Chapter V

The Ultimate Use of Symbolism in
The Old Man And The Sea

The Old Man And The Sea is the last published word in the life time of Earnest Hemingway in the year 1952. It is called a novella and instrumental in Hemingway winning the Pulitzer Prize in 1953 and Nobel Prize in 1954. Hemingway’s fame and career as a writer soared to heights that are discussed and debated in many a literary forum. There are some detractors who proved to be unsympathetic to a master craftsman of fiction that became central to literature in the twentieth century.

The old man in the novella is Santiago, who is a fisherman by occupation in a small fishing village on the shores of Cuba. Though he is an experienced fisherman, luck evaded him for eighty four days, as he did not make a single catch over the period. Manolin is an apprentice who is with him on the sea, helping him and learning fishing. Due to the ill-luck that is on Santiago, Manolin’s parents shifted him to another boat as an apprentice after forty days of the ill-luck that persisted.
Hemmingway very briefly rolls out the past of and the present status of Santiago his capabilities, his interests and his achievements to the readers. Santiago does not know the reason for his ill-luck but is sure of making a good catch shortly. He is all alone in his quest to make a mark for himself as a fisherman. He sails out on the eighty-fifth day into the Gulf-Stream which is the deep sea where big fish like the marlin is available. At midday he drops his bait in the sea and sure that the fish is hooked. The ordeal of securing the fish by killing it and bringing it to the shore goes on for three days and nights. It is during this struggle that the old man - Santiago, ruminates over the role of man and the role of the fish in the sea. Santiago is weak, frail but determined to succeed. He succeeds in killing the fish with his harpoon. The sharks smell the blood of the marlin and attack the carcass, eating away chunks of the marlin.

Santiago reaches the shore with the skeleton of the marlin larger than his boat. He has succeeded in catching the fish but is unable to protect the catch and convert into money. There are so many messages that the novella sends to its readers, where religion and human values, play a very prominent role. The relevance
of the novel through the symbols is assessed in this chapter.

The novella is set in a village which is predominantly catholic in faith. Though the people who live there are deep rooted in their faith they are also equally superstitious. There are subtle observations Hemingway makes of the fisher folk who attribute everything to the teachings, signs and symbols that come with their faith. The parents of Manolin are impatient and waited for forty days to take a decision to withdraw Manolin from his apprenticeship with Santiago. The cut off date at forty days symbolizes the forty days Christ took to fast in the desert before his crucifixion, and the Arc of Noah is deluged after forty days of incessant rain. The Biblical influence is very subtly the brought out be Hemingway. Santiago’s ill-luck is linked with career of Manolin who prefer to be with Santiago, but is forced by his parents to leave him because luck cannot be evasive to a man for more than a period of forty days. Anything that can have an effect can be only for forty days, which is practiced till today in the season of lent.

Santiago is the symbol of perseverance and patience he never gives up, and he apparently accedes,
but is unable to make it to the shore with the catch as his skill and knowledge becomes a lesson to him and other fishermen. He never expected his catch to be loaded with the sharks. The sharks are symbols of doom. Man may appear to be successful but failure will loom large after the success.

Hemingway is trying to convey a philosophy of sorts to society after the Second World War. The Nazis are winning territories but finally lost the war to the Allies. The victory is short lived and cannot be celebrated as it will be reversed in due course. Hemingway is symbolically bringing out the meaning of victory and defeat which could be measured only in relative terms and not in absolute terms. He is closely following the way battles are won in the First World War and in Spain by the establishment. His keen observation lead him to symbolically arrive at the truth that victory can be measured only in terms of territory and losses for the enemy, but the true loss of peace and calm forever is for humanity as a whole. His understanding of this reality culminates in the character of Santiago, who he creates to make his philosophy clear that Santiago is a model fisherman suffering from the scourge of old age and inability to
succeeds in his job. He succeeds in making it out as a challenge on the high seas after eighty four days. His lamentation, his inner thoughts, his association with Manolin and his love for sport is all a manifestation of the inner rumblings of every human being. He loves to succeed, but he is branded as an unsuccessful fisherman by his one community. He assumes the symbol of the Christ who is scourged by his community, denied by his own disciples and crucified.

