

16 CRITICS DISCUSS

The Old Man and the Sea (1952)

Ernest Hemingway

(1899-1961)

“His best. Time may show it to be the best single piece by any of us. I mean his and my contemporaries. This time, he discovered God, a Creator. Until now, his men and women had made themselves, shaped themselves out of their own clay, their victories and defeats were at the hands of each other, just to prove to themselves or one another how tough they could be. But this time, he wrote about something somewhere that made them all: the old man who had to catch the fish and then lost it, the fish that had to be caught and then lost, the sharks which had to rob the old man of his fish; made them all and loved them all and pitied them all. It’s all right. Praise God that whatever made and loves and pities Hemingway and me kept him from touching it any further.”

William Faulkner
Review of *The Old Man and the Sea*
Shenandoah III
(Autumn 1952)

“*Life* sold 5,318,650 copies within forty-eight hours. Advance sales on the regular American edition ran to 50,000 and settled thereafter into a brisk weekly sale of 3,000.... [Readers] kept telephoning congratulations. Those who saw [Hemingway] personally often thanked him and burst into tears.... American reviewers were mostly ecstatic. Harvey Breit called the book ‘momentous and heartening.’ Joseph Henry Jackson had nothing but praise for this ‘miracle-play of Man against Fate.’... Rabbis and ministers began preaching sermons on Ernest’s text. For three weeks, Ernest himself averaged eighty to ninety letters a day from well-wishers.”

Carlos Baker
Ernest Hemingway: A Life Story
(Scribner’s 1969) 504-05

“This parable of man’s struggle with the natural world, of his noble courage and endurance, tells of the Cuban fisherman Santiago, who for 84 luckless days has rowed his skiff into the Gulf Stream in quest of marlin. At first accompanied by the boy Manolin, with whom he talked of better days and about the great sport of baseball, he is now alone. Aged and solitary, he goes far out and hooks a great fish that tows his boat all afternoon and night and into the next day as he pits his skill and wanting strength against it the way he once did as a wrestler called ‘El Campeon.’ As the second night turns to dawn he finally harpoons his catch, lashes it to his small boat, and makes his wary way home. As he sails slowly to port sharks attack his catch and he fights them as best he can with a knife lashed to the tiller gripped in raw hands. When he makes land his marlin is but a skeleton. Proud in defeat, Santiago furls his sail and staggers to his shack, to be found by the boy and other fishermen, who marvel at his catch, while the spent man sleeps and dreams of past experiences.”

James D. Hart
The Oxford Companion to American Literature, 5th edition
(Oxford 1941-83) 555-56

“Just as Col. Cantwell presented the Hemingway hero aged for the first time beyond his young manhood, so Santiago is the first of the code heroes to have grown old. Particularly he is related to men like Jack, the prizefighter, and Manuel Garcia, ‘The Undefeated’ bullfighter, who lose in one way but win in another. Like Manuel, Santiago is a fighter whose best days are behind him, who is too old for what his profession demands of him and, worse, is wholly down on his luck. But he still dares, and sticks to the rules, and will not quit when he is licked. He is undefeated, he endures, and his loss therefore, in the manner of it, is itself a victory.

‘A man can be destroyed but not defeated,’ is how Hemingway put it this time. And so the theme—‘What a man can do and what a man endures’ (‘plenty,’ as Santiago admits of his suffering)—is also familiar. So are other things—Hemingway’s concern with fishing as a deeply meaningful occupation, for instance, and his awareness of death, expertly delivered and received, as the source of much of life’s intensity. In a way we have even known the boy before, for in providing that sentimental adulation which in his need for love and pity the other hero once required, Manolin has taken over some of the functions hitherto performed by the heroine.

There is little that is new, either, in the technique. The action is swift, tight, exact; the construction is perfect, and the story is exciting. There is the same old zest for the right details. And there is the extraordinary vividness of the background—the sea, which is very personal to Santiago, whose knowledge of it, and feeling for it, bring it brilliantly and lovingly close. Again there is the foreign speech translated—realistic, fresh and poetic all at once. In short, *The Old Man and the Sea*, in manner and meaning, is unmistakable Hemingway. But where characteristic methods and attitudes have on rare occasion failed him in the past, or have been only partly successful, this short novel is beyond any question a triumph.

