Existentialism in *The Old Man and The Sea*

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Introduction

Traditional religious and ethical systems ask, “How *should* I live?” the existentialist’s more fundamental question is, “How *can* I live?” If life is meaningless, how can we even approach the question of how we should live? How can human beings hungry for meaning, live and flourish without giving it to despair when no meaning is provided to them? Existentialism is a philosophy that attempts to be relevant to real people and real lives.

A more technical definition of existentialism, according to Panza and Gale’s, *Existentialism for Dummies*, reveals the reason for its name. Existentialism is the study of *existence*. If we take existence to be everything that exists – such as chairs, tables, and people – all philosophy, science, and religion would seem to have the same subject. But existentialism isn’t the study of everything *that* exists; it’s the study of *existence* itself – the study of what it means for something to exist at all as opposed to not existing. It’s also the study of what it means for *something*, as opposed to *nothing*, to exist at all. Of course, the primary focus of existentialism is a particular kind of existence, the kind of existence that includes

existing things like us, because we're aware of our existence and capable of questioning it.

It's appropriate and perhaps inevitable, that existentialism came of age in the 19th century, a period of unrest and social change. Science was flowering, belief in the powers of the human mind was reaching a high, and the Industrial Revolution was overpowering the traditional social order. The world was rushing into becoming the industrial, scientific, capitalist, and mostly secular world we know today.

As existentialism in the dissertation will be projected as a positive minded philosophy, many notions about it being a negative philosophy can be diminished. The dissertation aims to simplify existentialism so as to make it understand better. Also, the dissertation will integrate philosophy as well as social behavior so hopefully it will provide a healthy contribution to the field of literature.

The Old Man and The Sea

Set in the mid-twentieth century, *The Old Man and the Sea* begins and ends in a small village near Havana, Cuba. The real story, however, takes place far out in the Gulf Stream, where the main character, Santiago, wages his heroic battle against a great marlin. Santiago stays true to the Hemingway tradition; he is a hero who fights the great fish alone, relying on only his strength, his determination, and his skill.

Santiago's struggle in *The Old Man and the Sea* is presented by Hemingway like the struggle of the famous existential model of Sisyphus, who is doomed

eternally to roll up a hill a vast stone that will always fall back just as he is almost to reach the top. From both of the stories of Santiago and Sisyphus we can see that the dignity of life derives from mankind's continual perseverance in projects for which the universe affords no foothold or encouragement.

The book has a narrative structure which is simple and effective. It starts on land with old man and the young boy, which establishes the characters. In the middle he fishes alone, all the action takes place at sea. Alone he must wrestle the great marlin, a prize catch, the catch of a lifetime. He defeats the elements and changes his luck by skill, strength of will, and bodily power. But then, with the element of surprise, the sea takes back the prize he has wrested from it. The story ends as it begins. Back on land, he is bowed and bloodied. The young lad, full of compassion, ministers to his needs and his wounds.

Santiago in *The Old Man and The Sea* shares various existential traits viz. authenticity, consciousness of existence, anxiety and passion. Let us judge Santiago according to various existential parameters observed during the novella, *The Old Man and The Sea*.

Authenticity in *The Old Man and The Sea*

Santiago displays fighting spirit when dealing with the fish, marlin. "And pain does not matter to a man" (Hemingway 84) is what Santiago says to himself in his struggle. "I could not fail myself and die on a fish like this" (Hemingway 87). Santiago is ready to overcome all pain. He wants to prove his worth, and this is the quality he lives by. "You must keep your head clear. Keep your head clear and know how to suffer like a man" (Hemingway 92). Santiago knows that he

has to be clear in his ideas and thoughts. He must not feel defeated. He has to have strong will-power in such dire circumstances.

Santiago finally is victorious in killing the marlin. It has although come at a high price. Santiago has nearly cut his hand and his back is aching too much. However, he feels triumphant as he has been able to withstand the pain and suffering for three days and came out victorious. "But I think the great DiMaggio would be proud of me today. I had no bone spurs. But the hands and the back hurt truly" (Hemingway 97). Santiago indeed showed his character and strong willpower in his efforts.

Santiago's struggle is at its best, when he battles the sharks, who have more or less infinite reserves of numbers, energy, and vicious determination. Driving a harpoon at the first, he hits it "without hope, but with resolution and complete malignancy" (Hemingway 102). Having lost the harpoon in this encounter, he continues to improvise weaponry from materials in the boat in the face of hopeless odds: "Now they have beaten me, he thought, I am too old to club sharks to death. But I will try it as long as I have the oars and the short club and the tiller" (Hemingway 112).

Consciousness of existing in *The Old Man and The Sea*

The narrator emphasizes Santiago's perseverance in the opening pages, mentioning that the old man's eyes are still —cheerful and undefeated— after suffering nearly three months without a single catch. And, although Santiago's struggle will bring about defeat—the great marlin will be devoured by sharks— Santiago will emerge as a victor. As he tells the boy, in order for this to happen, he must venture far out, farther than the other fishermen are willing to go.

“You are killing me, fish,” the old man thought. “But you have a right to. Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than you, brother. Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who” (92). This realization speaks to the novella’s theory of the natural world. As Santiago’s exhausting and near-endless battle with the marlin shows, his is a world in which life and death go hand in loving hand. Everything in the world must die, and according to Santiago, only a brotherhood between men – or creatures – can alleviate the grimness of that fact. The death of the marlin serves as a beautiful case in point, for as the fish dies it is not only transformed into something larger than itself, it is also charged with life: “Then the fish came alive, with his death in him” (Hemingway 94).

