

**Individuality in Ernest Hemingway's  
"The Old Man and the Sea"  
التفرد في رواية ارنست همنغواي (الشيخ والبحر)**

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**Abstract:**

This paper is concerned with exploring the individualistic characteristics that set Hemingway's protagonist, Santiago, away from the society among which he lives.

The paper starts with an introduction defining the concept of individualism as it is used throughout the paper; this is followed by a historical background for the development of the term with references to schools of thought and their standpoint of the concept of individuality. The paper moves then to show how the main character in Hemingway's novella bridges the gap between the classical (heroic) and modern (everyday man) types of protagonists. This is followed by a detailed revelation of how the character manages to transcend the frustrations and limitations imposed by the old man's bad luck and his mocking and disrespecting fellow citizens not only to survive, but also to regain respect in a world that seems to revere youth, sophistication and good luck.

In order to do this, Santiago's individualistic qualities are scrutinized and the emphasis is laid on the character's intrinsic intuition and his exceptional spiritual relationship with both the animate and inanimate objects in his world. In addition, the old man's transcendentalism, seclusion, independence, primitivism and endurance are dissected.

The paper ends with a conclusion in which the main findings are outlined. This is followed by a list of references in which the sources and references consulted in this paper are listed.

**ملخص البحث:**

هذا البحث معني بكشف الخصائص المتفردة الي يتميز بها (سانتياغو) الشخصية الرئيسية في رواية ارنست همنغواي (الشيخ والبحر) والتي تميزه عن سائر المجتمع المحلي.

يستهل البحث بتحديد لمعنى مصطلح "التفرد" و تطوره التاريخي حسب المدارس الفلسفية والفكرية التي سبقت وعاصرت الرواية, ومن ثم يتم مناقشة مفهوم التفرد عند همنغواي و الانتقال لتوضيح كيف أن الشخصية الرئيسية تمثل حلقة وصل ما بين النمطين الكلاسيكي والمعاصر لمفهوم الشخصية الرئيسية في الادب القصصي. و يوضح الباحث كيف تتمكن الشخصية من التسامي على الاحباطات والقيود التي تفرضها الاقدار والمجتمع الانساني من اجل استعادة مكانته واحترام المجتمع له في بيئة تمجد الشباب والتحضر وحسن الطالع. ولاجل ذلك فقد تم تحليل وايضاح خصائص شخصية (سانتياغو) المتفردة مثل رؤيته المتسامية، وعزله، واستقلاله، وبدائيته، و تحمله.

و ينتهي البحث بخاتمة تلخص اهم الاستنتاجات التي خلص اليها البحث، متبوعة بقائمة بعناوين المصادر والمراجع التي تم الاستعانة بها.

## **Introdution:**

“I will not choose what many men desire,  
Because I will not jump with common spirits  
And rank me with the barbarous multitudes.”

(William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*, II, IX)

The *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary of Current English* states that the term “individuality” refers to “all the characteristics that belong to a particular person that make him/her different from others”.<sup>1</sup> The term is also explained in the sense of being separate from others. Hemingway's protagonist's bad luck is the reason behind his alienation from the society, while his romantic and humanitarian viewpoint enables him to get over social rejection towards self-assertion.

The emphasis on the individual person and experience dates back to Hellenistic Greece manifested in the personally guided moral philosophy of the Greek philosopher Epicurus who claimed that the gods were detached from human concerns and had little interference with human affairs, and people, he saw, had better worry about life than death and its consequences. Orthodox Christianity restricted such human independence in thought and action as the Christian moral system depends on a non-human and divine set of values which is not to be disobeyed by dissidents. However, after the emergence of Christian Humanism and later Protestantism and the changes that happened to Christian thought more importance was given to the individual human being.

