and then fights to retain the marlin from the attack of the sharks in the open sea for a long time, even though he knows the battle is useless.

Because Santiago is pitted against the creatures of the sea, some readers choose to view the tale as a story of man’s battle *against* the natural world, but the novella is, more accurately, the story of man’s place *within* nature. Both Santiago and the marlin display qualities of pride, honour, and bravery, and both are subject to the same eternal law: they must kill or be killed. As Santiago reflects when he watches the weary warbler fly toward shore, where it will inevitably meet the hawk, the world is filled with predators, and no living thing can escape the inevitable struggle that will lead to its death. Santiago lives according to his own observation: “**man is not made for defeat . . . [a] man can be destroyed but not defeated.**” In Hemmingway’s portrait of the world, death is inevitable, but the best men (and animals) will nonetheless refuse to give in to its power. Accordingly, man and fish will struggle to the death, just as hungry sharks will lay waste to an old man’s trophy catch.

The novel suggests that it is possible to transcend this natural law. It is precisely through the effort to battle the inevitable that a man can prove himself. Indeed, a man can prove this determination over and over through the worthiness of the opponents he chooses to face. Santiago finds the marlin worthy of a fight. His admiration for these opponents brings love and respect into an equation with death, as their destruction becomes a point of honour and bravery that confirms Santiago’s heroic qualities. One might characterize the equation as the working out of the statement “Because I love you, I have to kill you.” Alternately, one might draw a parallel to the poet John Keats and his insistence that beauty can only be comprehended in the moment before death, as beauty bows to destruction. **Santiago, though destroyed at the end of the novella, is never defeated. Instead, he emerges as a hero.** Santiago’s struggle does not enable him to change man’s place in the world. Rather, it enables him to meet his most dignified destiny.

Crucifixion Imagery

In order to suggest the profundity of the old man’s sacrifice and the glory that derives from it, Hemmingway purposefully likens Santiago to Christ, who, according to Christian theology, gave his life for the greater glory of humankind. Crucifixion imagery is the most noticeable way in which Hemmingway creates the symbolic parallel between Santiago and Christ. When Santiago’s palms are first cut by his fishing line, the reader cannot help but think of Christ suffering his stigmata. Later, when the sharks arrive, Hemmingway portrays the old man as a

crucified martyr, saying that he makes a noise similar to that of a man having nails driven through his hands. Furthermore, the image of the old man struggling up the hill with his mast across his shoulders recalls Christ's march toward Calvary. Even the position in which Santiago collapses on his bed—face down with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up—brings to mind the image of Christ suffering on the cross. Hemingway employs these images in the final pages of the novella in order to link Santiago to Christ, who exemplified transcendence by turning loss into gain, defeat into triumph, and even death into renewed life. This crucifixion imagery emphasizes the cyclical connection between life and death, as does Santiago's battle with the marlin.

Life from Death

Death is the unavoidable force in the novella, the one fact that no living creature can escape. But death, Hemingway suggests, is never an end in itself: in death there is always the possibility of the most vigorous life. The reader notes that as Santiago slays the marlin, not only is the old man reinvigorated by the battle, but the fish also comes alive "with his death in him." Life, the possibility of renewal, necessarily follows on the heels of death.

Pride as the Source of Greatness & Determination

Many parallels exist between Santiago and the classic heroes of the ancient world. In addition to exhibiting terrific strength, bravery, and moral certainty, those heroes usually possess a tragic flaw—a quality that, though admirable, leads to their eventual downfall. If pride is Santiago's fatal flaw, he is keenly aware of it. After sharks have destroyed the marlin, the old man apologizes again and again to his worthy opponent. He has ruined them both, he concedes, by sailing beyond the usual boundaries of fishermen. Indeed, his last word on the subject comes when he asks himself the reason for his undoing and decides, "Nothing . . . I went out too far."

While it is certainly true that Santiago's eighty-four-day run of bad luck is an affront to his pride as a masterful fisherman, and that his attempt to bear out his skills by sailing far into the gulf waters leads to disaster, Hemingway does not condemn his protagonist for being full of pride. On the contrary, Santiago stands as proof that pride motivates men to greatness. Because the old man acknowledges that he killed the mighty marlin largely out of pride, and because his capture of the marlin leads in turn to his heroic transcendence of defeat, pride becomes the source of Santiago's greatest strength. Without a ferocious sense of pride, that battle would never have been fought, or more likely, it would have been abandoned before the end.

Santiago's pride also motivates his desire to transcend the destructive forces of nature. Throughout the novel, no matter how baleful his circumstances become, the old man exhibits an unflagging determination to catch the marlin and bring it to shore. When the first shark arrives, Santiago's resolve is mentioned twice in the space of just a few paragraphs. First, we are told that the old man "was full of resolution but he had little hope." Then, sentences later, the narrator says, "He hit [the shark] without hope but with resolution." The old man meets every challenge with the same unwavering determination: he is willing to die in order to bring in the marlin, and he is willing to die in order to battle the feeding sharks. It is this conscious decision to act, to fight, to never give up that enables Santiago to avoid defeat. Although he returns to Havana without the trophy of his long battle, he returns with the knowledge that he has acquitted himself proudly and manfully. Hemingway seems to suggest that victory is not a prerequisite for honour. Instead, glory depends upon one having the pride to see a struggle through to its end, regardless of the outcome. Even if the old man had returned with the marlin intact, his moment of glory, like the marlin's meat, would have been short-lived. The glory and honour Santiago's spiritual growth come not from his battle itself but from his pride and determination to fight.

