

FILM

The Old Man and the Sea (1952)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

adaptation by Peter Viertel (1958)

ANALYSIS

The Old Man and the Sea is the triumphant culmination of Hemingway's lifetime achievement, and the work cited in the awarding of his Nobel Prize. Unfortunately, this movie is a cheap exploitation of a literary classic. Anyone who has read the novella is likely to derive some enjoyment from seeing it dramatized, but anyone who has not is likely to get bored.

This adaptation is cheap first of all because it had such a low budget. The music on the sound track is incongruous--studio muzak. In most of the many background shots of the sky, the clouds never move. In long takes this becomes obvious. Once you notice, everything looks artificial. Throughout most of the movie it looks as though the old man is fishing for marlin in a tank at the Warner Brothers studio that is maybe a foot deep. The producers used a great cinematographer in James Wong Howe but they did not allow him to shoot much on location in Cuba. Stock footage of marlin fishing appears to be used in many scenes rather than original shots, with poor editing. Original shots were probably out of the question. Nevertheless, Santiago appears to have pulled the big fish to within about thirty feet of his boat, now visible on the surface. He pulls in more and more and more line while the fish stays at the same distance. The fisherman and the fish are not in the same locale.

Hemingway especially disliked the casting: "Spencer Tracy looked like a fat, very rich actor playing a fisherman." He had a point. The successful fishermen are all slender, whereas the unsuccessful fisherman is so overweight he must wear an oversized tunic to cover his belly. Yet the old man claims he has stopped eating for some time and gets by on just a cup of coffee every morning. Hemingway no doubt would have preferred an unknown slender Cuban fisherman to play the role, but that too was probably out of the question. It was a risky picture to begin with and the studio wanted a famous popular actor to attract an audience. Tracy might pass for a Cuban because he is so sunburned, but still, he is very white, accentuated by snow white hair. He is an appealing old man, grizzled and weathered, but we all know he is a rich actor. The boy Manolo is cute and Cuban but not very expressive. That was partly caused by the Director, who was so inattentive that he had the old man sitting in the hot sun of the Gulf for hours without sweating. Nor does Tracy wipe his face.

This adaptation is also cheap because it was written by Peter Viertel, who got into the business because his mother was Salka Viertel who wrote scripts for Greta Garbo. The director John Huston was too artistic to be trite and he hired Peter Viertel to come in on a couple of his films and write endings that would be conventional enough to satisfy producers. Hemingway liked Viertel personally and treated him like a son, but he did not like what Viertel did to his novels. Viertel ruined the 1957 adaptation of *The Sun Also Rises* by changing the last line of Hemingway's novel from tragic irony to a sentimental lie that contradicts the major themes. In this adaptation a year later Viertel fails to see the iceberg below the surface. In the novella all the birds, fish, and turtles are metaphors. In this movie they are merely wildlife. Viertel starts the movie by quoting the novella as if he is going to be faithful to it, but he once again falsifies Hemingway's great ending. At the end of the novella the old man has so exhausted himself that he is implicitly never going to wake up when he reaches his shack and falls asleep. Viertel has him recovering and making plans to go fishing with Manolo—a happy ending! This loses all the moving pathos. It also reduces the dreaming of lions motif to pointless nostalgia.

Viertel's gutless ending also loses all the religious significance of the novella. Although he establishes that Santiago is religious, he omits the evidence that the old man has become Christlike, in particular when he makes a cry "such as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hands and into the wood" and the image of him carrying his mast like a cross up the hill to die. Viertel reduces the meaning of the story to Santiago's lament, "I went out too far," which he takes literally, as if the old man should not have tried to land the fish, missing the tragedy and the transcendence. Overall this scriptwriter was almost as imperceptive as the lady tourists at the end—and as deep as the tank at Warner Brothers.

Michael Hollister (2015)