The term “individualism” was used by the opponents of the French Revolution with negative overtones. Joseph Marie de Maistre (1753 - 1821), the French political philosopher and diplomat, used it to signify a disordered state of egotism and moral decay. Anti-individualistic thought was encouraged also by the intense human injustices which represented the downside of the wide scale process of industrialization. The rise of communistic and fascist thought at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century brought, later on, individualistic ideas into unpopularity; since these were political social theories that opposed individualism.

The concept of individuality regained popularity and reemerged after the collapse of the social and political apparatuses in the Soviet Union and the majority of the communist bloc. This was reflected in the appearance of movements like expressionism, surrealism, and dada that rely extensively on the free and independent personal artistic expression.

In literature, individualistic characters appeared in works such as *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, *Don Quixote*, *Robinson Crusoe*, and *Don Juan*. As for American literature, that has been often associated with individualistic qualities, advocates of the free and independent self such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, David Henry Thoreau, Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Mark Twain, and Robert Frost helped shape an American romanticism that is based on the break from the stiffness of society and civilization.

## **Santiago as an Individualist:**

Hemingway's protagonist is a hybrid of the modern type and the classical one. Santiago is a poor Cuban fisherman, an everyman of poor society; a model the classists would unlikely use as a protagonist since they sought to represent figures of high social or political stature. Yet, the character's individual, superior, and sometimes heroic qualities would fit him into the classical mould.<sup>2</sup>

The transcendental merits of Hemingway's protagonist which are achieved through his natural intuition elevate him above human and physical restrictions and frustrations. Such an attitude was declared by Emerson and later by Thoreau. The latter, in his book entitled *Walden* emphasized the advantage of

living simply within nature; an attitude established on the necessity of survival in hostile circumstances.<sup>3</sup>

Nature for Santiago is his main source of insights and stimuli for self-analysis. His empathy for sea creatures, his dreams and moral strength are inspired by his close association with the environment.<sup>4</sup>

The fisherman who sails far away into the vast ocean crosses the usual boundaries of his everyday fishing trips; it is an indication of his adventurous character and his desire to get closer to the natural and primitive and farther from human society. It is a call for a break with human civilization. Such a break is necessary for Santiago to live simply and in harmony with nature.<sup>5</sup> A similar bond, on the part of the other fishermen, does not exist as the development of uncongenial mechanization continued (they use motors, buoys, and radios). It is a romantic attitude that reveres the simple and spontaneous rather than the sophisticated and artificial.

This oneness with nature and its living things is reflected also through the fisherman's attitude that man is part of the cycle of life; today's hunter could be tomorrow's prey and man should fight in order to win and survive; thus man is seen as an individualist within the larger system of life, this is seen through the general development of the plot in which Santiago wins over the great marlin but later losses it to the sharks. It is a paradoxical view point that applies to Santiago's outlook to the great marlin as well; he admires the fish and considers it sometimes near and sometimes beyond the human-animal boundary "Fish, he said, "I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends."<sup>6</sup>

Animals, for Santiago are nobler and more able than man "They are not as intelligent as we who kill them, although they are more noble [sic] and more able". (p. 53), so they could transcend humanity. By linking himself with the marlin and the natural world Hemingway's protagonist is set apart from the rest of the world by his spontaneity and instinctiveness; qualities that associate the character with primitivism.<sup>7</sup>

Abrams and Harpham in their *Glossary of Literary Terms* see that a primitivist acts on the pulse of instinct. Human culture, thought, and the complexity of modern civilized society are all artificialities that degenerate man's morality and spoil his inner goodness. Santiago values the instincts and the passions over thought and reason, and the freedom of expression over silence and repression. Social philosophy holds that the ideal state is the simple and natural forms of social and political orders. These should replace the frustrations of a complex and highly developed social organization. Isolation from society is considered by primitivists as preferable to living in a highly developed society. Nature, unmodified by human intervention, is the Utopia of the primitivist.<sup>8</sup>

Hemingway, by presenting a primitive heroic character, seems to allude to his dissatisfaction with modern Western life.<sup>9</sup> Santiago's primitivism can be detected by examining some of his acts like slicing fish and chewing its raw meat swallowing its juices to keep himself strong, also the scene in which he recalls hooking a female marlin does not relate to social sophistication:

