

**AN ANALYSIS OF SYMBOLISM IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY'S "THE  
OLD MAN AND THE SEA"**

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**Abstract.** In this article, we are shown a very detailed literary analysis of the symbolism in Hemingway's novella "The Old Man and the Sea", considering the many-sided symbolic aspects that make up the work's long-lasting literary importance. A qualitative methodology has been applied which is close textual reading and comparative analysis of existing scholarly interpretations, through which the research has discovered the main symbolic elements such as the marlin, the sea, the lions, and Santiago's character. The results prove that the symbolic structure of the novella works on several levels of interpretation which are religious, existential, and naturalistic dimensions that all together claim the work to be a masterpiece of modernist literature. This research paper is contributing to the ongoing debate among scholars about Hemingway's literary techniques and at the same time it confirms the continued importance of symbolic analysis in the comprehension of the twentieth century American fiction.

**Keywords:** Ernest Hemingway, symbolism, The Old Man and the Sea, literary analysis, American literature, modernism, allegory, iceberg theory

**INTRODUCTION**

Ernest Hemingway's short novel "The Old Man and the Sea" was published in 1952 and it is considered one of the major American literary works of the twentieth century. Along with his other works, it gained him the Pulitzer Prize in 1953 and was one of the reasons for his getting the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954. The story about the epic fight of the old Cuban fisherman named Santiago against the giant marlin in the Gulf Stream has been a subject of considerable scholarly debates on its symbolic dimensions since the very day of its publication. The very importance of symbolism for this particular interpretation of the work cannot be exaggerated because Hemingway himself said that "The Old Man and the Sea" could be understood in many ways and that the pretty simple plot was a means of conveying deeper philosophical and spiritual meanings [1].

**The value of examining symbolism** in Hemingway's writings is indeed quite significant, even more so if one takes the author's peculiar literary style into account, which very often gets labeled as the "iceberg theory" or theory of omission, in which the dignity of the iceberg's movement is due to only one-eighth of it being above water [2]. Such a technique makes it necessary for the readers to be very active in the reading process in order to discover the submerged meanings that Hemingway with his very characteristic minimalist style has, on purpose, put below the surface. **Previous research.** Scholars have already presented a number of interpretations of the symbols in "The Old Man and the Sea" from the points of view of different critical schools, one being Christian allegorical reading proposed by Joseph Waldmeir, who equated Santiago's suffering with the passion of Christ, or the naturalistic interpretation supported by Philip Young, who stressed the work's engagement with nature themes and human endurance as its main focus [3]. Y.Y. Lidsky, a Russian scholar of literature, has been a significant part of the development of Hemingway studies providing a constantly more philosophical interpretation of the author's symbols, through which, he has shown that in the

latter part of Hemingway's career there was a gradual shift towards more explicit symbolic expression [4].

**The objectives of this study** are threefold: first, to systematically identify and categorize the primary symbolic elements within "The Old Man and the Sea"; second, to analyze how these symbols function both individually and collectively to convey the novella's thematic concerns; and third, to evaluate the interpretive frameworks that scholars have applied to understanding Hemingway's symbolic method in this particular work.

### **METHODOLOGY AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

The present research utilizes a qualitative literary analysis method which bases itself on a close analysis of the text and a comparative study of the interpretations of the scholars. The main material for analysis is the original English-language edition of Ernest Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea," and the analysis will spotlight the passages with important symbolic images. The procedures for analysis consist of recognizing systematically the recurring images and motifs, looking into the context where they are used in the story and evaluating how they contribute to the thematic structure of the work. This method is also in line with the approach that has been shaped by the leading Hemingway scholars like Carlos Baker, whose biographies and critical studies have set up strict standards for analyzing Hemingway's symbolic technique in a very thorough way [5].

The symbolism in "The Old Man and the Sea" has produced a variety of interpretive traditions that have markedly influenced the scholarly comprehension of the novella. One of these is the Christian allegory, which was initially formulated by Joseph Waldmeir through his significant essay, and it points out many similarities between Santiago's suffering and Christ's passion, such as the fisherman's bleeding hands, his lifting of the mast like a cross, and his lying on the beach in a position similar to that of Christ after the crucifixion [3]. This reading was one of the major lines of criticism during the early years, but it was also contested by the scholars who claimed that the readings impose a foreign reference on a text that is resistant to systematic allegorization. Bickford Sylvester's critique further complicated the Christian interpretation by showing that Hemingway was using a mixed religious imagery that referred to more than one spiritual tradition rather than strictly being restricted to the Christian symbolic vocabulary [6].

