IMAGES IN HEMINGWAY’S OLD MAN AND THE SEA

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ABSTRACT

Hemingway utilizes a great variety of images, symbols, and archetypal patterns which makes the novel a rich one and allows many interpretations. The most obvious pattern in the structure of the novel is that of the alternation of dream-memory and actual experience. This is also the device, as any reader of Hemingway may notice, that is employed in such a story as “The Snows of Kilimanjaro”. This device is generally an attempt to clarify man’s present conditions by contrasting the past with the present. The most recurrent image in the dream of Santiago is that of lions. Whenever he dreams, they almost always appear. Another important image is that of DiMaggio. It does not live in his memories and dreams as the lions do, but it is fully alive in his consciousness. The significance of the image of the “bone spur”. The classic analogy of the image is fairly obvious, the tradition of which, I believe, underlines the theme of the novel in many ways. It reminds us, for instance, of Odysseus scar, Achilles wound, or of one of the anagnorisis scenes in Sophocles Oedipus Tyrannus.


INTRODUCTION

Hemingway’s Old Man and the Sea, as esthetically satisfying work of art is the fact that he recognizes the value of “multi-layeredness” of literature as a basis of a “good” and “true” work of art and uses it in his novels. In this novel, he utilizes a great variety of images, symbols and archetypal patterns which make the novel a rich one and which allow many interpretations.

Many writers have used the sea as something that reveals deep realities of man and the universe. It is a place where man’s destiny and identity are sought after, dramatized, and clarified. However, these realities are revealed only when man is involved in and participates in the life of the sea. Hemingway also seems to have held such an idea of the sea in composing his masterpiece, The Old Man and the Sea. Thus for Santiago, the ocean is not an objectifiable place of exploitation, as it seems to the younger fisherman, but is considered as a personality, which he considers in terms of femininity.1 It is feminine because of its wantonness and because it
embodies both kindness and cruelty. But more. It is so because it contains in itself so many elements of fertility and possibility, as many myths of woman demonstrate, as to be deep enough to hide in its depth a never heard or never seen of great fish that Santiago eventually meets; side enough to make it possible for the old man to travel into the region where the unknowable and unknown secrets of reality can be known and experienced; and large enough to allow him to live in eternity. Such a notion of the sea may be more strongly substantiated when we realize that the old man is a lonely figure when he is engaged in the act of fishing. The opening sentence of the novel is “He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream”.2 It is true that the aloneness of Santiago is one forced from the outside by more realistic circumstances: that is, his best and only companion, Manolin, had to leave him because the boy’s father decided that the old man, who had not been able to catch any fish for over a month, was salao, the worst form of unlucky, and forced the boy to leave him. However, in a deeper level of meaning, it is only natural and logical that the old man should be alone, for, as we shall see more fully later, he has made up his mind to fish “far out” in order to achieve the task “that which he was born for,” as he again and again vows in the course of his fishing voyage. For a fisherman of his character, the vow is a serious one, for all his honors and glories as a fisherman depend upon whether he can perform the task perfectly. No matter what kind of suffering and trial he has to go through he has to fulfill his destiny, and thus the act of performing the task becomes a kind of ritual. Each individual has his own sense of destiny and the task should be met but himself and for himself. There is no one else capable of this undertaking or allowed to participate in this ritualistic procedure. It is a sort of esoteric religious rite where the particular individual has to face his holy destiny. In the course of various trials and sufferings, the old man wishes that the boy could be with him to help, but it is not to be permitted, for he alone has to endure the sufferings to fulfill his destiny. Thus, the ocean becomes a place where the old man searches his own identity through the act of pursuing the fish.

The most obvious pattern in the structure of the novel is that of the alternation of dream-memory and actual experience. This is also the device, as any reader of Hemingway may notice, that is employed in such a story as “The Snows of Kilimanjaro.” This device is generally an attempt to clarify man’s present conditions by contrasting the past with the present. The experience of the past are not meaningless and useless facts but are often “recaptured” by the self through the discriminating and organizing process of the mind in order to establish one’s self identity. Association and remembrances do not take place at random but are directed toward such an end.

The most recurrent image in the dream of Santiago is that of lions. Whenever he dreams, they almost always appear. Besides he no longer dreamed of storms, or of women, or of great occurrences, or of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor of 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.

And he wonders why the lions are “the main thing is left”, It is also the question that arises in the mind of the reader. Let alone the Freudian interpretations, we may understand this image in connection with the idea of primitivism, which has been a constant resort of Hemingway from The Sun Also Rises onward. The primitive scenes as contrasted to man-made societies in Hemingway’s works seem to play the role of a giver of strength and purity. Harry’s dream in “The Snows of Kilimanjaro” is a case in point. Among his various dreams, that of the life among
the snowy mountains brings forth not only the vitality he once possessed, but also the cleansing power of nature when he remembers that “the snow was so bright it hurt your eyes”. In a similar fashion, Santiago dreams of the lions on the beaches of Africa. The long golden beaches and the white beaches are “so white they hurt your eyes”. The lions and the whiteness of beaches that live in his happy memories have become part of the personality of the old man and give him a purity to his purpose and sense of vitality that drives him toward the goal “that which he was born for”.