...The female made a wild, panic-stricken, despairing fight that soon exhausted her, ... when the old man had gaffed her and clubbed her,...clubbing her across the top of her head until her colour turned to a colour almost like the backing of mirrors ... We begged her pardon and butchered her promptly. (p. 41)

The old fisherman is portrayed here as an individual who fights to survive just like an untamed wild beast. Modern primitivists consider pain a sign of that which is authentic, since pain is associated with the hardness of primitive life:<sup>10</sup>

He had pushed his straw hat hard down on his head before he hooked the fish and it was cutting his forehead. He was thirsty too...Then he rested against the bow. He rested sitting on the unstepped mast and sail and tried not to think but only to endure. (p. 37)

Later, the wounds and scars on his body make him appear as a Christ-like figure; his pains and stigmata associate him with the highest Christian ideal of sacrifice and individuality.<sup>11</sup> In the last part of the

novella the image of the old man carrying the mast on his shoulder and stopping to rest before collapsing is a striking similarity with the story of crucifixion “then he shouldered the mast and started to climb” (P. 104) and another image in which he lays on bed in a manner suggestive of crucifixion charge the scene with highly emotional religious connotations of pain, fatigue, and self-sacrifice “Then he lay down on the bed...and slept face down on the newspapers with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up.” (p. 105). , displaying love and kindness to Manolin and even to his rival (the fish) parallels the relationship between Christ and his disciples, Manolin’s crying corresponds to the supporters of Christ and their guilt after the crucifixion.

The concept of the “noble savage” was not unpopular in the literature of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The term refers to a person who belongs to an “uncivilized” group or tribe and is considered for this reason morally superior to people who live within civilization.<sup>12</sup> The name of the French educator Jean Jacques Rousseau was particularly associated with this term.<sup>13</sup>

Rousseau in his influential novel entitled *Émile* (1762) advocates the idea that without the bounds of civilization man is essentially good. The wild untamed and unrestricted state of man which existed before the creation of civilization is the best condition for the flourishing of human goodness and happiness, people’s innate goodness and spiritual purity are corrupted by their experiences in society. Rousseau thus recommends that a child’s emotions be educated before his reason.

The idea that primitive people are “naturally intelligent, moral, and of high dignity in thought and deed”<sup>14</sup> applies to Hemingway’s protagonist, Santiago. A close examination of this character would reveal that optimism and the ability to see hope even in hopeless situations is one quality that ranks Santiago as a dignified individual. In spite of the fact that “he had gone eighty-four days without taking a fish ... the old man was still cheerful and undefeated... his hope and confidence had never gone” (p. 8); he believes that every day is a fresh beginning that could bring in something new and good; “every day is a new day.” (p. 25) His lion dreams are symbolic representations of strength, endurance, and dignity “he only dreamed of places now and of lions on the beach. They played like young cats in the dusk and he loved them as he loved the boy.” (p. 19). The religious image of presenting Santiago as a Christ-like figure alludes to the old man’s dignity “The old man carried the mast on his shoulder.” (p.10) His empathy, pity, and admiration toward the marlin reveal tenderness of heart and a high sense of morality “he began to pity the great fish that he had hooked. He is wonderful and strange.” (p. 40) In the same way we see that the old fisherman’s humanistic attitude towards a pair of marlin he had hooked before indicates that his primitivism has not spoiled his nobility; instead, these actually seem to be closely allied qualities that spring from his realistic knowledge of the necessity to survive and his pity and admiration toward sea creatures:<sup>15</sup>

He remembered the time he had hooked one of a pair of marlin. The male fish always let the female feed first, ... That was the saddest thing I ever saw with them, the old man thought. The boy was sad too and we begged her pardon and butchered her promptly. (p. 41)

Santiago’s personality is differentiated from that of his fellow fishermen in his village; his romantic attitude to the sea emphasizes his individuality within his community. He looks at the sea as a female “la mar”:

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. The moon affects her as it does a woman, he thought.” (p. 23)

While “some of the other younger fishermen, those who used buoys as floats for their lines and had motor-boats...spoke of her as el mar which is masculine. They spoke of her as contestant or a place or even an enemy.” (p.23) The generation gap between Santiago and the younger fishermen individualizes him further more.