Christ’s disciples are all from humble occupations like fishermen. St. James also belonged to the fisherman community. It is the identity that Christ gave them that mattered and all they became symbols of fishermen who carried forward Christ’s mission of love and sacrifice that made them fishers of humans which today form the large number of followers of Christ all over the world. Santiago is visualized by Hemingway as a master fisherman who is a role model to Manolin and though severed by the others of the village, is not given his due place because of the commercial aspirations that make Manolin’s parents dissuade him from going with Santiago. Hemingway uses Santiago as the symbolic fisherman of the twentieth century who had lost his credibility in the context of commercialism.
The symbol of St. James the Apostle and disciple of Christ who is one among the twelve chosen to carry forward the mission of Christ and be a fisher of men has transformed into a frail weakened Santiago who is unable to maintain his professional credibility to his one and only one disciple and apprentice Manolin.

Hemingway constantly links the pride of Santiago with his professional skills which is no longer the way the people of his village think. The changed times is the concern of Hemingway. Hemingway points with the alienation and crisis that Santiago the great experienced fisherman in his over society. Santiago is isolated because of his ill luck at sea. He feels betrayed but accepts it, and the betrayal is for want converting his skill into a commercial success. The society he belongs to is nonchalant of his ill luck or failure to succeed is what concerns Hemingway. Christ is betrayed for thirty silver coins by Judas. Santiago is symbolically ignored by his follow fishermen who treat him with scant respect, which amounts to betrayal and lack of humanism.

Hemingway initiates the reader to contemplate of the failure of human beings to endear and be supportive
of fellow human beings which the world has been lacking even from the days of Christ.

Santiago’s advice is practical and encourages Manolin. This interaction shows the resolve in Santiago’s mind. It is this resolve that he shows on the high seas and repeats the refrain that man can be destroyed but not defeated. He speaks for the whole human race, and its endeavour to succeed. Hemingway makes success a symbol as victory is conveyed through the symbolize movements of moving up the ladder of esteem in society.

The measurement of success is symbolic when Santiago returns with the skeleton of the huge fish. The success in reality should have been celebrated, but there are raised eyebrows, a hush among the fellow fishermen who normally celebrate the victory of the base ball team. This is the contradiction that Hemingway points out, where ordinary man like Santiago achieve the impossible to instil courage and confidence in the society around them, but they are ignored or remain unsung heroes. The lack of recognition for people like he soldiers who laid down their lives to make the world a peaceful place are ignored, they go unnoticed like Santiago. It is this attitude that
Hemingway highlights, which is endemic of the twentieth century. This attitude has been persistent whether it is war time or peace time in the lives of ordinary men. The sports teams like the Dimaggio, The Reds of Cinerinatic and the white sox of Chicago are all celebrated, but the real hero like Santiago is not celebrated.

Santiago’s struggle in claiming his rightful place in society is symbolic to the extent that every common man has his own story of victory. Hemingway transforms Santiago into a hero, but making his struggle assume epic proportions in the craft of fishing with poor equipment, his age is against him, his hands are cut by the rope which is symbolic of the wounds Christ had on his hands. E.M. Halliday states:

Hemingway as far as I know, has never written an allegory notwithstanding the bright interpretations of the Old Man And The Sea that illuminated cocktail parties a few years ago, when it is published in ‘Life’ and for a very good reason. In successful allegory, the story on the primary level is dominated by the story on the secondary level, and if the allegorical meaning is to be kept clear, its
naturalistic counterpart must pay for it by surrendering realistic probability in one way or the other. A strain is imposed on the whole narrative mechanism, for mere connotative symbolism will not do to carry the allegory; there must be denotative equation, part for part, between symbols and things symbolized in order to identify the actors and action on the allegorical level. (56)

E.M. Halliday points out that the contemporary readers have imposed a strain on the narrative mechanism, for mere ‘connotative symbolism’ which converts that novel into an allegory. Hemingway’s narrative technique forced critics to analyze the methods that made his fiction remarkable for each character became an “objective epitome”- enhancing the relevance of the symbol. Santiago becomes the “objective epitome” of an old man who is forced to eke out his living, which is briefly stated in the opening paragraph of the novel.