This is the first time, in all of Hemingway’s work, that the code hero and the Hemingway hero have not been wholly distinct. Wilson the guide, Cayetano the gambler, Morgan the smuggler—all embodied ideals of behavior the Hemingway hero could not sustain. They balanced his deficiencies; they corrected his stance. Of course Santiago is not Hemingway, and is not the Hemingway hero; he is the code hero, based on the experience of an unfictional Cuban fisherman. But now the relation of the author and the code hero is very close. Though Hemingway was thought with the phrase to be acknowledging his eccentricity, whereas Santiago makes it clear that he means he is formidable, both figures were given to remarking ‘I am a strange old man.’ And both men were preoccupied with their ‘luck’—a kind of magic which people have in them, or do not....

Hemingway was narrowing the gap that had always existed between him and his code heroes. Actually he narrowed it to the point where it is possible to show that on one level *The Old Man and the Sea* was wholly personal... *The Old Man and the Sea* is, from one angle, an account of Hemingway’s personal struggle, grim, resolute and eternal, to write his best. With his seriousness, his precision and his perfectionism, Hemingway saw his craft exactly as Santiago sees his. The fishing and the fishermen turn out to be metaphors so apt that they need almost no translation: Santiago is a master who sets his lines with more care than his colleagues, but he has no luck any more. It would be better to be lucky, he thinks, but he will be skillfully exact instead; then when the luck comes he will be ready for it....

The sharks may eat his fish, and spoil everything, as they always try to do. But even a young fisherman in the prime of his strength would have done well to land this marlin, and so at the end Santiago is secure in bed, dreaming happily of the lions. (As for these lions, they play like cats on beaches ‘so white they hurt your eyes’—as white, we might think, as the ‘unbelievably white’ top of Kilimanjaro that Harry dreamed of, the magical goal of the artist, where the leopard froze. And so we could say here, as Hemingway said of Harry, that Santiago is happy in the end because he knows that ‘there was where he was going.’)”

Philip Young
Ernest Hemingway: A Reconsideration
(Penn State 1952,1966) 124-27

“*The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) revived a flagging interest in Hemingway the artist. Critics were beguiled by its simplicity, its apparent heroism, its brief and suggestive symbolism. J. Donald Adams thrilled to the ‘tragic story...so persuadingly alive’ (*NYTBR*, Sept. 21, 1952). Carlos Baker was almost as uncritically enthusiastic (*SatR*, Sept. 6, 1952). He spoke of ‘the proud, quiet knowledge of having fought the fight, of having lasted it out, of having done a great thing to the bitter end of human strength.’ Harvey Breit (*Nation*, Sept. 6, 1952) admired the ‘fluent, controlled, and astonishing power.’ Robert Gorham Davis (*NYTBR*, Sept. 7, 1952) applauded ‘a tale superbly told’.... *Old Man* was getting more than the customary applause in France, both Romain Gary (*NL*, Sept. 11, 1952) and Michael Mohrt (*TR*, Dec. 1952) spoke highly of it....” [Obtuse critics, about equal to admirers in number, are not quoted here]

Frederick J. Hoffman
"Ernest Hemingway"
Sixteen Modern Authors: A Survey of Research and Criticism [1952]
(Duke, 1969; Norton 1973) 382-83

"It was discussed within the context of tragedy far more than any previous work. Some critics who did not refer to it as a tragedy still spoke of it in tones appropriate to great spiritual events, quite different from the tones which had accompanied discussions of the political-philosophical themes in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In the midst of this discussion of tragedy critics compared Hemingway to other authors, not a customary evaluative gesture in Hemingway reviewing. The other authors were those who had achieved tragic dimensions in their work and though they usually ended up ahead, Hemingway fared well. However, the general joy over Hemingway's recovery and his receiving the Nobel Prize shortly after has perhaps obscured the fact that the immediate response was not a unified chant of praise. There was some discord. Some critics expressed dissatisfaction with the much admired hero, Santiago....the introduction of baseball talk, the repetition of the 'grace under pressure' theme...and a *denial of symbolic content* [!]."

Frank L. Ryan
The Immediate Critical Reception of Ernest Hemingway [1952-53]
(U Press of America 1980) 32-33

"For his powerful style-forming mastery of the art of modern narration, as most recently evinced in *The Old Man and the Sea*... Hemingway's earlier writings displayed brutal, cynical and callous signs which may be considered at variance with the Nobel Prize requirements for a work of ideal tendencies. But on the other hand he also possesses a heroic pathos which forms the basic element of his awareness of life, a manly love of danger and adventure, with a natural admiration of every individual who fights the good fight in a world of reality overshadowed by violence and death."

