

THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA

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*The Old Man and the Sea—The Old Man of the Sea—The Old man is the Sea.* This is a story of dualism, of dichotomies and of what seems to mortal minds to be contrasts of differences—the sea, the old man, the marlin, the turtles, the Man of War jellyfish that pop under Santiago's feet as he gleefully savors their destruction—a seeming victory over nature's falsities and betrayals. Continuously throughout this novella Hemingway makes clear these opposing forces, but then ultimately melds them together as a clear unity of process, purpose and function. So although there are distinct contrasts presented, both physically and spiritually, in the end a sense of unity prevails summing up Santiago's mind numbing ordeal with the female tourist's comment: "I didn't know sharks had such handsome, beautifully formed tails." (Hemingway, 1952, p. 127). As Eric Waggoner stated in "Inside the Current: A Taoist Reading of 'The Old Man and the Sea'"

Each section contains the seed of its opposite to remind us that change is ever-occurring. No thing is merely one thing. There is light in the dark, motion in stillness, male in the female. The Taoist world-view relies on philosophical dualism to make sense of the everyday in relation to the spiritual (and vice versa, because in Taoism there is no lasting or essential difference between the two.) (1998, p. 2)

Immediately Hemingway pits the material impermanence of Santiago, the Old Man of the Sea, with the immutable spirituality of his soul. He describes the aging Santiago as a product of material entropy—the inevitability of the ravages of time on a material being. In the next sentence he announces: "Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated." (1952 p. 10) Here Hemingway suggests that the eyes were the conduits into the soul of Santiago, and his soul was as the sea, vast, unlimited, at times cheerful, and always undefeated. What is interesting is that he compares his eyes

(soulful spirituality) to the sea, which can be a symbol of nature and material earthly feminism. Here is the paradox, that although we can see, for our own understanding, a difference between the material (feminine) and the spiritual (masculine) they are, as the Taoists say, one and the same.

The distinction disappears when taken out of the human need to differentiate subject from object.

Throughout this story there is an oscillation between this earth-bound sense of realism and the spiritual idealism of higher meaning and purpose. I would like to focus on the feminine that is symbolized by nature in general, or even more broadly, material reality, in Hemingway's novella. This manifest reality follows the rules of classical physics in its outward and physical expression. It is the way of the animal spirit, the way of the wild. To Santiago it is luring, enchanting, beautiful, yet deadly, destructive and cyclical—all things come into being and all things eventually move out of being. The sea represents the clearest metaphor for this cycle of nature in Hemingway's novella. It is all encompassing, it provides life, and then takes it away. It is impersonal, unified, beautiful and wicked simultaneously.

I see the masculine in this story as represented by humankind, or by *man* as Hemingway puts it repeatedly, but not only by physical man, but also by man's tedious *action*. Humankind is a strange mixture of spirituality and earthiness continuously being pulled apart and examined. Santiago spends countless minutes perfecting his skillful process in the execution of his task. He believes he must master the material world and transcended mere human instinct. He has learned a skill beyond what nature handed to him in his genes. "His repeated ordered action embodies his connection with his inner landscape, and arranges outer reality to match the inner." (1998, p. 8) Santiago's relationship with animals throughout this story has great significance.

He continually compares himself with the animals he has encountered and ponders on the similarities they may possess, he even goes so far as to wonder what they are thinking, and if they are thinking the same things he is thinking. Santiago often identifies with the marlin he has

caught, commenting on it being his brother and comparing his will with the marlin's. Santiago clearly sees an essential part of himself in his surroundings and in the animal objects of his experience. Maria-Louise Van Franz describes this *archaic identity*:

Thus we must assume that in relatively earthly stages of our development there was no difference between our unconscious psyche and the outer world; they were in a state of *complete equality*, that is, archaic identity. Then certain mysterious psychic processes, mutations, took place which disturbed the peace of this identity and forced us to withdraw certain representations and see that they were inner not outer facts. We then always replace the idea about the outer facts with a new "projection," of which we do not yet see its subjective aspect. (1972, p. 5)

Other animal connections include Santiago's description of the Man of War jellyfish as whores—a temptress of the ocean, with beautiful iridescent bubbles fooling one to be lured into the poisonous sting of its tentacles. In Santiago's eyes this could serve as a metaphor for physical, earthly, life in general—tempting and beautiful yet treacherous and ultimately destructive. He feels betrayed by the jellyfish, betrayed by the feminine qualities of nature, dynamic and entropic, which say, *I am beautiful, come to me*, yet then are the cause for suffering, death, old age, and ultimate physical defeat. He still feels the compulsion to be engaged with it, however, and to be seduced by its promise of victory and success through conquest. Only in the end does he realize his experience is beyond the material: "But man is not made for defeat...A man can be destroyed but not defeated." (1952, p. 103)

The ubiquitous spark of spirit puts him above this fear of destruction, even above the fear of the sea as he bravely sails out into it alone, totally prepared mentally, physically, and spiritually for whatever it might bring forth in challenge. Santiago has believed that he has the will to conquer nature—he has popped the whore under the "horny soles of his feet." (1952, p.36) Yet Santiago continuously identifies himself with the fish, and the sea, and the other animals he encounters and wishes to conquer. Through this process of dissimulation he finds himself to be an orphaned child of nature, unable to fully connect with his inner primal identity,

yet struggles with looking for that identity in, questions the righteousness of killing the great fish he has cunningly lured into his trap and finally comes to the conclusion that it doesn't matter who kills whom. (1952, p. 92)