From the beginning of the text the picture of Santiago is clear and precise. His age, his ill-luck, his old boat, his improper clothing, poor gear needed for a fisherman and a host of disadvantages that
indicate to the reader Santiago’s plight. His struggle against the odds of nature on the high seas acquires multiple dimensions which predict defeat. Hemingway’s use of symbols in the narrative is carefully worded preparing the reader to be ready to sympathize as he undertakes the journey across the high seas, beyond the other fishermen. He is sure of the availability of the big fish in the deep seas. The marlin symbolizes nature. The struggle that Santiago undergoes till he kills the marlin becomes a struggle which assumes proportions unheard of in the circle of fishermen. His suffering is so acute that he prays to God and makes a vow to the Virgin de Cobre.

He settled comfortably against the wood and took his suffering as it came and the fish swam steadily and the boat moved slowly through the dark water. There is a small sea rising with the wind coming up from the east and at noon the old man’s left hand is uncrammed.

‘Bad news for you, fish,’ he said and shifted the line over the sacks that covered his shoulders.

He is uncomfortable but suffering, although he did not admit the suffering at all.
'I am not religious,’ he said. ‘But I will say ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys that I should catch this fish, and I promise to make a pilgrimage to the Virgin de Cobre if I catch him. That is a promise.’ (80)

Hemingway develops the story making the reader accept Santiago’s relationship with nature without a slight suspicion of guile or hatred. Santiago loves nature and sea where he had spent most of his life fishing; he is familiar with every object on the sea. Santiago’s guileless relationship makes him endear himself to the marlin. He talks to the fish and makes himself familiar and communicative to the fish.

The narrative technique used here forces the reader to sub-consciously record the skill and passion Santiago had for the sea and the fish. Santiago is aware of his superiority as a man over the fish. Though the fish is great as an animal and creature of the sea, which is its natural habitat, may seem unjust for Santiago to kill the fish in its own habitat “I’ll kill him; though,” he said, “in all his greatness and his glory” (82). Santiago is a symbol that represents mankind and marlin represents nature and both are exclusively unique pitted against each other. Santiago
says: “I told the boy I am a strange old man,” he said, “Now is when I must prove it” (82).

The pride of Santiago is similar to the pride that led the whole world into this war. Santiago’s desire to prove his skill and ability to the rest of the community and disprove their taunts is a matter of human pride that often tends to degrade and derange a society or an individual. Santiago’s urge to make a spectacular catch is his primary pre-occupation. He is not satisfied with an ordinary catch to augment his livelihood. Santiago here is portrayed like the tragic heroes of Shakespeare who inherit a tragic flaw.

Hemingway portrays Santiago in the perspective of the current scenario that prevailed after the Second World War. The world had become a more competitive place, the humble occupation of fishing in the sea, which is one of the most ancient occupations of mankind like farming and hurting has become are of the largest businesses of the day which forced ordinary fishermen like Santiago at the far end of his life become a part of the competitive business. Every occupation and trade is driven by the war economy that focused only on profit. The spirit of competition always exists in the field of sports.
Hemingway uses the game of base ball which is one of the favourite sports of the fishermen, to rekindle the spirit of Santiago who is an outstanding sportsman in his youth. The nostalgia of Santiago is symbolic, of the success he enjoyed in the field of sports and in his occupation. The nostalgic feelings that he recalls are indicators to the reader that Santiago is a man who is a very successful fisherman and a doyen in his own way who is a role model to many. The information given by him during the struggle with the fish as reminiscences is to create an aura of respect and reference for Santiago, who is not willing to surrender to the fish.

Hemingway combines a number of qualities that go in the making of such professionals who take a pride in what they profess as an occupation however humble it may be. Santiago is not a military general or a political figurehead in his village; his is an old fisherman who has no great relevance to the society he lived in.

Hemingway chooses Santiago as protagonist of the novella, to make the world understand that it is the ordinary average human being involved in a traditional basic occupation who is the heroes of the post world war period. The courage, perseverance, fortitude,
grace, patience and conviction to succeed are what drive the world. Hemingway raises the image of Santiago to greater heights by presenting him as the symbol of the age that had lost all sympathy for humans and changed irrecoverably into a commercial conundrum. Hemingway is subtly pointing out to the world the drastic change society is undergoing along with rampant commercialization that demolished societal concerns for human life.