The transformation that the fish undergoes upon its death anticipates the transformation that awaits Santiago in the novella’s final pages. The old man’s battle with the fish is marked by supreme pain and suffering, but he lives in a world in which extreme pain can be a source of triumph rather than defeat. The key to Santiago’s triumph, as the end of the novel makes clear, is an almost martyr like endurance, a quality that the old man knows and values. Santiago repeatedly reminds himself that physical pain does not matter to a man, and he urges himself to keep his head clear and to know how to suffer like a man (Hemingway 92).

The hope that Santiago clings to at the novella’s close is not the hope that comes from naïveté. It is, rather, a hope that comes from experience, of something new emerging from something old, as a phoenix rises out of the ashes. The novella states as much when Santiago reflects that “a man can be destroyed but not defeated” (Hemingway 103). The destruction of the marlin is not a defeat

for Santiago; rather, it leads to his redemption. Indeed, the fishermen who once mocked him now stand in awe of him.

Anxiety in *The Old Man and The Sea*

Santiago, the protagonist in Hemingway's *The Old Man and The Sea*, is an embodiment of existentialism. The world that Santiago is faces up proves that the universe does not make sense, that there are no rational patterns discernable in it. Any established connection between things may break down at any minute. Order is a deceptive mask that the universe wears. The individual thus confronts the universe with no rational scheme, by means of which he can hope to master it. Reason will only lead him to formulate generalization that will, if he relies upon them, let him down. Human existence is therefore absurd. There is no ultimate explanation of why things are as they are and not otherwise. Nonbeing or nothingness is seen as a universal source of fear and a sense of meaninglessness in the outer world produce discomfort, anxiety and loneliness in the face of human limitations.

Santiago has to remind himself that he does not have the boy with him and must struggle against the fish himself. The marlin pulls the line and cuts Santiago's eye. He announces to the fish that he will struggle against him until he is dead. The fish continues to pull Santiago further into the Gulf. The greater and longer the two struggle, the more Santiago respects his adversary: "Fish, I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends. (Hemingway 54).

Santiago faces anxiety while dealing with the fish. It is evident in his actions in having patience and killing the marlin. Although Santiago is only by

himself in the middle of the sea, he does not lose hope and keeps faith on himself. His constant referring of the boy shows that he misses the boy while he undergoes such tremendous struggle against the marlin. His anxiety is also evident when the sharks attack to devour the marlin after the old man has killed it.

Passion in *The Old Man and The Sea*

What makes Santiago special is that despite a lifetime of hardships that have hurt him as the morning sun has always hurt his eyes, he is still a man in charge and an expert who knows the tricks of his fisherman's craft. His eyes remain young, cheerful, and undefeated. He knows how to rely on the transcendent power of his own imagination to engender the inspiration and confidence he needs and to keep alive in himself and others the hope, dreams, faith, absorption, and resolution to transcend hardship.

Santiago is a man who still has powerful shoulders, whose eyes are not old but the color of the sea and "cheerful and undefeated," who knows "many tricks" and has "resolution" (Hemingway 5). Santiago's strength and his vision are not that of an old man. His eyes remain cheerful and undefeated because one of the many tricks he has learned - arguably more vital than his tricks of the fisherman's craft - is the transcendent power of imaginative vision. Whether drawing his inspiration and confidence from religion, baseball, games of chance, memories of his own youth, his love for Manolin, or something else, Santiago knows how to keep alive in himself and others the hope, dreams, faith, absorption, and resolution essential to withstand suffering, transcend it, and ultimately transform one's self.

Human beings can summon imaginative vision, as well as physical endurance, creating the capacity to withstand and even transcend hardships. This central theme radiates beyond the surface realism in this very human tale of an impoverished old man, his love for a young man who also loves him, and his trials in bringing in a big fish. Hemingway's early descriptions of Santiago support the central theme and foreshadow the novella's ostensibly simple yet artfully designed plot. The old man's shirt, like his sail, is patched beyond all recognition. He is thin and gaunt, from a long life of hard work and times with little to eat. He has deep wrinkles on the back of his neck and blotches of skin cancer on his face and hands from a life spent in the sun's reflection on the tropical sea. His hands are scarred from handling heavy fish on cords, but the scars are old as erosions in a fishless desert. Job-like in his hardships, Santiago is a man who has endured many ordeals.

Conclusion

Santiago although old and weak, is passionate in his work. He is expert in his skills. He knows well how to utilize his fishing gear and also is aware of the psyche of the fishes. He well and truly knows his business that he operates. And it is with this precision that Santiago is able to kill the marlin. Santiago does not let his wearied body to overcome him. He fights with all his might and patience. He displays the characteristics of various parameters of existentialism.

He never gives up. He is conscious of his existence. Even though he has failed for eighty-four days and gone without fishing, he does not lose hope. He remembers his ideal DiMaggio and takes inspirations from him. It would have been very easy for him to give up the struggle and return back home but he

would rather loose fighting. He does not have anything to prove for anybody, but he only proves him for himself. He wants to show himself that age and physical limitations are no hindrances if one is strong-willed and resolute.

Also the most striking feature of Santiago is endurance. He endures his pain and does not complain. This is what he follows in his life. He knows his responsibilities as a man. He does not let his anxiety get over him but stays resolute and firm in adversity. He knows that life is nothing but a challenge and he faces the challenge with strong will-power. He does not take the easy way out of life, and that is how he gives meaning to his life. He wants to make his life authentic, and for that he is ready to endure pain and hardships.

On studying the novel *The Old Man and the Sea* in the light of existentialism, it can fairly be concluded that the following parameters of existentialism like: Authenticity, Anxiety, Consciousness of existence, Free will, Passion and Responsibility are found in the novel. Hence, existentialism is prominent in the novel.

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