

LECTURE 11

The character of Santiago

Santiago is an impoverished old man who has endured many ordeals, whose best days are behind him, whose wife has died, and who never had children. For 84 days, he has gone without catching the fish upon which his meager existence, the community's respect, and his sense of identity as an accomplished fisherman all depend. As a result, the young man who is like a son to him (the young man who, since the age of five, has fished with him and learned from him) now fishes, at the behest of his parents, with another fisherman.

Indeed, Santiago's philosophy and internal code of behavior make him unconventional in his society (as critics such as Bickford Sylvester have mentioned). Santiago's dedication to his craft (beyond concerns of material gain or survival) separates him from the pragmatic fishermen motivated by money. He stands apart from Cuba's evolution to a new materialism and a village fishing culture converting to a fishing industry. He remains dedicated to a profession he sees as a more spiritual way of life and a part of nature's order in the eternal cycle that makes all creatures brothers in their common condition of both predator and prey.

What Santiago desperately wants is one epic catch — not just to survive, but to prove once more his skill, reassert his identity as a fisherman, secure his reputation in the community, and ensure for all time that Manolin will forever honor his memory and become his successor in what matters most in life. For Santiago, what matters most in life is to live with great fervor and nobility according to his beliefs, to use his skills and nature's gifts to the best of his ability, to struggle and endure and redeem his individual existence through his life's work, to accept inevitable destruction with dignity, and to pass on to the next generation everything of value that he has gained. In these desires, he reflects the desires of us all.

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

The character of Manolin

Manolin is Santiago's last and deepest human relationship, his replacement in the generational cycle of human existence, the one to whom he wishes to entrust his skill as a fisherman, the transforming power of his vision, and his memory. As Santiago is mentor, spiritual father, and the old man or old age, Manolin is pupil, son, and the boy or youth. Manolin loves and cares for Santiago, and at the story's end, he professes his faith in Santiago and everything Santiago represents. Living up to his name, which is the diminutive of Manuel (Spanish for Emmanuel, the Redeemer), Manolin articulates for Santiago the true meaning of his great struggle, which has brought him the intangibles he craves. Three times, Manolin professes his faith in Santiago. In accepting the marlin's spear, Manolin demonstrates once and for all that he clearly understands and accepts all that Santiago wishes to bequeath him — and all that comes with that inheritance.

The character of Marlin

The marlin is more than a great fish locked in an evenly balanced and protracted battle with an accomplished fisherman. It is also a creature onto whom Santiago projects the same qualities that he possesses, admires, and hopes to pass on: nobility of spirit, greatness in living, faithfulness to one's own identity and ways, endurance, beauty, and dignity. As Santiago and the marlin remain locked in battle for three days, they become intimately connected. Santiago first pities and admires the fish and then empathizes and identifies with it. He recognizes that just as the marlin was born to be a fish, he was born to be a fisherman. They are brothers in the inevitability of their circumstances, locked in the natural cycle of predator and prey.

The marlin's death represents Santiago's greatest victory and the promise of all those intangibles he so desperately hopes for to redeem his individual existence. Yet, like the marlin, Santiago also must inevitably lose and become the victim. After shark's attack, Santiago eats the marlin's flesh to sustain himself, completing the natural cycle in which the great creature passes on something of itself to Santiago. Not only are all creatures predator and prey, but all also nourish one another. Allusions to the crucified Christ that were previously associated with the marlin (images that represent suffering, apparent defeat, and the endurance through which one redeems an individual life within nature's tragic cycle) are transferred to Santiago (as critics such as Philip Young and Arvin Wells have suggested). The

marlin's brave and unavailing struggle to save its own life becomes Santiago's brave an unavailing struggle to save the marlin from the scavenger sharks.

The scavenger sharks strip the marlin of all material value, leaving only its skeleton lashed to Santiago's skiff. But before that skeleton ends up as so much garbage to be washed out with the tide, it becomes a mute testimony to Santiago's greatness and the vehicle for those intrinsic values Santiago craves to give his existence meaning and dignity. The fisherman who measures the marlin's skeleton reports that it is 18 feet long — evidence of the largest fish the villagers have ever known to come out of the Gulf. And when Manolin accepts the marlin's spear, he accepts for all time everything that Santiago wishes to bequeath him.