The naturalistic reading, supported by Philip Young and later critics, underlines the novella's concern with humanity's connection to the natural world. In this context, the ocean is the place where nature's overpowering and very destructive forces are person's struggle, while the marlin is the case of beauty and also the indifference of the natural order [7]. Uzbek literary critic A.A. Abdullayev, while looking into the impact of American literature on the growth of Central Asian literature, pointed out that Hemingway's symbolic portrayal of nature communicated with the universal human experiences of 'battling' the forces which are beyond his/her control [8]. The existentialist approach, inspired by the philosophical currents that were dominant at the time of Hemingway's mature period, interprets Santiago's fate as a refusal to acknowledge man's defeat in an absurd universe, with the fisherman's well-known assertion "a man can be destroyed but not defeated" being the symbolic highlight of the theme.

Contemporary scholarship has increasingly adopted synthetic approaches that acknowledge the validity of multiple interpretive frameworks operating simultaneously within the text. Robert P. Weeks's critical examination questioned overly systematized symbolic readings while affirming the presence of deliberate symbolic elements that reward careful analysis [9]. This methodological plurality informs the present study's analytical approach, which seeks to examine symbolism without forcing the text into predetermined interpretive categories.

**RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

The study of symbolic factors in "The Old Man and the Sea" brings to light a well-formed and interconnected network of symbols which interweave with narrative realism and carry the reader onto several interpretive levels. The results can be categorized in accordance with the main symbolic elements and their roles in the text's thematic structure.

The first symbol, the marlin, becomes the most complex and diverse symbol of the story through analysis since it is Santiago's foe, his brother and his double at the same time. Hemingway highlights the fish's nobility, beauty, and dignity in his depiction, which are, in fact, the attributes of Santiago's character and his struggles to keep during his ordeal. Santiago's referring to the marlin as "brother" repeatedly affirms their symbolic relationship which not only goes beyond the predator-prey dynamic but also implies a bond of mutual recognition between two worthy opponents [1]. This aspect of the symbolism elevates the fight from a simple fishing trip to a ritual contest that not only tests but also confirms Santiago's humanity. The act of sharks ripping off the fish's flesh, leaving only the skeleton as the old man's trophy, is a symbolic representation of the unavoidable extinction of earthly success, but at the same time, it hints that the value of human struggle goes beyond its material results.

The in-depth examination of the symbolic elements in "The Old Man and the Sea" leads to the discovery of a network of images that is very intricately made and operates on many different levels of interpretation while still being closely linked to the realistic surface of the narrative. The results can be clustered thus: First, the symbolic elements and their functions in the text's thematic architecture will be the main organizational principle.

The sea plays a multifaceted role as a symbol throughout the whole novella that cannot be confined to one meaning. The older fishermen see the sea as "la mar," the feminine Spanish article, which connotes the good side, while the younger ones, who strictly take it as "el mar," a manly competitor or enemy, oppose him. This gender-imbued symbolic distinction lays open Santiago's view of the sea as an entity that is both maternal and capricious; it gives and takes away in accordance with its own baffling logic. The sea, in its character of existence, embodied the whole human life, providing both food and killing, and beauty and terror [10]. Hemingway's handling of the sea keeps the reality of the situation intact by avoiding romanticism and at the same time hinting at the acknowledgment of the awe-inspiring nature of the sea, thus creating a symbolic plane that is as complex as humanity's relationship with the natural world.