Citation of Nobel Prize for Literature (1954)

"Running through Ernest Hemingway's work, from *In Our Time* to *The Old Man and the Sea*, are two dominant motifs—the matador and the crucified. The matador represents a great force held in check, releasing itself proudly in controlled yet violent administering of death. The crucified stands for the taking of pain, even unto death with all of one's courage and endurance so that it becomes a thing of poignancy and nobility. Although it was not until *The Old Man and the Sea* that Hemingway achieved a perfect blending of these two themes, the continual tension and interplay between these forces represented by the matador and the crucified create a pattern in the Hemingway canon against which the individual works of fiction may be profitably studied....

Just as the matador pits himself against the bull, so does Santiago pit himself against the great fish; in their killing they achieve a rebellion against death. In this combat both men must call upon their pride and courage, their skill and knowledge of their craft. Whereas the bullfight terminates with the final sword thrust between the shoulders of the bull, the fight with the fish terminates with the thrusting of the harpoon into his heart. And the old man his hands lacerated and mushy, raises himself out of his pain to bring down the harpoon, in the same way as the matador Maera in *Death in the Afternoon*, disregarding his broken wrist, goes in for the sixth time over the horns of the bull.

Nevertheless, there are differences. The artificial setting of the bullfight, its spectators, and its ceremony leave one with the sense that this is but violence on exhibit, that it is not a natural struggle between man and animal, and that the emotions produced seem strained and self-induced. But Santiago's struggle with the fish is natural. As he says, he was born to be a fisherman and the fish was born to be a fish. The killing of fish is an old accepted livelihood. And the setting for Santiago's struggle is the most natural in the world: overhead move the sun and the stars and the moon; beneath sways the sea, la mar; and about the boat move the birds and fish. The sea is the old man's home and the others are his friends and brothers. The old fisherman himself—his skin blotched brown by the friendly sun, his eyes 'the color of the sea,' the scars on his hands 'old as erosions in a fishless desert'—is part of the natural universe. It is a complete and closed universe, a friendly one—its Creator neither hostile nor beneficent but mysteriously

just. And the old man talks to the fish and the birds and the stars just as primitive man might have done long ago....

The old man was dreaming of the lions on the white beaches of Africa. The dream may represent, as Philip Young suggested, not only a nostalgic return to the strength of one's youth but also a desire for immortality—like the meaning of the frozen leopard on the summit of Kilimanjaro. Despite the suffering and seeming defeat of the old man, the final effect is that of a triumph which is invested not with the violent ritualized quality of the bullfights of *Death in the Afternoon* or the uneasily insistent and belligerent note of *Green Hills of Africa*, but with a warm autumnal glow. The old man beating off the sharks is like life rebelling against death—as though the old man and the great fish who are lashed together and steering as one toward home, just as earlier they had been bound by the 'pain of life,' have become the symbol of life; while the sharks (scavengers like the vultures and hyena who are symbols of death in 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro') have become the death which must be resisted even though it will win.

Combined with this triumph is a tenderness not usually found in Hemingway's work. For all of Hemingway's glorifying of love between man and woman...in the relation between man and boy, Hemingway achieves a new gentleness. This turning to male companionship seems characteristically American, recalling the paired Huck Finn and Jim, Natty Bumppo and Chingachgook, Ishmael and Queequeg. Curiously, with the exception of Ishmael, they are all variations of primitives. And in Santiago Hemingway has created as fine a primitive as the twentieth century has revealed, one who seems worthy of comparison with Mark Twain's Huck Finn or Jim. But the old man is more richly endowed than most primitives: bearing the name of Saint James, who was fisherman and martyr, he strangely unites the matador and the crucified."

Melvin Backman
"Hemingway: The Matador and the Crucified"
Modern Fiction Studies I
(August 1955)

"In recent years, critics have become increasingly suspicious that it is necessary to read Ernest Hemingway's work on the symbolic as well as on the story level in order to gain a full appreciation of its art. Since the publication of *The Old Man and the Sea*, the suspicion has become first an awareness, then a certainty. Of all Hemingway's work, this one demands most to be read on both levels; and the story, its details, its method of presentation, are sufficiently similar to the balance of his work as to suggest strongly the possibility of a similar reading and perhaps a similar interpretation.