Hemingway's protagonist demonstrates a tendency to identify himself with the world around him; this oneness applies not to his fellow citizens but rather to the inanimate universe around him also to his attitude toward the great marlin. The high regard with which he views the marlin calls to mind the tradition of "animality".<sup>16</sup>

Animality is associated with the rise of primitivism as a philosophy, in which some advocates see that to correct the damage caused by modern society on man's morality man should take animals as models of dignity and goodness. Animals are seen as noble, balanced, reasonable and in touch with nature; it is an extreme form of primitivism. Animality means also imitating animals or the desire to be animal-like.<sup>17</sup> Animality in "The Old Man and the Sea" can be seen in the ways Santiago blurs the line between the human and animal. This can be observed through the symbolic significance of the fishing line that connects the great fish with the old fisherman.

Man is the only creature who is known to identify himself with animals; thus, such an act is an indirect assertion on man's humanity.<sup>18</sup>

The fact that Hemingway in many of his works, like *The Sun Also Rises* and "The Old Man and the Sea", is interested in presenting situations that require little thinking but much endurance is another manifestation of animality in the writer's output "He rested sitting on the un-stepped mast and sail and tried not to think but only to endure." (p. 37) The old man behaves mostly impulsively asserting his distinctiveness from his fellow human beings and closeness from the instinctual, natural and un-tamed. Another clear reference to animality in Hemingway's saga is presented through his empathy and admiration to green turtles and hawk-bills:

He loved green turtles and hawk-bills with their elegance and speed and their great value .... Most people are heartless about turtles because a turtle's heart will beat for hours after he has been cut up and butchered. But the old man thought, I have such a heart too and my feet and hands are like theirs. (p. 29)

Santiago observes bondage of "brotherhood" with the marlin and green turtles; he calls the marlin "my brother". However, the necessity of survival pushes Santiago on with his battle with the fish "I wish I could feed the fish, he thought. He is my brother. But I must kill him and keep strong to do it." (p. 49)

Hemingway seems to present a character who echoes Rousseau's belief that society corrupts man. Santiago's individuality is emphasized through setting him apart from urbanized society. Sophisticated and civilized life has resulted in cutting modern man off from the natural world and instinctive impulses.<sup>19</sup> The character, with his loneliness and isolation preserves his innate goodness "He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream." (p. 5)

References to Santiago's alienation are found in his physical isolation from the main land going far into the wide ocean, his distinction from the other fishermen in his fishing techniques, his characteristic physical strength " 'But you went turtleing for years off the Mosquito Coast and your eyes are good.' 'I am a strange old man' ". (p. 9), and being a lonely widower.

The protagonist's seclusion is an indication of his separation from human society "He had probably started to talk aloud, when alone, when the boy had left." (p. 31), "He looked around for the bird now because he would have liked him for company. The bird was gone." (p. 46), and "I wish the boy were here" (p. 47). Santiago is conscious of his alienation from the rest of the local community "If the others heard me talking out loud they would think that I am crazy, I do not care. And the rich have radios to talk to them in their boats and to bring them the baseball." (p. 32). Though the old man is aware of his alienation and independence, yet he often longs for the boy's company and support. Such solidarity is not possible after the boy's parents ordered him to leave Santiago and join another more fortunate fisherman. However, they are united only when the old man returns home on land where they achieve integration with each other.