The progressive damage which began with the First World War continued into the post second world war period. Reviewing the relevance of Hemingway’s concern for this loss of human values, makes his writings relevant to this day, when the lives of the most marginalized like Santiago is trivialized and made insignificant. Hemingway deliberately converted an incident that occurred in a fishing village near Havana into a novella which makes every well meaning human being who reads the novella think and ruminate on the direction in which society is proceeding.

Santiago as a symbol of the marginalized in his native society raises the alarm of man’s commitment to man. The alarm gains serious ramifications and becomes relevant to the generation in which he lived and
continuously to the generation that followed. On examining Santiago as a symbol from all angles, his simplicity is pitted against his pride; his poverty is shown against the rest of society living in apparent comfort. His love for the sea and nature contradict his killing of the marlin. His complex positions make him a unique symbol of the present day common man, who has qualities that are contradictory in terms. Hemingway indirectly forces the reader to analyze Santiago as a symbol representing the most vulnerable section in a traditional society.

Hemingway is aware of the theory of symbolism when he wrote his novels and short stories. He is aware of W.B. Yeast’s essay “The symbolism of Poetry” which may have influenced him to use this as a technique in his narration. Every object in The Old Man And The Sea becomes a potent symbol. W.B. Yeats: “Besides emotional symbols, symbols that evoke emotions alone – and in this sense all alluring or hateful things are symbols, although their relations with one another are too subtle to delight usefully” (32).

The suffering of Santiago during the epic struggle is something that he never wants to repeat. He knows that he and the marlin suffer from the same sin of
pride. Santiago becomes the symbol of endurance, which is Hemingway’s view of the world. Death is inevitable and unavoidable, but Santiago is prepared to face defeat only when he is completely destroyed. Santiago’s struggle with the fish gives him an opportunity to introspect on the beauty of nature he says,

I do not understand these things, he thought. But it is good that we do not have to try to kill the sun or the moon or the stars. It is enough to live on the sea and kill our true brothers. (The Old Man and the Sea 95)

Though he is at the peak of the struggle he empathizes with the fish and reflects on the beauty of nature and man’s capacity that is inadequate to destroy nature. After killing the marlin with the harpoon, he is challenged by the sharks that tear the flesh of the marlin and destroy his catch, he feels terribly desperate.

‘He took about forty pounds’, the old man said aloud. He took my harpoon too and all the rope, he thought, and now my fish bleeds again and there will be others.
He did not like to look at the fish anymore since he had been mutilated. When the fish had been hit it is as though he himself are hit.

'But man is not made for defeat,' he said. 'A man can be destroyed but not defeated.' (131–132)

Death and destruction become powerful motifs that constantly remind the reader that whether it is the fish or Santiago, death and destruction is inevitable. Santiago tries to reason out the cause of his killing the fish and he acknowledges it is a sin to kill. He tries to reason out the meaning of sin, which is of no relevance and justifies the killing by consoling himself that it is the job of fisherman to kill fish for the livelihood of people and it served as food for humans. He reflects the justification of Lord Kirshna in the Bagavad Gita where he advises Arjuna the warrior to fight and kill his own kith and kin to do his duty. Destruction and death are justified as man’s duty and so there is no sin.

Hemingway brings into focus the conflict that man always faces at all levels - the conflict between the
material and the spiritual – Santiago’s conflict is to bring home his catch the marlin, which is material, but his chant reverberates the spiritual and ultimate goal of man that reverses back to the purpose of creation in Christian theology. Ever, living being according to Christian theologians is created by God with a purpose. Death or destruction is not the purpose of creation. Hemingway succeeds in bringing the conflict between the material and the spiritual in *The Old Man And The Sea*.