The Old Man and the Sea is, as story, very good Hemingway. It is swiftly and smoothly told; the conflict is resolved into a struggle between a man and a force which he scarcely comprehends, but which he knows that he must continue to strive against, though knowing too that the struggle must end in defeat. The defeat is only apparent, however, for, as in 'The Undefeated,' it becomes increasingly clear throughout the story that it is not victory or defeat that matters but the struggle itself. Furthermore, *The Old Man and the Sea*, while reasserting the set of values, the philosophy which permeates all of Hemingway, is built upon the great abstractions—love and truth and honor and loyalty and pride and humility—and again speaks of the proper method of attaining and retaining these virtues, and of the spiritual satisfaction inevitably bestowed upon their holder.

The Christian religious symbols running through the story, which are so closely interwoven with the story in fact as to suggest an allegorical intention on Hemingway's part, are so obvious as to require little more than a listing of them here. The Old Man is a fisherman, and he is also a teacher, one who has taught the boy not only how to fish—that is, how to make a living—but how to behave as well, giving him the pride and humility necessary to a good life. During the trials with the great fish and with the sharks his hands pain him terribly, his back is lashed by the line, he gets an eyepiercing headache, and his chest constricts and he spits blood. He hooks the fish at noon, and at noon of the third day he kills it by driving his harpoon into its heart. As he sees the second and third sharks attacking, the Old Man calls aloud, 'Ay,' and Hemingway comments: 'There is no translation for this word and perhaps it is just such a noise as a man might make, involuntarily, feeling the nail go through his hand and into the wood.' On landing, the Old Man shoulders his mast and goes upward from the sea toward his hut; he is forced to rest several times

on his journey up the hill, and when he reaches the hut he lies on the bed 'with his arms out straight and the palms of his hands up.'

The Christian symbolism so evident here shifts from man to fish—a legitimate symbol for Christ since the beginning of Christianity, as it was a legitimate symbol before Christianity—and back to man throughout the story...the phenomenon itself closely parallels the Roman Catholic sacrifice of the Mass, wherein a fusion of the priest-man with Christ takes place at the moment of Transubstantiation. Along with the Christ symbols, reinforcing them, but depending on them for its importance, is a rather intricate numerology. It is not formalized—neither is the numerology of Christianity—but it is carefully set forth. Three, seven, and forty are key numbers in the Old and New Testaments, and in the religion, and Hemingway makes a judicious use of them. The Old Man, as the story opens, has fished alone for forty-four famine days and with the boy for forty more. The Old Man's trial with the great fish lasts exactly three days; the fish is landed on the seventh attempt; seven sharks are killed; and, although Christ fell only three times under the Cross, whereas the Old Man has to rest from the weight of the mast seven times, there is a consistency in the equal importance of the numbers themselves....

The religious overtones of *The Old Man and the Sea* are not peculiar to that book among Hemingway's works, and...Hemingway has finally taken the decisive step in elevating what might be called his philosophy of Manhood to the level of a religion.... God is sometimes prayed to by the Hemingway hero at moments of crisis, but His aid or succor are never depended upon, never really expected.... Hemingway has always had a deep respect for Christians—provided they *live* like Christians. His great abstractions are also great Christian virtues; and when he finds a believer, such as the priest in *A Farewell to Arms* or Anselmo in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, who lives in accord with the abstractions, he praises them as 'a Christian,' and adds, for the benefit of the hypocritical, 'something very rare in Catholic countries.' There is no evidence of intentional blasphemy in any of his work; the deeply religious are frequently exalted, not in the terms of Christianity, but in Hemingway's own terms.

In his one-act play, 'Today Is Friday,' Christ's Manhood is given far greater importance than His Godhead with no blasphemous overtones. The First Soldier, speaking for Hemingway and offering the highest praise he is capable of, answers, 'He was pretty good in there today,' each time the cynical Second Soldier minimizes Christ's manliness. The words are not only directly addressed to the cynic, but indirectly to the emotionally disturbed Third Soldier as well, who has had a religious experience which the First cannot share, but which he comprehends and sympathizes with....

War, the prize ring, fishing, hunting, and making love are some of the other celebrations by means of which Hemingway's religio-philosophy of Man is conveyed. But the bullfight is the greatest because, besides possessing, as the others do also, a procedure inviolate, intimately related to the great abstractions, it always ends in death. It assumes the stature of a religious sacrifice by means of which a man can place himself in harmony with the universe, can satisfy the spiritual as well as the physical side of his nature, can atone for the previous omissions and commissions of his past, can purify and elevate himself in much the same way that he can in any sacrificial religion. The difference between Hemingway's religion of man and formal religion is simply—yet profoundly—that in the former the elevation does not extend beyond the limits of this world, and in the latter, Christianity for example, the ultimate elevation is totally otherworldly.