As Santiago struggles with his morality he becomes confused by his perceived superiority as a thinking human being—feeling it is necessary to somehow elevate the fish and nature to a level that he equates with his own. This gives him justification for killing the marlin. He knows he is somehow different from the fish, but at some inner level believes that they are really one and the same, brothers, and yet he has an unfair advantage, his intellect. This dichotomy is a struggle for Santiago and he wishes to be the fish rather than the man. Santiago struggles with his incongruent thinking, on the one hand loving the fish as a brother, and on the other his desire to prove his superior humanness by its destruction. His identification with wildness tell him it is natural to want to kill the fish:

Coyote and Ground Squirrel do not break the compact they have with each other that one must play predator and the other play game. In the wild a baby Black-tailed Hare gets maybe one free chance to run across a meadow without looking up. There won't be a second. The sharper the knife, the cleaner the line of the carving. (Synder, 1990, p. 4)

Yet Santiago is a man, a human being, who is aware of greater things than the code of instinct-driven nature. The foundation of the manifest universe is a natural and balanced process. There is a cyclical continuity to this process. It needs no meaning beyond this; it functions as a well-oiled machine. As we look at the bigger picture we see a sophisticated and elegant mechanism. This lofty view is devoid of the noise at its sublevels where a continual struggle of life and death, destruction and rebirth, takes place. Of course nature is not devoid of spiritual subjectivity, it is always present, weaving its way in and out of this process. But in our desire to understand and observe we must, as the Taoists suggest, rely on this philosophical dualism. The spiritual element in nature, and as presented as a heightened persuasion in Santiago, is catalytic

and wishes to drive an arrow into the seeming complacency of a balanced universe—it wishes to understand it, to give meaning to it, and to transcend it through conquest. Santiago isn't merely attempting to catch a fish as the lion catches a gazelle; he is struggling to find a higher meaning in this process. In Hemingway's work, the old man struggles with this integration of spiritual masculinity—the desire to *do* in the world—and his own archaic identity with feminine nature and the compulsion to simply *be*—to be part of the natural system. This struggle becomes the catalyst for the story that unfolds. His story provides meaning to the events.

Ultimately, in my view, Santiago comes to terms with this struggle—at least partially, which is the best most of us can expect in our material life. He satisfies his great spiritual need to go into the woods and return a hero, although the fruits of his labors may not be material at all: “The teeming sea has stripped us clean, and there is no fleshly form to admire. It is ourselves we have lashed to the side of the little vessel, and we have rowed mightily to get us home while something is still left.” (Heinz, 1999, p. 101)

His experience brought him closer to withdrawing the projection of his own value and self worth from the marlin and nature around him. The marlin was physically destroyed—he was not. He goes on to sleep in his own shack and dream again of his lions, the imagery of integrated masculinity and nature. The journey itself becomes the prize. Santiago created a story, his story with the marlin, the sharks, the birds, the tuna, the dolphins, turtles, jellyfish, and the sea.

Through his choices and decisions he painted a canvas of struggle, of event, and of manifest, material, reality. He broke through the mechanized process of nature and catalytically punched a hole in that process bringing meaning to a series of events that as they were before his engagement would hold no meaning beyond nature's cyclical process of life and death—destruction and reconstruction. His story is one of inner triumph rather than the physical outer success of bringing the marlin home. Yet in this reality, too, there is great suffering. Even through enlightenment Santiago cannot escape the reality of his physical form. He has come

home defeated physically, with no catch—no fish. He is not any younger, not any less hungry, and not any more physically stronger.

While researching this article I could not help but be struck by the analogy between *The Old Man and the Sea* and my wife's personal struggle with cancer four years ago. As Santiago did, she went out in the vast ocean of unlimited potential to fight a battle that was ultimately unwinnable. She was meticulous in developing her skills for fighting the disease honing all of the elements necessary for her battle, including physical exercise, nutrition, education and research that enabled her to make better choices about her care. She went out too far as Santiago did, defying nature and probability and *the way things are* insisting that there could be a different ending for something that nature had statistically insisted on being a certain way. She continually came back to shore with less and less flesh strapped to the side of her boat as her body was slowly and methodically sliced into, burned, or chemically assaulted.

She held onto the myth, as Santiago did, that physical life was the ultimate truth, but only because she felt to preserve it was *what a man must do*. The paradox in both stories is that although Santiago and Janice believed in the reality of the physical world they still had a clear and present connection with the spirit deep within them. They both continued to fight when there was so little hope of success. It was not important for either of them, toward the end of their ordeal, to be victorious over the physical challenge, but rather to be clear and aware of what they were truly experiencing. The loss of the marlin for Santiago can only be deemed a failure if we measure success in terms of our dominance and superiority over other beings, or over nature. (Waggoner, 1998) This was true for Janice as well. I cannot speak for her, but from my perspective she was clearly successful...as was Santiago. Their duty as spiritual beings manifest in a physically expressive body, was to defy conformity, to make choices and actions that set into motion change and evolution—to step out of the wildness momentarily, without ever really letting go of it entirely. Santiago accomplished this as a personal inner victory. Janice

accomplished it in many ways—through transformative change in my life and the lives of those many hearts she touched, and undoubtedly in her own spiritual evolution.



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