

THE WRITER'S STRUGGLE

Still reeling from the critical thrashing of his previous book, *Across the River and Into the Trees*, Hemingway constructs an allegory about the struggle of a writer who extends himself beyond all limits, only to have the resulting work picked apart by critics. Placing the novella in the context of Hemingway's resentment toward his critics, the parallels become quite obvious: the sharks are the critics; Santiago's art is as lonely as the writer's; the marlin, magnificent and elusive and inextricably bound to the man who hunts it, represents Art. Furthermore, Santiago is a former champion who wants to be champion again—in 1952, Hemingway was in the same position. Hemingway seems to have believed that his writing exceeded his critics' ability to understand it. In an interview conducted after the publication of *Across the River and Into the Trees*, he claims to have gone "far out." More compelling evidence for this reading comes from the text itself. Santiago is the consummate craftsman. As a writer might aspire to do, he keeps his lines where he wants them "with precision." In fact, he keeps them "straighter than anyone did." As the double meaning of "line" links the writer and the fisherman, so does Hemingway's description of Santiago's line being thick as a "big pencil."

A CHRISTIAN ALLEGORY

The Christian references in *The Old Man and the Sea* are inescapable. Manolin sails with Santiago for forty days, which is the same amount of time Christ was banished to the wilderness. Santiago's trial with the fish lasts for three days, a crucial number in Christian theology, for it marks the Trinity as well as the interval between the death and resurrection of Christ. The scars of Santiago's trial—his cut hands, for instance—unite him with the crucified Christ, as does his posture when he returns to his village. Santiago reminds the reader of Christ as he bears the mast upon his shoulders and, further, as he collapses with his arms out and palms up in the pose of crucifixion. Moreover, one could say that Santiago exhibits essential Christian traits of humility and charity. Like Christ, he also undergoes a great trial and returns to society having experienced

something others cannot. And, like Christ, the fisherman is a martyr of sorts. The question is whether these accumulated symbols amount to anything coherent. Viewing the novella through the lens of Christian allegory is useful in that it provides a context for understanding some of the work's dominant themes. For example, by linking Santiago to Christ, Hemingway strengthens the reader's sense that a terrific and profound triumph has come from the old man's defeat.

RELIGION OF MAN

One critic, at least, sees *The Old Man and the Sea* as a religious allegory, but a decidedly non-Christian one. The novella, in this view, is the clearest expression of what Joseph Waldmeir refers to as Hemingway's "Religion of Man." This is a religion without an afterlife, in which spiritual completion is achieved through physical action. It is the cult 34 • *The Old Man and the Sea* of manhood. If anything counts in this world, if anything has meaning and moral significance, it is how one does whatever one does. This is especially true of solitary individuals in life-and-death situations. One must kill to live, one must die, and these actions have no otherworldly importance. Their meaning resides in how they are enacted. Because there is no eternal salvation, all meaning and purpose are derived from earthly experience, from doing one's deeds well and bravely and truly— from being, in short, a Man. Santiago acts bravely and truly, and kills like a Man, which gives meaning and purpose to his struggle. The final, material outcome of the struggle—that is, whether he returns home with the fish—becomes irrelevant. The fish, too, has acted well and bravely and truly. It has been a brother to Santiago, and it has died like a Man (indeed, Hemingway tells us the sex of the fish). There is thus meaning and purpose in the fish's death. This reinforces the male-dominated worldview that Hemingway creates in the novella: it is no mistake that there are no notable female characters in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Critical Readings • 35 HEMINGWAY'S STYLE In his discussion of the prose style of *The Old Man and the Sea* in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of The Old Man and the Sea*, Malcolm Cowley notes that Hemingway "uses the oldest and shortest words, the

simplest constructions, but gives them a new value—as if English were a strange language that he had studied or invented for himself and was trying to write in its original purity.” Indeed, Hemingway was a revolutionary writer. Following on the heels of American novelists like Henry James and, even earlier, Herman Melville, to whom Hemingway was inevitably compared as a writer of “fishermen stories,” Hemingway stood out rather shockingly. Whereas those novelists fashioned complex sentences to capture some of the most complex observations ever transcribed in English, Hemingway felt sure that he could do the same using concise everyday speech. He developed and prided himself on a philosophy of writing that he termed “the iceberg principle,” which essentially explains the air of strangeness and mystery to which Cowley alludes. In a 1958 interview in *The Paris Review*, Hemingway described this style of writing in the following terms: I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is sevendighths of it underwater for every part that shows. Anything you know you can eliminate and it only strengthens your iceberg. It is the part that doesn’t show. If a writer omits something because he does not know it then there is a hole in the story. Hemingway went on to say that in *The Old Man and the Sea* I have tried to eliminate everything unnecessary . . . I’ve seen the marlin mate and know about that. So I leave that out. I’ve seen a school (or pod) of more than fifty sperm whales in that same stretch of water and once harpooned one nearly sixty feet in length and lost him. So I left that out. All the stories I know from the fishing village I leave out. But the knowledge is what makes the underwater part of the iceberg. Certainly, there are moments when the reader feels the suggestion of vast meaning beneath Hemingway’s few, spare words. Santiago’s beautiful and elusive memory of the lions playing on the beach suggests another world and another time, while his unexpected gratitude that man does “not have to try to kill the stars” signals a profound inner life of which the reader has only a mere glimpse. But there are moments when this style feels hollow rather than spare, when Santiago’s words seem more like an imitation of Hemingway than a profound and inevitable reaction to circumstance. His cursing of the shark, for instance, reads like a parody of Hemingway’s own swaggering (and adolescent) masculinity: “Slide down a mile deep. Go see your friend, or maybe it’s your mother.” In his posthumously

published works, such moments of near self-parody proliferate. Fortunately, in *The Old Man and the Sea*, such slips are rare.