The bullfighter is in a sense a priest, performing the sacrifice for the sake of the spectator as well as for his own sake, giving each that 'feeling of life and death and mortality and immortality' which Hemingway described in *Death in the Afternoon*, and, as does the Roman Catholic priest on the ideal level, the bullfighter actually places his own life in jeopardy. This curious phenomenon of the sacrificer gambling on becoming the sacrificed serves to clarify the terms of Hemingway's system... The bullfighter recognizes the possibility and immanence of death when he steps into the ring, and he must face it bravely. He must perform the sacrifice cleanly, with one true stroke, preserving both his honor and the bull's dignity. If he kills out of malice or out of fear his actions will show it, and the spectator will be distracted from concentration upon the sacrifice to awareness of the man, and no satisfaction will result.

There must be a cognizance of death both from the standpoint of killing and from that of being killed; there must be more than a cognizance actually; there must be an acceptance. Knowledge of death's inevitability so that he does not react to its immediacy, coupled with unconcern for the possibilities of life after death, are necessary attributes of the ideal bullfighter.... He must realize that it is not *that* one dies but *how* one dies that is important. And equally important, that it is not *that* one kills but *how* one kills.... The abstractions, the rules, the ritual, the sacrifice dominate the details of *The Old Man and the Sea* as they dominate those of "The Undefeated" and *The Sun Also Rises*.... We are told specifically, in terms reminiscent of such descriptions of the bullfight, how the kill is made.... The immanence of death for the sacrificer as well as for the sacrificed, and his total disregard of its possibility, are made clear when the Old Man thinks: 'You are killing me, fish... Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who'....

Hemingway did not turn religious to write *The Old Man and the Sea*. He has always been religious, though his religion is not of the orthodox, organized variety. He celebrates, he has always celebrated, the Religion of Man; *The Old Man and the Sea* merely celebrates it more forcefully and convincingly than any previous Hemingway work. It is the final step in the celebration. It is the book which, on the one hand, elevates the philosophy to a religion by the use of allegory, and on the other, by being an allegory of the total body of his work, enables us to see that work finally from the point of view of religion."

[To be Christian means to be Christlike, as Santiago (Saint James) proves himself to be, which certainly affirms Christianity. This critic tries to secularize Hemingway. He denies that all his affirmative Christian symbolism in *The Old Man and the Sea* is evidence that he was a Christian. After getting blown up in WWI, Hemingway was a religious Existentialist who tried to be a Catholic, as expressed in *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms*, and "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." *The Old Man and the Sea* is evidence, as Faulkner saw, that Hemingway had attained a strong faith in God. M. H.]

Joseph Waldmeir
"Confiteor Hominem: Ernest Hemingway's Religion of Man"
PMASAL XLII (U Michigan, 1956) 277-81
reprinted in *Hemingway: A Collection of Critical Essays*
ed. Robert P. Weeks
(Prentice-Hall Twentieth Century Views 1962) 161-68

"*The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) is the most lyrical of Hemingway's longer works, apparently marking a turn away from the naturalistic style toward a more poetic form of expression. It retains, however, the terse and ironic understatement of his prewar work. The story is taken from an actual incident which Hemingway heard about during his fishing experiences in Cuba. The hero, Santiago, is an old Cuban fisherman who goes out alone in a small skiff to catch tarpon and marlin; his character is established through his conversations with a young boy, the only one in the world who appreciates him and admires his skill as a fisherman.

After a long period of fruitless fishing the old man succeeds one day in hooking an enormous marlin, larger than his boat, the meat of which he can sell for a small fortune. For a day and a night he struggles with the fish and finally kills it. But as he attempts to tow it back to the cannery (it is too large to be taken into the boat) the marlin is torn apart by voracious sharks; when he reaches the harbor all he has left is a head and a bare skeleton. He knows he will never fish again: 'Something in his chest was broken,' but his spirit too was crushed, and the sea has defeated him. Yet there is a glory, almost a victory, in the stature of his defeat and in the unremitting courage with which he struggles against the sharks.