## **Conclusion:**

The theme in “The Old Man and the Sea” is the elevation of individuality and the subordination of the social whole.<sup>20</sup> Santiago’s individuality arises from the special and unique qualities of his character; his primitivism, noble savagery, the sense of oneness he has with the natural universe and the sea creatures, the blood brotherhood he feels with the marlin, his heroism, independence and alienation in a society that venerates youth, good luck, and social integration. Yet, this individuality does not mark him as an alien in the universe; for he achieves a considerable level of integration with the world around him. Unlike Hemingway's other novels, “The Old Man and the Sea” emphasizes what man can do rather than what he is incapable of, the world is presented as a place in which the best can establish his heroic self, tragedy and pain are transcended by optimism and endurance. Santiago’s voyage is a quest in which he searches for and establishes a unique identity within the inclusive universal structure. It has been emphasized that the American character features individuality and independence, Ernest Hemingway’s novella frames this meaning giving it a heroic and epic dimension.

## **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> A. S. Hornby, “Individuality”, Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary of Current English, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989) p. 636.

<sup>2</sup> Gerry Brenner, The Old Man and the Sea: Story of a Common Man, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991) p. 34.

<sup>3</sup> Karl Avery, “Walden”, Microsoft Student Encarta Encyclopedia (DVD), 2009.

However, private notes indicated that Thoreau did not always feel that nature held the answer to most social and spiritual problems, this is the point in which Thoreau differs from the English romanticists.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Waldhorn, A Reader’s Guide to Ernest Hemingway, (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1972) p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> Harold Bloom, ed, The Old Man and the Sea: Modern Critical Interpretations, (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 1999) p. 93.

<sup>6</sup> Ernest Hemingway, The Old Man and the Sea, (New York: Scribners, 1952) p. 45. All subsequent quotations are taken from this edition; henceforth, they shall be indicated only by page numbers.

<sup>7</sup> Vyrna Santosa, “The Characteristics of Primitivism in Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*”, <http://puslit2.petra.ac.id/ejournal/index.php/ing/article/viewArticle/15487>. (Retrieved on 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2010).

<sup>8</sup> M.H. Abrams and Geoffrey Galt Harpham, “Primitivism” A Glossary of Literary Terms, (Boston: Thomson and Wadsworth, 2005) p. 253.

<sup>9</sup> Harold Bloom, p. 101. Such a theme is emphasized more clearly in other Hemingway works which are characteristic of the Lost Generation; the group of U.S. authors, including Ernest Hemingway and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who, being disillusioned, rejected American values and lived in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s.

<sup>10</sup> Margo DeMello, Encyclopedia of Body Adornment, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2007) pp. 240-41.

<sup>11</sup> R. Brandon Kershner, Twentieth Century Novel: An Introduction, (Bedford: St. Martin’s, 1997) p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> Katherine T. Jobes, Twentieth Century Interpretations of *The Old Man and the Sea*, (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1968) p. 60.

- <sup>13</sup> Rebecca S. New and Moncrieff Cochran, ed, Early Childhood Education: An International Encyclopedia, (Connecticut: Praeger Publications, 2007). P. 703.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid. p. 704
- <sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, ed, Ernest Hemingway: The Critical Heritage, (London: Routledge Inc., 1982) p. 260.
- <sup>16</sup> Stephen P. Clifford, Beyond the Heroic "I": Reading Lawrence, Hemingway, and "Masculinity", (New Jersey: Bucknell University Press, 1999) p. 78.
- <sup>17</sup> Patricia Dunlavy Valenti, Understanding The Old Man and the Sea: A Student Casebook to Issues, Sources and Historical Documents, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002) p. 98.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 54.
- <sup>19</sup> The New Monarch Notes CD-ROM, Triad Grafton. "The Old Man and the Sea", (London: Oakwood Publishing Company, 1976) p. 105.
- <sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Meyers, "Hemingway's Primitivism and "Indian Camp"", Twentieth Century Literature, Vol. 34, No. 2, Summer, 1988, (New York: Hofstra University Press) p. 211.

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