

A NIHILISTIC AND EXISTENTIAL EXPLORATION OF SANTIAGO'S STRUGGLE IN *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA*

1 Aziz Ullah Khan,

Assistant Professor, Department of English and Applied Linguistics, University of Science & Technology, Bannu, KP, Pakistan

2 Muhammad Hassan Shah,

M.Phil Scholar, Visiting Lecturer, Department of English and Applied Linguistics,
University of Science and Technology, Bannu, KP, Pakistan

Abstract

*This paper explores Santiago's inner thoughts, emotional development, and behavioral patterns in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), interpreting them as manifestations of psychological resilience amid existential despair. The study also investigates how the narrative subtly mirrors Hemingway's own life experiences, particularly his psychological and emotional turmoil during the later stages of his career. Santiago's solitude, guilt, and eventual emotional exhaustion parallel Hemingway's personal feelings of alienation, creative fatigue, and existential crisis. The old man's physical struggle against nature, his introspective dialogue, and his ultimate resignation are interpreted through existential philosophy, particularly the absurdist ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre. The relationship between Santiago and Manolin is also analyzed as a symbol of Hemingway's longing for human connection in the face of spiritual isolation. Ultimately, the novel is argued to be a symbolic reflection of Hemingway's internal world and a profound meditation on the human condition.*

Keywords: Santiago, Ernest Hemingway, psychological conflict, existentialism, absurdity, loneliness, guilt, resilience, *The Old Man and the Sea*, autobiographical elements

Background of the Study

Ernest Hemingway's literary work reflects the disenchantment and disillusionment characteristic of the 20th century. *The Old Man and the Sea*, written in 1952, captures the essence of existential defeat and human endurance against a meaningless world. This study investigates how the novella presents a deeply nihilistic perspective by focusing on the futility of struggle, loss of purpose, and existential fatigue that Santiago experiences.

Purpose of the Study

The aim of this study is to interpret *The Old Man and the Sea* using the philosophical frameworks of nihilism and existentialism, with particular attention to Santiago's inner thoughts, behavior, and emotional trajectory. It also aims to situate Hemingway's personal life context within this narrative to argue that the novel is a veiled reflection of the author's own psychological and existential turmoil.

Literature Review

Recent scholarship has increasingly highlighted existential and nihilistic interpretations of Hemingway's work. Abdullah and Kamal (2022) emphasize the psychological exhaustion of modern man in Hemingway's fiction. Chen (2023) discusses Santiago as a representation of Camus's absurd hero, caught in an unresolvable tension between struggle and meaninglessness. Fatima et al. (2021) view the novella as an allegory of artistic failure, where the marlin symbolizes Hemingway's ideal work, ultimately destroyed by reality. Qureshi (2024) explores Santiago's isolation and futile attempts to assert meaning in a chaotic universe. These perspectives reaffirm the novella's position as an existential work steeped in the philosophy of absurdism.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive approach rooted in textual analysis to examine *The Old Man and the Sea* through the lenses of existentialist philosophy, psychoanalytic theory, and autobiographical criticism. The novel's text serves as the primary source, with a focus on Santiago's internal monologue, behavior, and emotional shifts. A thematic analysis identifies recurring motifs such as absurdity, solitude, guilt, and inner conflict (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Concepts from Jean-Paul Sartre's existential freedom and Albert Camus's absurdism help interpret Santiago's confrontation with the meaningless yet persistent struggle of life (Sartre, 2007; Camus, 1991). Freudian psychoanalysis reveals Santiago's ego-superego conflict, while Jungian archetypes frame his journey as that of a symbolic hero (Freud, 1961; Jung, 1969). Hemingway's biographical background—his depression, loneliness, and disillusionment—guides the autobiographical lens (Baker, 1969; Meyers, 1985). Secondary scholarly texts further support this triangulated method to decode the novel as both a psychological and philosophical allegory of human endurance.

Theoretical Framework

This study applies Existentialism and Psychoanalytic Literary Theory to examine *The Old Man and the Sea*. Drawing on Sartre and Camus, Santiago's struggle is seen as a reflection of existential isolation and absurdity, symbolized by his overreaching efforts and ultimate futility. The psychoanalytic lens, particularly Freudian and Jungian concepts, explores his inner conflicts, guilt, and symbolic role as a solitary hero. Additionally, autobiographical criticism suggests Santiago mirrors Hemingway's own psychological struggles, making the novel a personal and philosophical allegory of human endurance and existential fatigue.