Most of the dialogue in this story is purportedly taking place in Spanish, which Hemingway 'translates' literally to produce a curiously elegant and lyrical effect. The device is sometimes comic, as when Santiago and the boy discuss American big-league baseball in their poetic Spanish. But the more common result is a kind of Biblical dignity which is exactly suited to the subject of the book. The style is seen as well in the Spanish conversations in *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and in some of the bull-fighting stories (e.g., 'The Capitol of the World') as well as in some stories in which the dialogue takes place in Italian. In another sense *The Old Man and the Sea* belongs with Hemingway's hunting stories: it expresses the theme of the 'kinship between hunter and hunted' in the sense of beauty and pity that the old man feels as he

struggles with the fish. It has been pointed out that Santiago is established as a saintly, even Christlike figure through the scars on his hands as well as by his name and the austerity of his life; in a sense *The Old Man and the Sea* is a religious story. It is perhaps this aspect of the novelette which inspired the Swedish Academy to cite it specifically in awarding Hemingway the 1954 Nobel Prize.”

Donald Heiney
Recent American Literature 4
(Barron’s Educational Series 1958) 161-62

“Considered by many critics to be one of Hemingway’s finest works, *The Old Man and the Sea* deals with an old Cuban fisherman who has had eighty-four days without a catch. Far from port on the eighty-fifth day he hooks a gigantic marlin, and, against great odds in a battle lasting two days, brings the fish alongside and harpoons it. Soon sharks appear, and the old man breaks his knife after he has killed only a few; during the last night of the voyage home the sharks devour all but the head of the great fish. The story is often interpreted as an allegory of man’s inevitable losing struggle with existence; though the old man fights the great fish with courage and stoicism he is defeated in the end not by the fish—or by life itself—but by the sharks, or death. Hemingway, always a concise and economical writer, according to Malcolm Cowley here ‘gives words a new value...as if English were a strange language that he had studied or invented for himself, and was trying to write in its original purity’.”

Max J. Herzberg & staff
A Reader’s Encyclopedia of American Literature
(Crowell 1962) 829

“By selecting a common man like Santiago for his hero, Hemingway gives his story a classical universality. More than that, when he shows us the bravery and resolution this ordinary man can summon up in the face of defeat, we are struck with pity and awe. Here is Aristotle’s dictum turned upside down: we are moved not by the fall of a great man but the elevation to heroism of what we had taken to be a little man. And the tourists, by their unawareness in the final scene, flat, unempathetic and understated as it is, underscore as nothing else could the solitary, dignified, self-sufficient valor of the old fisherman. Their unawareness of Santiago’s ordeal helps to elevate it far above the sort of pathos that outsiders often are aware of, perhaps because they can mitigate it with their commiseration. Thus the final scene of *The Old Man and the Sea* demonstrates how skillfully Hemingway combines self-imposed limitations to stir our emotions and bring into focus the central meaning of this novel.”

Robert P. Weeks, ed.
Introduction
Hemingway: A Collection of Critical Essays
(Prentice-Hall Twentieth Century Views 1962) 13

“In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway proved to those critics who were beginning to fear an approaching end to a distinguished career that he might still have that major novel in him. Again rumor which could be traced to the author himself suggested that this was but part of a much larger and more ambitious work. Even as it stood as a short tale, perfect in form and execution, it expressed better than Hemingway ever had before his faith in the sufficiency of life lived for itself. Old Santiago’s triumphant struggle with his Fish, which results in a giant skeleton, underlines the moral: to have lived intensely is enough.” [This is a very inadequate interpretation.]

Willard Thorp and Robert E. Spiller
Literary History of the United States, 3rd edition
(Macmillan 1946-63) 1398-99

“He knew that it was the best writing he had ever done in his life.... It could well stand, he thought, as an epilogue to all his writing and to all he had learned, or tried to learn, while writing and trying to live.... *The Old Man and the Sea* did come in the course of time to stand as the epilogue to all Hemingway’s writing, not only because it was the last of his books to be published while he lived, but also because its ‘virtues and implicaciones’ made it representative of his true forte in the writing of fiction.

As the body of his work takes its provisional position in the long *galleria* of world literature, it is evident that his prime virtue lies in the ability to present physical actions which at the same time carry the

'implicaciones' of symbolic actions. This is not to deny him other powers, such as the always disciplined accuracy of observation; a skill with landscape as unerring as Cézanne's; mastery of stylized dialogues and internal monologues for purposes of characterization; a moral outlook whose overtones are stoical; and the ability to communicate to his readers a golden sense of life's glamour, even when he and his readers know very well that between the peaks of power and glory lie...black gulfs of despair into which both the just and the unjust may inadvertently stumble. Yet Hemingway's senses are never so alert, his emotions at such a controlled pitch of intensity, his narrative talents so absolute at his sovereign service, as when he concentrates upon a sequence of physical actions from which he expects his readers to infer a sequence of symbolic 'implicaciones'....