Another important image is that of DiMaggio. It does not live in his memories and dreams as the lions do, but it is fully alive in his consciousness. The old man loves baseball as some other heroes of Hemingway love bullfighting. In fact, just as the lions are “the main thing that is left” in his dreams, so is baseball all he has left when he is on his way home after a long endured fight with the fish. And whenever he thinks of baseball, there inevitably appears the figure of DiMaggio. He is a great baseball player and worthy of the old man’s admiration. Santiago feels closer to him the more because his father was also a fisherman and he can certainly understand how a fisherman like Santiago feels. But the most important factor in DiMaggio that attracts the old man’s attention is the bone spur that has made DiMaggio transfigured to something more than a mere hero. It comes to have a symbolic significance to the mind of the old man. To him DiMaggio symbolizes a man who both endures suffering and achieves greatness. Notice that it is almost always when the old man faces crises and hard trials that he remembers DiMaggio. He has become not only a source of Santiago’s strength and vitality but also an absolute criterion and directing source of his action. The old man decides that he “must be worthy of the great DiMaggio who does all things perfectly even with the pain of the bone spur in his heel”. When he feels weakness within himself during the long struggle against the great fish, his mind turns during the long struggle against the great fish, his mind turns to DiMaggio and he asks himself: “Do you believe the great DiMaggio would stay with a fish as long as I will stay with this one?” With an affirmative answer, “I am sure he would”, he then goes on fighting with renewed strength.

This takes us further to another plane of significance in the novel: the significance of the image of the “bone spur”. The classic analogy of the image is fairly obvious, the tradition of which, I believe, underlies the theme of the novel in many ways. It reminds us, for instance, of Odysseus’ scar, Achilles’ wound, or of one of the anagnorisis scenes in Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannus. The significance of the analogy lies: these hero’s are all “noble” characters and the scars on their feet are used to bring about their own identity in one way or another. We need not push this second analogy of anagnorisis too much, for no Aristotelian definition is applicable in a strict sense to any contemporary literary works. Rather, it is advisable to use a loose definition and analogy. Therefore, the word is here so used as to mean broadly “a discovery”. Now what strikes the old man concerning DiMaggio is, as we have seen, that the latter, despite his pain in his heel, endured the sufferings and achieved greatness. His bone spur is a reminder of the nobleness of an action and of “what a man can do and what a man endures”—thus the image of a hero in his memory and consciousness helps formulate his present identity and discover his possibility.

This fact becomes more significant when we notice that, during his pursuit of the great fish, his hand becomes cramped and his back starts to ache. Whenever he feels that “the hands and the back hurt truly” he remembers DiMaggio’s bone spur. Whatever he does, he wishes to follow the
example of DiMaggio. His mere past memory of a hero new becomes part of himself. The pain in his hands and back may remind us of the image of Christ. But we may not be far wrong to take it that it is a constant reminder to the old man of the limitation of finite human being and thus helps him attain humility by way of the recognition of the classic idea of hubris, the point of which we shall discuss in our next section.

When Santiago declared that he would go “far Out”, he felt “confident” because the day was the eighty-fifth day and it meant to his mind a lucky day. The prospect of the day seemed to be a smiling one. Far out in the sea, he finally succeeds in hooking the great fish. But it is not until he has been taken farther out on the ocean by the fish that he realizes how big the fish is. He has never “seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than” this fish as he continues his fight, his respect for the greatness and dignity of the fish increases. He loves the fish as if it was his own brother, and yet he is determined to kill him. This determination and subsequent actions of his come from his sense of destiny. This decision is founded on his firm feeling that he is to show “what a man can do and what a man endures” and to fulfill the task “that which he was born for”.

At this point, it may be helpful to notice two phases of time structure in the old man’s consciousness. His being a fisherman is predetermined, so to speak, as far as we are made known of him in the novel. But, on the other hand, what saves him from being a mere victim of the past and making predetermination is what may be called his existential time consciousness. In the early stage of his fishing voyage, he shows defiance to a deterministic and fatalistic attitude. His failure of catching fish for the past eighty-four days casts a doubt on his confidence. This doubt makes him say, “Only I have no luck anymore.” If it is true, it would be a fatal blow to a fisherman. But then he immediately rejects such a notion and tells himself: But who knows? May be today. Every day is a new day” again, when he recognizes the “greatness and glory” of the fish, his determination to kill him is strengthened the more for it. Hemingway describes the mind of Santiago at this moment as follows:

I told the boy I was a strange old man,” he said. “Now is when I must prove it.” The thousand times that he had proved it meant nothing.