Santiago's Psychological and Emotional Journey and Hemingway's Reflections in *The Old Man and the Sea*

1. Santiago's Inner Thoughts, Behavior, and Emotional Trajectory

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Ernest Hemingway presents Santiago as a solitary, dignified character who navigates the harshness of nature and the weight of his own mortality. Santiago's inner thoughts expose an introspective man deeply aware of his isolation and decline. He laments, "*No one should be alone in their old age... but it is unavoidable*" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 12), revealing a deep-seated loneliness and resignation to solitude. These thoughts show his acceptance of existential isolation, a theme central to his psychological landscape.

His behavior, however, reflects resilience and personal integrity. Despite his physical frailty and long streak of bad luck, Santiago maintains his pride and continues to fish, stating, "*A man can be destroyed but not defeated*" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 29). This mantra encapsulates Santiago's moral philosophy: endurance over despair.

His emotional trajectory fluctuates between nostalgia and melancholy. Santiago longs for Manolin's companionship: "*I wish I had the boy. But you haven't got the boy... You have only yourself*" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 14). This emotional solitude grows as the story progresses. Even his success in hooking the marlin becomes a source of regret rather than joy. He reflects, "*I wish it were a dream and that I had never hooked him*" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 31). These inner conflicts drive Santiago into a state of spiritual and emotional fatigue, culminating in the powerful line: "*It was then he knew the depth of his tiredness*" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 46). His struggle, therefore, is not only with the marlin but with his own meaning in life.

2. Hemingway's Life Reflected in the Narrative

Hemingway's personal life provides critical insight into Santiago's character. By 1952, Hemingway was dealing with aging, creative exhaustion, and emotional instability. Santiago's psychological profile closely mirrors these concerns. The line, "*Perhaps I should not have been a fisherman*" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 13), echoes Hemingway's possible doubts about his writing career, especially as critics questioned his relevance after his earlier success. Santiago's journey "too far out" is symbolic of Hemingway's own tendency to push personal and artistic boundaries. The old man says, "*I went out too far*" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 34), a metaphor for overreaching one's limits—a feeling Hemingway may have experienced due to the pressures of fame, failed relationships, and psychological trauma, especially from his experiences in war and his multiple injuries (Baker, 1969).

Moreover, Santiago's guilt and shame after killing the marlin suggest Hemingway's internal struggle with violence, masculinity, and moral responsibility. Santiago mutters, "*I am sorry that I went out too far. I ruined us both*" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 32), reflecting a deep moral exhaustion. This mirrors existential notions of absurdity, especially in Sartre's claim that man is "condemned to be free" and must bear the consequences of his choices (Sartre, 1943/2007). The relationship between Santiago and Manolin further supports the autobiographical reading. Santiago tells the boy, "*If you were my boy I'd take you out and gamble*" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 2), showing both affection and a sense of lost connection. Hemingway had often felt estranged from loved ones, and this surrogate father-son bond perhaps mirrors his desire for meaningful, unconditional human connection (Lynn, 1987).

The novel ends with Santiago asleep, face down, overwhelmed by fatigue. This haunting image represents more than physical exhaustion—it captures Hemingway's existential despair and possibly foreshadows his tragic end. As Santiago returns to his shack, "*He was still sleeping on his face*" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 36), a symbolic position of defeat and surrender to the absurdity of existence.

Santiago's internal conflict, quiet endurance, and final weariness are more than literary elements; they are symbolic projections of Ernest Hemingway's own psychological and existential condition. *The Old Man and the Sea* is not just a tale of perseverance—it is a personal meditation on isolation, meaning, and the cost of living beyond one's limits. Through Santiago, Hemingway gives voice to his own struggles, making the novel a veiled yet poignant self-portrait.

From a nihilistic lens, Santiago's condition is not simply about a physical struggle with the marlin; it is an internal struggle with meaning, loneliness, and despair. Despite Manolin's sincere care ("I must have water here for him..."), Santiago is aware of his existential detachment: "I am a strange old man."

He finds brief solace in illusions of prosperity ("Black beans and rice..."), yet is haunted by the truth of his impoverishment. His loneliness becomes evident in: "No one should be alone in their old age... But it is unavoidable."

Santiago's profession becomes a burden: "Perhaps I should not have been a fisherman," reflecting a deeper regret and disillusionment. His dialogue with the fish ("I am sorry that I went out too far. I ruined us both.") exhibits remorse not merely for physical failure but for existential overreach—aligning with Sartre's definition of absurdity as man exceeding his own limits.