The story of Santiago matured in Hemingway's mind a full fifteen years before he set it down. In the course of an article on the Gulf Stream published in *Esquire* magazine in the spring of 1936, he told of 'an old man fishing alone in a skiff'...who hooked 'a great marlin that, on the heavy sashcord handline, pulled the skiff far out to sea. Two days later the man was picked up by fishermen 60 miles to the eastward, the head and the forward part of the marlin lashed alongside. What was left of the fish, less than half, weighed 800 pounds.... He was crying in the boat when the fishermen picked him up, half crazy from the loss, and the sharks were still circling the boat'...he had written *The Old Man and the Sea* in eight weeks and had learned enough so that he did not have to rewrite....he rounds out the length of Santiago's voyage to a magical three days and three nights....

One of Hemingway's major additions is the boy Manolo, called Manolin, who provides a framework of human sympathy at the beginning and the end of the old man's lonely struggle. His admiration for Santiago both as a man and fisherman also helps to enlarge our belief in the heroism of the undertaking, to enhance our sense of Santiago's stature to dimensions larger than life—even though, as with Melville's Captain Ahab, we know that extrinsically he is only a simple fisherman.... The boy Manolo serves to recall for Santiago the period of his own lost youth when he was in full possession of all his powers, and when his greatest achievements yet lay in the future rather than as now in the past.

It is no accident, it is rather an aspect of Hemingway's psychological plan, that during the old man's ordeal the two sentences, 'I wish the boy was here' and 'I wish I had the boy,' keep crossing his mind at periodic intervals. In one of the story's subtler rhythms, Santiago always manages, just after he has repeated these words, to secure a new lease on his ebbing strength, as if the consciousness of his former powers, represented by that complex of associations which he sums up simply in 'the boy,' could always be invoked as a psychological spur at the moments of his greatest need. The young lions serve a similar purpose... 'and he loved them as he loved the boy.' In Santiago's subconscious the distant remembrance of the young lions has met and merged with the more recent image of the boy Manolo....

This wave-like motion of ebbing strength and fluent courage is one of the rhythmic devices through which Hemingway sustains the interest of his narrative.... The fundamental movement of *The Old Man and the Sea*—at least in the central account of the hooking, the capture, and the loss of the giant marlin—is not unlike the slow, majestic tempo of the groundswell of the ocean. Whenever Santiago rises to a theoretical peak of his resistance, there always follows a time of relaxation into a trough of temporary rest. The very structure of the prose, one discovers with astonishment, partakes of the rhythm of the sea, a tempo old as time and as exactly fitted to the nature and locale of the narrative as the movement of the prose at the opening of the Book of Genesis is fitted to the cosmic creation there enacted....

Mark Schorer was surely correct in emphasizing this parabolic aspect of the novel... 'The true quality of fable is first of all in the style,' he said, 'in the degree of abstraction, which is not only in some ways Biblical but is always tending toward the proverbial rhythm. ('The setting of the sun is a difficult time for fish.')

Next, it is in the simplicity of the narrative, and in the beautiful proportion (about three fourths to one fourth) of its rise and fall. Finally, of course, it is in the moral significance of the narrative, this fine story of an ancient who goes too far out, 'beyond the boundaries of permitted aspiration,' as [Joseph] Conrad put it...

We may speculate on the possibility that much of the best American fiction from Melville to Faulkner and Hemingway is built (whether consciously or not) on what may be called *the trope of too-far-out*. One

thinks, for example, of Tashtego's upraised and still defiant arm as he nails the Pequod's flag yet faster to the topmost spar the moment before the ship makes its final plunge into the welter of the sea. The Japanese critic Harada has suggested that Santiago's purpose in going too far out is to unite 'temporality with eternity.' In thus overstepping the 'boundary of man's finite and limited nature,' he becomes involved with a *hubris* for which he must take the consequences. It does not matter that the marlin itself is at least partly responsible for pulling him too far out, nor that his act in killing the fish is merely his obligation as a professional fisherman. For it is written into the scheme of things that he must pay the price for this glory, and Nemesis in the guise of sharks is therefore inevitable....