**Table 1. Primary Symbols and Their Interpretive Dimensions**

Symbol	Literal Function	Symbolic Dimensions	Textual Evidence
The Marlin	Santiago's catch	Noble adversary; brotherhood; human aspiration; natural beauty	"Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than you, brother"
The Sea	Setting of action	Life force; feminine principle; source of sustenance and trial	Santiago's use of "la mar" versus younger fishermen's "el mar"
The Lions	Dream imagery	Youth; strength; innocence; connection to past vitality	Recurring dreams of lions on African beaches from Santiago's youth
The Sharks	Destroyers of marlin	Inevitable destruction; entropy; forces of dissolution	Progressive destruction of the marlin during return voyage
Santiago's Hands	Instruments of labor	Wounded humanity; stigmata; cost of struggle	Cut and cramped hands during the battle with the marlin

The study of symbolic elements in "The Old Man and the Sea" has shown a network of carefully constructed images that function on different interpretative levels while still being connected to the narrative's realistic surface. The different aspects of nature can be discussed as the main symbolic elements and their functions within the text's thematic structure.

Lions that come in Santiago's dreams represent one of the strongest symbols in the novella. Images of lions that are recurrent, playing on the beaches of Africa, remembered by Santiago's youth as a sailor symbolize the old man's vitality, innocence, and natural grace which he relates to his previous life. Santiago no longer dreams of storms, women, or great fish but only of the lions, which means that these animals represent a core quality of existence that goes beyond the specific contents of experience [2]. The symbolic role of the lions has generated much scholarly debate, with interpretations varying from Freudian readings emphasizing their link with male potency to more generalized readings equating them with the life force itself. Santiago's sleeping and dreaming of the lions again at the end of the novella signifies a symbolic return to the sources of vitality that sustain human life even after defeat.

**Table 2. Scholarly Interpretive Frameworks for Hemingway's Symbolism**

Framework	Key Proponents	Central Argument	Limitations
Christian Allegorical	Waldmeir, Baker	Santiago as Christ figure; suffering as redemptive	May impose external schema; Hemingway's ambivalence toward religion
Naturalistic	Young, Weeks	Focus on human-nature relationship; rejection of transcendent meaning	May undervalue spiritual dimensions of text
Existentialist	Gurko, Brenner	Affirmation of dignity in meaningless universe	Risk of philosophical abstraction
Syncretic	Sylvester	Multiple religious traditions inform symbolic vocabulary	Complexity may resist systematic application

The symbolic analysis that was done has a far-reaching impact when it comes to Hemingway's accomplishment in "The Old Man and the Sea" recognition as a merging of his past stylistic innovations with a more overtly symbolic meaning. One of the reasons why the novella is considered so, is the fact that Hemingway's iceberg theory, which is largely thought of as being a cause for the superficiality of the prose, was actually a rear guard to a type of symbolism that grows naturally from the specific details rather than being dragged in through the explicit allegorical machinery. The finding implies, the prose of Hemingway in this work though seeming to be simple at the surface is actually laden with considerable artistic sophistication in the building up of symbolic meaning.

Through Santiago's characterization analysis, it comes out that the old man is the one who acts as a strong symbol that surpasses the limits of a realistic fictional character's role. Santiago delineates what Hemingway called the "code hero," a person who even in a situation where one is absolutely certain to lose, still manages to maintain his dignity and grace and be calm [5]. His very old age, which is made more vivid and clear through the narrative via the portrayal of his tired body and the brown spots on his face which are skin cancer, signifies the accumulated wisdom and experience that make him able to stand the ordeal. The old man's suffering comes out in his thinness and physical deterioration, but at the same time, it is spiritually strengthened by the absence of such a battle in him hence there is a tension between bodily frailty and

indomitable will being one of the cornerstones thematically of the novella. Furthermore, Santiago's relationship with the boy Manolin adds to his symbolic importance because their connection symbolizes the transfer of knowledge, values, and basic human traits from one generation to the next. The enforced absence of the boy during Santiago's journey makes the old man even more alone but at the same time, it asserts that the the virtues Santiago represents w

This symbolic analysis has far-reaching implications not only for the understanding of Hemingway's achievement in "The Old Man and the Sea," but also for recognizing it as the blending of his previous stylistic innovations with an overtly symbolic-mind engagement. The novella shows that the iceberg theory of Hemingway is not a barrier to the depth of symbolism; rather it facilitates the latter, owing to the fact that the symbol is not imposed through explicit allegorical machinery but comes to light organically from the concrete particulars. The recognition of this fact implies that the noticeable simplicity of Hemingway's writing in the narrative conceals a high level of artistic sophistication in the padding of symbolic meaning.