Discussion

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago embodies the complex psychological struggles and existential dilemmas central to both existentialism and psychoanalytic theory. Drawing on existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, the novel presents a

meditation on human existence, free will, and the burden of choice. Santiago's introspective thoughts, such as "No one should be alone in their old age... but it is unavoidable" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 12), reflect the existential notion of isolation as an inherent part of the human condition, a theme central to **Sartre's** existentialism, which holds that humans must create meaning in an indifferent and absurd world (Sartre, 1943/2007). Santiago's realization that he has "gone out too far" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 34) mirrors Sartre's assertion that man is "condemned to be free," burdened by the weight of his own choices, and faces inevitable isolation in a world without inherent meaning (Sartre, 1943/2007).

Santiago's relentless perseverance despite the futility of his struggle aligns with Camus's concept of the absurd hero, who continues the fight against an irrational world, even knowing it will end in failure (Camus, 1991). This connection to absurdity is evident when Santiago, after his victory over the marlin, reflects, "I wish it were a dream and that I had never hooked him" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 31), signaling his realization that even success is tainted by the inevitability of failure and the absurdity of human effort.

From a psychoanalytic perspective, particularly Freudian and Jungian concepts, Santiago's internal conflict is framed as a battle between his ego, superego, and id. Freudian analysis suggests that Santiago's guilt over killing the marlin ("I am sorry that I went out too far. I ruined us both" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 32)) reflects a moral tension between his ego's desire for pride and victory and his superego's internalized sense of guilt and responsibility (Freud, 1961). Additionally, Santiago's journey reflects the Jungian archetype of the hero's journey, where he undergoes both physical and psychological trials to achieve self-realization. Santiago embodies the wise old man archetype, reflecting the quest for wisdom and transcendence, despite the isolation and loneliness that accompany such a path (Jung, 1969).

The autobiographical lens also sheds light on the profound psychological struggles reflected in Santiago's character. By 1952, Hemingway was experiencing aging, creative exhaustion, and emotional instability, which are mirrored in Santiago's internal battles. Santiago's lament, "Perhaps I should not have been a fisherman" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 13), echoes Hemingway's own doubts about his writing career, particularly after the pressures of fame and self-imposed artistic boundaries. Hemingway's struggles with mental health and physical limitations in his later years are reflected in the old man's journey of overreaching—a metaphor for Hemingway's push beyond personal limits, including his experiences in war and his physical and emotional scars (Baker, 1969). This existential fatigue and crisis are highlighted when Santiago expresses his deep weariness, stating, "It was then he knew the depth of his tiredness" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 46), a sentiment that parallels Hemingway's own battle with depression and eventual suicide.

Finally, the relationship between Santiago and Manolin is imbued with autobiographical resonance. Santiago's yearning for companionship, as seen in the line, "I wish I had the boy. But you haven't got the boy... You have only yourself" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 14), reflects Hemingway's feelings of isolation and alienation, particularly in his later years, as he faced personal estrangement from those closest to him (Lynn, 1987).

Santiago's regret over his decision to venture too far, coupled with his ultimate exhaustion and sleep "face down" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 36), serves as a symbolic representation of Hemingway's own existential despair and the moral cost of living beyond one's limits. In this way, Santiago is not only a symbol of perseverance but also a metaphor for Hemingway's struggle with the absurdity of life, reflecting a personal and profound reckoning with isolation, meaning, and human limitations.

Findings

The analysis of *The Old Man and the Sea* through existential and psychoanalytic lenses reveals Santiago's profound internal struggle with isolation, futility, and moral exhaustion,

mirroring both Hemingway's personal battles and broader existential themes. His journey embodies the absurdity of life, where, despite relentless effort, the outcome remains indifferent to human will. Santiago's resilience, expressed in his mantra "A man can be destroyed but not defeated," reflects an existential quest for meaning amid overwhelming challenges. The psychological complexities of his character, particularly his guilt, regret, and resignation, offer insight into Hemingway's own struggles with aging, depression, and a sense of purposelessness, ultimately presenting the novel as a poignant exploration of human endurance in an indifferent world.

Santiago is a nihilistic figure whose efforts are ultimately meaningless in the larger context of life. Manolin's care is insufficient to redeem Santiago's existential despair. Santiago's achievements are negated by forces beyond his control, reflecting the futility of human effort. Hemingway projects his own psychological trauma and existential exhaustion through Santiago.

Conclusion

The analysis of *The Old Man and the Sea* through existential and psychoanalytic frameworks reveals the depth of Santiago's psychological and emotional landscape. His internal struggle, existential isolation, and moral exhaustion are reflective of both Hemingway's personal struggles and broader existential concerns. The novel is not only an exploration of human resilience but also a meditation on the absurdity of life, the inevitability of isolation, and the search for meaning in a chaotic and indifferent world. Through Santiago's character, Hemingway presents a poignant reflection of his own psychological state, making the novel a powerful self-portrait of existential despair and resilience..

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