In the end, Santiago knows he has transgressed 'the boundaries of permitted aspiration.' He admits to having gone 'too far out'.... Urged on by pride, by the love of his trade, by his refusal to take continuing bad luck as his portion, and by a resurgent belief that he might win, Santiago made trial of the impossible. In the tragic process, he achieved the moral triumph, the failure which was also victory. Something of this familiar paradox of tragic literature seems to have underlain Hemingway's decision to introduce certain images derived from the story of the Crucifixion. These come at intervals throughout the novel, but they are chiefly concentrated in the course of the long and bitter, though also heroic, voyage home. Allusions to Jesus Christ occur with some frequency in Hemingway's earlier works. These are always gentle, and they seem always to emphasize His powers of endurance, human courage, and the dignity of His conduct in the full sweep and magnitude of the necessary agony.

The implied parallelism here is by no means inept. For Santiago's name is Spanish for Saint James, the martyred apostle who began as a simple fisherman on the Sea of Galilee. In going on to employ such other symbolic reminders as the blood on the forehead, the manual stigmata, or the ship's mast like the weight of the cross over Santiago's shoulder as he ascends, going home, his own equivalent of Calvary. Hemingway appears to be suggesting that there must be a resemblance between Jesus Christ in his human aspect as the Son of Man and those countless and nameless thousands in the history of Christianity who belong to the category of 'good men,' and who may accordingly, and without impiety, be seen as followers of Our Lord, whatever the professed degree of their Christian commitment. Any writer who sets out, as Hemingway did, to show 'what a human being is capable of' and to prove something about 'the dignity of the human soul without the word *soul* being capitalized' may end, as here, by thinking of the example of Jesus Christ. 'I tried,' said Hemingway, 'to make a real old man, a real boy, a real sea and a real fish and real sharks. But if I made them good and true enough they would mean many things'....

According to the Italian critic Marcello Camilucci, the balanced terms of the title which worried Hemingway so much may be seen as 'emblematic of the history of the world.' First in the order of being is the Sea, 'the face of the waters' in the Book of Genesis. It stands, says Camilucci, as a poetic image for that whole expanse of created nature... Not less important, according to Camilucci, is the second term Man, who in Genesis is given 'dominion over the fish of the sea...and over all the earth,' yet who is 'substantially disarmed' in the face of the mystery 'if he attempts to dominate instead of worshipping it.' Hemingway's engagement of this emblematic dualism, both in his title and the pages which follow, thus gives his novel something of the enigmatic quality of wisdom-literature. By its combination of simplicity and profundity, the actual and the symbolic, the book takes on resemblances to 'those fables which have come to us down the broad river of time,'—worn smooth as stones 'by the flow of centuries'....

Whether or not we are quite willing to accept this view of its ultimate 'implicaciones,' *The Old Man and the Sea* can fittingly serve as the epilogue to the rest of Hemingway's fiction, not only by virtue of its possibly final position in the published canon, but also as the author himself appeared to think, because it embodies in a stirring narrative of courage and endurance the sum of what he had learned in the lifelong process of writing and trying to live."

Carlos Baker
"Introduction to *The Old Man and the Sea*"
Three Novels of Ernest Hemingway
(Scribner's 1962) iv-xvii

"By critics and the general reader alike it was hailed as a masterpiece. Whatever special meaning on a personal level may be attributed to the story, it undoubtedly reflects Man's lonely and exhausting struggle

for a belief in some achievement as a value, which, after being obtained, will be torn to shreds by a hostile world but will keep its significance for him who fought for it. It would not be easy to find a more impressive, precise and relevant symbol for an experience common to the second postwar generation if not to the whole of Western mankind. The theme of hunting so essential to Hemingway's entire work has ultimately become the most comprehensive metaphor of his beliefs."

Heinrich Straumann
University of Zurich
American Literature in the Twentieth Century
(Harper Torchbooks 1965) 109

"*The Old Man and the Sea*...carries one of Hemingway's most important themes. During the most exhausting moments of his struggle to fight off the sharks, Santiago says, 'But man is not made for defeat.... A man can be destroyed but not defeated.' Nearly all of Hemingway's major characters attempt to live by this credo. Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*, says, 'I did not care what it [the world] was all about. All I wanted to know was how to live in it.' Robert Jordan in *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, knows that if he lives his life to the fullest during his last 72 hours, it could be the same as 72 years. Richard Cantwell in *Across the River and into the Trees*, struggles to maintain dignity in the face of impending death. They are all 'destroyed but not defeated'."

Charles M. Oliver
Ernest Hemingway A to Z:
The Essential Reference to the Life and Work
(Facts on File/Checkmark Books 1999) 247

Michael Hollister (2015)