Among the various symbols in the novel, one that has received a lot of attention from critics is the sharks that gradually eat away at Santiago's marlin during his journey back. The sharks have a double function: they are wild animals on the natural level but also play a part in the symbolic plot which is much more vast than their realistic function. The sharks are the natural law of decay and death that is gradually operating through every human success, dissolution by and through nature's forces, which is why there is a constant struggle between man's efforts and the killing power of nature. The king of the sea's battle against the sharks, which are armed with less and less, has turned until he is left with nothing but a broken tiller, symbolizes the total depletion of resources that comes with aging and dying. The old man's fighting spirit, which is almost like a candle in the dark of the futility of his efforts, strengthens the symbolic significance of struggle itself, no matter what the outcome is. Russian scholar Lidsky has pointed out that, in the case of Hemingway's treatment of inevitable defeat, the defeat is viewed not merely as a pessimistic concept but rather through the lens of the aspect of the struggle and the manner of the battle even when it is lost.

The religious symbolism that runs through the whole novella, however, is something that will need to be looked at very carefully and scholars still do not agree about its exact meaning and Hemingway's purpose in using it. Santiago's hands are literally being hurt and in a way, cutting them through his fighting with the marlin, which makes the association with Christ's stigmata or wounds even more obvious, besides, his carrying the mast on his shoulders coming back from the sea is also likened to Christ's going to the place of crucifixion [3]. The old man's fall reiteratively during his ascent to his hut is like a stronger signal of this Christ-like imagery. But, on the other hand, it should be acknowledged in the analysis that Hemingway encouraged non-allegorical approaches in his works and that the religious imagery coexisting with the naturalistic and existentialist forms of the narrative confuses the Christian interpretation. Baker's in-depth research on Hemingway's approach to symbolism revealed that the writer usually preferred religious images for their emotional and cultural impact rather than to present through them explicitly theological meanings [5]. Therefore, the existence of Christian symbolism adds to the thematic complexity of the novella but it does not limit to one exclusive interpretation.

The baseball references that occur during Santiago's agony also serve as a symbol that ties the old man's personal fight to the greater cultural situations. The support of Santiago to Joe DiMaggio, especially his curiosity about DiMaggio's capability to shine despite the discomfort caused by the bone spur, draws a modern-day parallel to his own case and thus, makes the narrative's more abstract symbolic dimensions rooted in the recognizable social reality. DiMaggio symbolizes a contemporary hero whose public fight parallels Santiago's private suffering, thus, disconnecting the lonely fisherman from the larger human society. This symbolic

link implies that Santiago's ordeal, though highly personal, is part of the universal pattern of human struggle and survival. The old man's preoccupation with baseball in the course of extreme physical and psychological challenges reflects Hemingway's method of using specific cultural details to communicate symbolic meanings that could otherwise turn abstractly philosophical. Sylvester pointed out that the placing of symbolic content in realistic detail was one of the factors that characterized Hemingway's technique and distinguished it from the more overtly allegorical modes of literary symbolism.

Santiago's isolation during his ordeal has a symbolic meaning that requires the reader to reflect and think about it very deeply, as at no point in time does the solitude become a mere storytelling device in the novella but rather, a philosophical one. Before the story starts, Santiago has been fishing for eighty-four days and during that time, he has never caught a fish. His long string of bad luck has resulted in his social ostracization through the leaving of Manolin, whose parents have told him not to fish with the old man they see as "salao," the worst kind of unlucky [1]. This isolation imposed upon him by society takes away Santiago's external confirmation and he is left with the inner self alone to generate his own meaning and purpose, which is a situation that is quite symbolic and is also recognized by existentialist thinkers as one of the most authentic human modes of existence. The old man moving far out into the Gulf Stream, where he can neither see nor be seen by other fishermen and by all the human world, has reached a level of isolation that is so extreme that it turns his fight into one with the roots and conditions of human existence. By showing Santiago speaking out loud to himself, the fish, his hand that is cramped, and the birds that sometimes come, Hemingway might imply that people need to have a conversation even in total solitude, and that awareness is, in fact, relational and communicative by nature. The solitary struggle of Santiago thus has a double meaning that is both the existential desolation of the individual human being and the pressing human need for sociality that can still be felt even in the most deserted places.