Hemingway does not attribute much credence to religion in all his writings, he is sarcastic and points out the shallow faith that Catholics have. He is wary about the way Catholics pray, and he is very critical of the purpose for which they pray to the saints to intercede for them only when they are in trouble. The narrator of *The Old Man And The Sea* says,

> He is comfortable but suffering, although he did not admit the suffering at all. I am not religious; he said but I will say ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys that I should catch this fish, and I promise to make a pilgrimage to the Virgin de Cobre if I catch him. That’s a promise.
He commenced to say his prayer mechanically. Sometimes he would be so tried that he could not remember the prayer and then he would say them fast so that they would come automatically. Then he added, ‘Blessed Virgin, pray for the death of this fish wonderful though he is.’ (63)

Hemingway’s observation on the way the Catholics pray, their attitude to religion and their purpose of prayer has been very soothing attacks. He is trying to convey symbolically that religion in the western countries especially Europe and the countries that are influenced by European thinking and behaviour had become nonchalant to religion. They used the mechanism of prayer only to satisfy materials needs and earthly gifts that are ridiculous and pagan in nature. Spain which is looked upon as the centre of European culture had only their bull fighting to offer as entertainment to the tourists from other countries. Spain is wholly catholic and their belief in luck and gambling is referred to in almost all the writings of Hemingway.

His narrative technique is so lucid that he brings religion into focus without embarking on any high moral ground involving the validity of theology or Doctrine.
He causally mentions the way Santiago uses religion and prayer which is a practice till today. The purpose of prayer and worship has degenerated into stark ritualistic commercialism. Santiago’s promise to go on a pilgrimage to the Virgin de Cobre is made in return for helping him to catch the fish. The purpose of a pilgrimage and the making of vows to secure some material benefit sound very unethical and demeaning of religion. Pilgrimage is practiced by the major religions of the world. The pilgrimage becomes symbolic when it is used as a method to fulfil one’s vows for the material benefit gained. The treatment of religion is symbolic in the novels of Hemingway.

Santiago is an ordinary fisherman who follows the traditional religious rituals of his people. He may not be capable of making an analysis of religion or its rituals. Hemingway hints at the religious belief that is prevalent in the catholic countries where one’s faith is superficial. He makes similar observation in *A Farewell To Arms* and *For Whom The Bell Tolls*.

Hemingway uses the Christian imagery and symbols for the reason that his characters are from Catholic backgrounds. The countries like Spain and Italy are predominantly Catholic and the use of Catholic imagery
and symbolism with the myths and legends that are popular there would go down well, with the readers. The belief in such myths and legends has adds aura to the story and its value. In order to impress the readers, Santiago the old man is developed in the story like a Christ image, carrying his mast all alone without any help, and facing the odds of the high seas all alone for three days which is symbolic of Christ’s suffering before he is crucified. The parallel of the stigmata on Christ’s hand and the wounds on the hand of Santiago, the suffering and sacrifice Santiago undergoes is similar to Christ’s suffering. The suffering is for the future generations to get inspired by his sacrifice and determination on the high seas. His achievement needs to be remembered like that of Christ’s and commemorated.

Santiago’s dreams are symbolic indicators of his determination to succeed in the struggle against nature to prove his superiority and make a catch that will be remarkable. The night before he sets out on his fishing trip he dreams of the lions on the beach.

He no longer dreamed of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor his
wife. He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach. They played like young cats in the dusk and he loved them as he loved the boy. (27)

Santiago no longer dreamt of great occurrences, he dreamt of the lions playing on beach. The lion is a symbol of nature, which has so many connotations and connections to the world of Hemingway’s exploits in the jungles of Africa. The places are symbols that connect to the sub-conscious psyche of Santiago, that are of importance in his youth. Every young man has a dream, which is linked with some place either dear to his imagination or to his life which he wants to visit. In the case of an old man like Santiago, the place he dreams of may be the nostalgia of the places he visited as a youth with enthusiasm and vigour. This passage has a direct reference to Hemingway who had a very adventurous past and loved to travel to places to witness events which formed the basis of his writings. Dreaming of places suggests that he is going to undertake a journey. The journey is the defining journey of his life where he is poised of fixing the destiny of his life – the eternal struggle that man faces on earth.
Every man born on this earth including Christ becomes a part of the eternal struggle and so is Santiago. The defining struggle for Christ is the test he is put to which lead him to death by crucifixion.

Santiago puts himself to the test like Christ by undertaking the most dangerous journey in the early hours of the eighty fifth day to venture in the deep sea, equipped only with his motivation and courage ready to face the worst challenge. His skiff is a damage skiff, which may not be sea worthy if put through a fitness test, his sails are damaged, torn and tattered; he himself is weak and withered.