Q. Draw a character sketch of Santiago in your own words.

Answer:

The protagonist of the novella, Santiago is an elderly widowed Cuban fisherman whose "luck" seems to have run out—he hasn't caught anything in 84 days. Santiago is humble in his dealings with others, yet takes great pride in his work and himself, and is frustrated and embarrassed by his failures. He views his aging body as a kind of betrayer, and fondly remembers his younger days, when he was exceptionally strong and a successful fisherman. Other than fishing, Santiago's greatest joys are the time he spends with his former apprentice, Manolin, and the time he spends talking about baseball, and, in particular, his favorite player, the "great DiMaggio." Besides Manolin, Santiago considers his only friends to be the sea, the fish, and the stars. In his conquest over the marlin, Santiago exhibits exceptional determination and endurance in the face of physical and psychological pain. Although he loses the marlin to sharks, the entire struggle constitutes a spiritual triumph in which Santiago emerges as a Christ figure.

The old man, Santiago, is a Cuban fisherman who has had an extended run of bad luck for 84 days. We come to know that despite his expertise, he has been unable to catch a fish for eighty-four days. By nature, he is humble, yet exhibits a justified pride in his abilities. His knowledge of the sea and its creatures, and of his craft, is unparalleled and helps him preserve a sense of hope regardless of circumstance. Throughout his life, Santiago has been presented with contests to test his strength and endurance. The marlin with which he struggles for three days in this novel represents his greatest challenge. Paradoxically, although Santiago ultimately loses the fish, the marlin is also his greatest victory.

Santiago is the most important character of the novel. He is the protagonist. Unfortunately, he suffers terribly throughout the novel. In the opening pages of the book, due to the bad luck of eighty-four days, he becomes the laughingstock of his small Cuban village. We see that he then endures a long and terrible struggle with the marlin only to see his trophy catch destroyed by sharks. Yet, we find that the destruction enables the old man to undergo a remarkable moral victory in his defeat on the sea. After all, Santiago is an old man whose physical existence is almost over, but the reader is assured that Santiago will persist through Manolin, who, like a disciple, awaits the old man's teachings and will make use of those lessons long after his teacher has died. Thus, Santiago manages, perhaps, the most miraculous feat of all: he finds a way to prolong his life after death.

Santiago's commitment to sailing out farther than any fisherman has before, to where the big fish promise to be, testifies to the depth of his pride. Yet, it also shows his determination to change his luck. Later, after the sharks have destroyed his prize marlin, Santiago chastises himself for his hubris (exaggerated pride), claiming that it has ruined both the marlin and himself. True as this might be, it is only half the picture, for Santiago's pride also enables him to achieve his most true and complete self. Furthermore, it helps him earn the deeper respect of the village fishermen and secures him the prized companionship of the boy—he knows that he will never have to endure such an epic struggle again.

Santiago's pride is what enables him to endure, and it is perhaps endurance that matters most in Hemingway's conception of the world—a world in which death and destruction, as part of the natural order of things, are unavoidable. Hemingway seems to believe that there are only two options: defeat or endurance until destruction; Santiago clearly chooses the latter. His stoic determination is mythic, nearly Christ-like in proportion. For three days, he holds fast to the line that links him to the fish, even though it cuts deeply into his palms, causes a crippling cramp in his left hand, and ruins his back. This physical pain allows Santiago to forge a connection with the marlin that goes beyond the literal link of the line: his bodily aches attest to the fact that he is well matched, that the fish is a worthy opponent, and that he himself, because he is able to fight so hard, is a worthy fisherman. This connectedness to the world around him eventually elevates Santiago beyond what would

otherwise be his defeat. Like Christ, to whom Santiago is unashamedly compared at the end of the novella, the old man's physical suffering leads to a more significant spiritual triumph.

Q. Sketch the character of Manolin.

Answer:

A boy presumably in his adolescence, Manolin in the novel "The Old Man and the Sea" is Santiago's apprentice and devoted attendant. The old man first took him out on a boat when he was merely five years old. Due to Santiago's recent bad luck, Manolin's parents have forced the boy to go out on a different fishing boat. Manolin, however, still cares deeply for the old man, to whom he continues to look as a mentor. His love for Santiago is unmistakable as the two discuss baseball and as the young boy recruits help from villagers to improve the old man's impoverished conditions.

Manolin is present only in the beginning and at the end of *The Old Man and the Sea*, but his presence is important because Manolin's devotion to Santiago highlights Santiago's value as a person and as a fisherman. In the novel, Manolin demonstrates his love for Santiago openly. He makes sure that the old man has food, blankets, and can rest without being bothered. Despite Hemingway's insistence that his characters were a real old man and a real boy, Manolin's purity and singleness of purpose elevate him to the level of a symbolic character. Manolin's actions are not tainted by the confusion, ambivalence, or willfulness that typify adolescence. Instead, he is a companion who feels nothing but love and devotion.

Hemingway does hint at the boy's resentment for his father, whose wishes Manolin obeys by abandoning the old man after forty days without catching a fish. This fact helps to establish the boy as a real human being—a person with conflicted loyalties who faces difficult decisions. By the end of the book, however, the boy abandons his duty to his father, swearing that he will sail with the old man regardless of the consequences. He stands, in the novella's final pages, as a symbol of uncompromised love and fidelity. As the old man's apprentice, he also represents the life that will follow from death. His dedication to learning from the old man ensures that Santiago will live on.