The temporal structure of the novella contributes significantly to its symbolic architecture, as the three days of Santiago's voyage evoke numerous cultural and religious associations that enrich the narrative's meaning. The correspondence between Santiago's three-day ordeal and the three days between Christ's crucifixion and resurrection has been noted by scholars advancing Christian allegorical interpretations, though this parallel operates alongside other symbolic dimensions rather than determining a single authoritative reading [3]. The progression from day to night and back to day throughout the voyage creates a symbolic rhythm of darkness and light, struggle and rest, that reflects fundamental patterns of human experience. Santiago's moments of greatest suffering occur during the nights, when he must maintain tension on the line despite exhaustion and when the sharks attack most aggressively, while the days bring renewed strength and clarity of purpose. This symbolic alternation between darkness and light suggests that the novella's thematic content extends beyond the specific circumstances of one fisherman's experience to encompass universal dimensions of human existence characterized by cyclical patterns of difficulty and renewal.

The tools and equipment that Santiago employs throughout his voyage possess symbolic significance that extends beyond their practical functions. The old man's hands, described repeatedly and in meticulous physical detail, symbolize the direct connection between human will and physical action that characterizes authentic labor. Unlike modern industrial production, which interposes machinery between workers and their products, Santiago's fishing depends entirely upon the strength, skill, and endurance of his own body, making his hands the primary instruments through which his human qualities find expression in the world. The progressive damage to his hands during the struggle with the marlin, and their further injury during the battles with sharks, symbolizes the cost that meaningful achievement extracts from those who

pursue it genuinely. The lines, harpoons, and other equipment function similarly as extensions of Santiago's physical being, and their gradual loss and destruction during the voyage parallels the depletion of the old man's own bodily resources. Young's analysis emphasized that Hemingway's attention to the physical details of fishing equipment reflected the author's commitment to grounding symbolic meaning in concrete material reality, thereby avoiding the abstraction that weakens purely allegorical writing [7].

The skiff itself functions as a complex symbol that has received insufficient attention in existing scholarship. This small boat, which contains Santiago throughout his voyage and brings him home despite all that occurs, represents the minimal material basis necessary for human engagement with the larger forces of existence. The skiff's smallness relative to the immensity of the sea and the size of the marlin Santiago catches emphasizes the disproportion between human capacity and the magnitude of challenges that human beings nonetheless confront. That the old man ultimately returns alive, though his catch has been destroyed, suggests that survival itself constitutes a form of triumph even when more ambitious goals remain unachieved [10]. The skiff as symbol thus encompasses themes of human limitation, persistence, and the fundamental adequacy of modest resources when employed with skill and determination. Brenner observed that Hemingway's treatment of simple tools and equipment throughout his fiction reflects a philosophical commitment to direct human engagement with material reality that distinguishes his work from more intellectualized literary traditions [10].

The symbolic treatment of sleep and dreams throughout the novella reveals Hemingway's sophisticated understanding of the relationship between conscious striving and the deeper sources of human vitality. Santiago's dreams of the lions on African beaches, which frame the narrative at both its beginning and conclusion, represent access to a realm of experience that transcends the immediate pressures of survival and achievement [1]. These dreams do not concern the struggles and accomplishments of Santiago's waking life but instead return him to a state of contemplative wonder associated with his youth, when he witnessed lions playing on the beaches of Africa during his time as a sailor. The symbolic significance of these dreams lies partly in their content, the lions themselves representing natural grace and power, but equally in the act of dreaming itself, which suggests that human beings require periodic withdrawal from purposive activity into states of receptive consciousness. Lidsky noted that Hemingway's treatment of dreams in his later fiction demonstrated increasing recognition of dimensions of human experience that exceed rational comprehension and practical engagement [4]. The novella's final image, Santiago sleeping and dreaming of the lions while Manolin watches over him, symbolically affirms the continuity of essential human qualities across the boundary between waking struggle and unconscious rest, suggesting that what matters most in human existence persists through and beyond individual episodes of achievement and defeat.