Hemingway portrays Santiago in such a pathetic condition not evoke sympathy but to invoke and inspire the whole fishing community that taking on nature, whether it be the sea, the marlin or the sharks is a challenge that should be taken on valiantly to defy the forces of nature.

Hemingway’s technique of making his observations as the narrator, and then slipping into the character of the protagonist – Santiago who reveals his inner thoughts and dreams is a modern cinematographic
technique which is used in the production of documentaries.

Hemingway uses the matter of fact narration to stimulate the reader’s appetite and force him into a mode of creating a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ as Coleridge did while writing poetry. Santiago is the protagonist who challenges the forces of nature, defeats nature and returns to the shore paradoxically without total victory. Hemingway subtly tells the reader that any form of victory or defeat is only relative and cannot be measured in absolute terms. The readers are inquisitive to know the fate of the old man, the reaction of his immediate surroundings, the reaction of Manolin and the end. Hemingway talks of the sea and makes his observations which enhance the effect of the narrative.

In the dark the old man could feel the morning coming and as he rowed he heard the trembling sound as flying fish left the water and the hissing that their stiff set wings made as they soared away in the darkness. (32)

The old man sets out in the dark, he takes a leap into the dark, which is symbolic of the leap that
mankind has to take to test the veracity of human confidence and courage. The old man could feel the morning coming, which symbolized hope. His movement in the dark is in search of light, and he is sure that the promising morning will come. Santiago here becomes a symbol of hope first to himself and then to others. Here also his hope resembles the hope that Christ gave his disciples, when he is sure that he will be resurrected by his Father.

Santiago is sure that nature moves only in cycles, night will be followed by day. The only beacon of hope that man should have is self confidence, courage and the urge to survive. In spite of his age Santiago fights the odds of nature in his own style.

Santiago always visualized the sea as a mother, because the Spanish and the Cubans who live on the shores the sea have their own regards and respect for the sea and call her the mother. The sea is the symbol of ‘mother’, who is the source of love, wealth and so many blessings that she bestows on her children. Santiago is clear in his vision of the sea.

Hemingway as the narrator, does not stop with Santiago’s vision, he says some address the sea as
el mar which has a masculine connotation. Some visualize the sea as a contestant or any enemy. There are multiple views of the sea, but Hemingway makes offers his clarity that the sea is the mother for the protagonist-Santiago.

Santiago’s bait in the sea, to catch the fish is another poignant symbol that Hemingway projects, as it is allowed to drift at different depths in the sea. The length of the bait and its capacity to target the right fish is well calculated by Santiago. Though the bait is a symbol which is used with accuracy and precision, Santiago is aware that luck is the deciding factor.

Hemingway’s narrative is appreciated by critics for the economy of language in all his works. It is best demonstrated in the following lines, like Santiago, Hemingway is precise and accurate in his use of vocabulary which makes his prose style exclusive and symbolic of the process his mind works on.

But, he thought, I keep them, with precision. Only I have no luck any more. But who knows? May be today. Every day is a new day. It is better to be lucky. But I
would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready. (37)

Hemingway has displayed his master craftsmanship in the novella, where every object becomes a symbol. The human relationship between the aged Santiago and the young Manolin is another natural relationship in an occupation, where the old endear the young in the learning process that sustains human life on the earth. Santiago evolves as the symbol of hope at the end of the novella, when Manolin goes to see the old man sick on his bed in the shack. Christ chose Peter the fisherman as his first apostle to lead his mission. Santiago is the first among the fisherman to accomplish the daring feat of catching a huge marlin in the deep sea all alone. The struggle of Santiago is the symbolic struggle of the whole of humanity to survive on this planet.

E.M. Halliday says:

Hemingway has used techniques of symbolism and techniques of irony and use them well; what we want in criticism is an even view of his use of these and other artistic resources that does not exaggerate one at the expense
of others. A point deserving great attention and emphasis about this writer is his devotion to the implicit rather than the explicit mode; both symbolism and irony truly serve this artistic purpose. Hemingway, in fact, stirs thought as to the interrelationship of these two kinds of ambiguity. (69)

Hemingway’s commitment to his art, he once said in one of his interviews is like a bull fight. The writer has to succeed with his audience or he perishes in the process like the matador in the ring. The image of the matador is the predominant symbol that occupied his life and writings till the end of his career as a novelist.