As the story proceeds, the real issue of Santiago’s pursuit becomes clearer. The fish he has hooked ceases to be a mere physical object. It comes to symbolize something which belongs to a different realm of existence. This is a wholly new experience for the old man in his long years of life as a fisherman. Until he faces this fish, he has never seen or heard of such a great and beautiful fish. And he feels that “there is no one worthy of eating him from the manner of his behavior and his great dignity”5. The old man’s wisdom and long years of experience prove to be useless, because the experience is a Beginning with something which transcends the “limit situation” of a physical and temporal being which is necessarily bound by finitude and time. This is precisely the reason why the old man repeatedly expresses his desire to share the fate with the fish. What the image of DiMaggio does to him in his memory and consciousness, the fish does in actuality. He feels he is not “worthy of eating him”, but nevertheless he tries to kill him. He has to kill him because it is a kind of sacrifice to complete the ritual, and the sacrifice is absolutely necessary to attain a rebirth through death. Thus he cries, “Come on and kill me, I do not care who kills who” and later, “If I were towing him behind there would be no question. Nor if the
fish were in the skiff, with all dignity gone, there would be no question either . . . let him bring me in if it pleases him. I am only better than him through trickery. . .” As these words of the old man show, Santiago’s pursuit has now become a quest: a quest for the union with the transcendental, that he nor anyone else has ever seen or ever been able to see. Now it makes no difference which one dies as long as he succeeds in the quest. He does succeed. The pursuer and the pursued have become one. Temporarily is united with eternity.

But the fact remains that Santiago belongs to the temporal order of time. He has to pay the price for what he has done and for what he got. Already, at the beginning of the novel, we seem to discern a tragic flaw when he tells the boy that he intends to go “far out” to fish. The region where he hooked the great fish is that where no other fishermen can be seen, or more symbolically understood, where no earthly being is permitted to enter. Whether he has committed the act consciously or not matters little. He has overstepped the boundary of man’s finite and limited nature. The act may be interpreted more as a hubris than as a sin. For the concept of sin in a Christian context involves some conscious act or motivation, while hubris does not necessarily have to do with it. For example, we may argue that the Moira was too severe on Oedipus for he has really nothing to do with the making of his own fate. But just the same, it is a hubris, and he has to take the responsibility. Indeed, that the old man has gone “too far out” is partly the responsibility of the fish that has towed the fishing boat and Santiago toward the heart of the ocean. And that he killed the fish thus “far out” on the sea comes from a clear and simple reason, not wholly his own responsibility that he was born a fisherman and nothing else, the fact of which he cannot help himself. But just the same, he has to pay the price for the glory. In this twentieth century novel, the Nemesis takes the shape of the sharks. After he has achieved the act of greatness, the union with the eternal and the transcendental, he turns his boat toward the land, the home of temporality, futility, and fixedness. It is then that the old man has to face a great enemy, the sharks. Just like the furies haunting the doomed Orestes, the sharks seem to be determined to prevent the old man from taking the prize of his fighting out of the sacred region. It is as if these sharks were the mortuary divinities who are angered by the sacrilegious attempt of the old man to expose the unknowable face to those in the temporary and finite order. That exhilarated joy of the old man was something attained by his plunging into the abyss of an eternal “now”. But after the moment of this exhilaration, the old man is reminded of his actual predicament. He lives in time. And the goal of time is death and destruction. The sharks are the symbol of “time”. They are the incarnation of “Devouring Time”, and Santiago finally learns, with Shakespeare, that “nothing” against times scythe can make defense” (Sonnet XII). He is now forced to learn the reality of man’s existence. He says to the fish, “I shouldn’t have gone out so far, fish, neither for you nor for me, I’m sorry, fish”. He recognizes that he has transgressed his limitation that he has to meet the consequences of his hubris. Now, at last, he would have admitted to the full the truth of the lesson of the Oresteia, that “By suffering man learns”.

However, he is not “defeated,” despite the fact that he has been “beaten”, as he himself admits, by his violation of the sacred code. He pronounces that “nothing” beat him really and that his only fault was that he “went out too far”. It is because he has learned “by sufferings”, and he now knows the truth that the penalty of his hubris is the loss of his supreme identity in an eternal order. “Mistah Kurtz” died in failure. But to the mind of Marlow, he was a victor because Kurtz had pronounced a “judgment” upon the “horror” to the abyss of human existence. In the same way, Santiago has learned much in a few days of fishing voyage through much suffering, and he
is now able to pronounce a judgment upon the inscrutable human existence and man’s destiny: he has “gone too far out”. His failure has thus turned out to be his victory.

REFERENCES


2. Ibid. P.9.