The color symbolism that pervades the novella contributes to its overall symbolic architecture in ways that reinforce and complement the more explicit symbolic elements. The blue of the Gulf Stream, repeatedly emphasized in Hemingway's descriptions, symbolizes both the beauty and the depth of the natural world that Santiago engages through his vocation as a fisherman. The purple stripes of the marlin and the iridescent quality of its skin represent the aesthetic dimension of nature that elicits Santiago's admiration even as he struggles to kill the fish for practical purposes. The contrast between the vibrant colors associated with living nature and the progressive darkening of the marlin's flesh as it dies and is subsequently attacked by sharks traces a symbolic arc from vitality through death to dissolution that mirrors the trajectory of all living things. Baker's analysis of Hemingway's use of visual imagery demonstrated that the author consistently employed color and light to convey emotional and thematic meanings that operate below the level of explicit statement. The darkness that descends during Santiago's

nights alone on the Gulf Stream intensifies the symbolic weight of his struggle, while the return of daylight brings both literal and figurative illumination that enables continued resistance. This interplay of light and darkness, color and its absence, creates a symbolic texture that enriches the novella's engagement with fundamental questions concerning meaning, beauty, and human purpose in a world that offers no guarantees of success or permanence.

The symbolic function of eating and nourishment throughout Santiago's voyage deserves attention as an element that connects the narrative's physical realism to its deeper thematic concerns. Santiago's consumption of raw tuna and dolphin flesh during his struggle with the marlin represents not merely practical sustenance but a symbolic participation in the natural cycle of predation and consumption that defines biological existence. The old man eats without pleasure, forcing himself to consume the fish because he knows his body requires fuel to continue the fight, and this deliberate, joyless eating symbolizes the discipline and self-mastery that distinguish Santiago's character throughout the narrative. His repeated statements that he wishes he could feed the marlin, his brother, reflect an awareness that the roles of predator and prey might easily be reversed, and that all living creatures participate in the same fundamental economy of consumption and being consumed [7]. The contrast between Santiago's careful attention to nourishment during the voyage and his inability to eat upon returning home, when Manolin must bring him food, symbolizes the depletion that profound effort inevitably produces and the dependence upon community that follows periods of isolated struggle. Brenner observed that Hemingway's attention to the physical necessities of eating, drinking, and sleeping throughout his fiction reflects a materialist understanding of human existence that grounds even the most elevated spiritual themes in bodily reality. The symbolic treatment of nourishment in the novella thus reinforces the integration of physical and spiritual dimensions that characterizes Hemingway's mature artistic vision, suggesting that authentic human dignity emerges not through transcendence of bodily needs but through their disciplined management in service of meaningful purpose.

**The recommendations** arising from this analysis emphasize the value of maintaining interpretive flexibility when approaching Hemingway's symbolism. Rather than selecting a single interpretive framework and reading the text exclusively through that lens, scholars and students benefit from acknowledging the simultaneous operation of multiple symbolic dimensions. This approach honors both the complexity of Hemingway's artistic achievement and the irreducible richness of literary symbolism as a mode of meaning-making.

## **CONCLUSION**

This analysis of symbolism in Ernest Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea" has demonstrated that the novella's enduring literary significance derives substantially from its sophisticated deployment of symbolic elements that operate on multiple interpretive levels simultaneously. The primary symbols identified and analyzed, including the marlin, the sea, the lions, and Santiago himself, function both individually and collectively to convey the work's thematic concerns with human dignity, the inevitability of struggle, and the possibility of meaning within an indifferent universe. The examination of scholarly interpretive frameworks reveals that no single approach exhausts the symbolic richness of the text, suggesting that Hemingway achieved a rare synthesis of realistic narrative surface and symbolic depth that continues to reward analytical attention. The findings affirm that "The Old Man and the Sea" represents a culminating achievement in Hemingway's artistic development, demonstrating his mature mastery of techniques that enable profound meaning to emerge from the simplest of narrative materials. Future research might productively examine the influence of Hemingway's

symbolic method on subsequent generations of writers, both within American literature and in global literary traditions that have engaged with his work.

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