

# **The Characteristics of Primitivism in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea***

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**Abstract:** Authors of any periods unconsciously tend to explore the sublimity and free expression of feeling, the simplicity of style and themes, the portrayal of the 'noble savage', the glorification of nature, the excitement of physical power and sensuous use of language. These are the characteristics of primitivism, the celebration of an earlier stage of human development, which is uncorrupted, vigorous, genuine expression of life. Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* clearly depicts the characteristics of primitivism as seen in the portrayal of its main character, Santiago. Hemingway's regret on the impact of technology led him to write the novella with its hero who is depicted with the qualities of being a true hero, a winner 'who takes nothing'; a 'noble savage' with great courage of physical action while dealing with nature. Santiago has become the portrayal of Hemingway's criticism toward the development of civilization and the urban way of life.

**Key words:** primitivism, civilization, early human development, specific and sensory language, reminiscence, dream, man of dignity, nature, noble savage.

Literary scholars believe that an artist has a tendency to "fall back into archaic perpetual habits" during his/her aesthetic creation. A writer, beyond his/her "conscious quest of the spontaneity, sublimity, free expression of powerful feeling, or paradisiac virtues supposed to reside in primitivism," tends to use the language of literature as "psychically regressive", and attempts to celebrate particular phase of early human progress. Thus, some literary scholars declare, "all literature is, unconsciously, a return to the primitive" (Shipley, 1970, p. 249).

What is primitivism? Actually, it can be found in the literature of many periods, but it had a particular prominence in the eighteenth century Europe and in the nineteenth century America, contributing to the values of Romanticism. In modern writing, primitivism is less employed as a critical term, yet still is able to relate particularly to the author's simplicity of style and the presentation of simple themes and subjects, for example, the story about peasant life, which represents an early stage of human cultural endeavour. The most influential primitivist, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, argued that the freedom and dignity of the "noble savage" had become stifled by the constraints of civilized society, which led to the corruption of the true manifestation of life. Thus, primitivism is "the glorification (and proposed imitation) of an earlier stage of human development". It aims to "have preserved the memory, or developed the legend, of an earlier time of uncorrupted, vigorous, genuine expression of life" (p. 249).

Thus, the glorification of the past, the intense man's greatest achievement derived from physical rather than intellectual powers, and the dominance of feeling over intellectual awareness are the significant characteristics of primitivism. Furthermore, according to Shipley, another characteristic of primitivism as literary expression is the language, which is "more concrete, specific, sensory ... emphasis(ing) the visual and motor, personification, dreams" (p. 249). These characteristics are clearly depicted in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, his most acclaimed *novella*, as evidently seen from his craftsmanship in sensory, yet simple description, and his characterization of Santiago, the main character of the story.

Hemingway's regret on the impact of technology can be considered as his attempt to glorify the past that requires the intense man's physical greatest achievement, especially when he wrote *The Old Man and the Sea*:

For Hemingway ... the psychological effects of the world-wide depression of the 1930's are far too complicated to trace in detail, but surely one effect of the massive economic paralysis of the times was a strengthening of the total bureaucratization of life and an increasing sense (individually felt) of the impotence and helplessness of the single unit, man. The traditional notion of the possibilities of the heroism, in the capacity of man to front the world with a certain degree of success, using only the powers and resources that were his

own natural inheritance, this concept of heroism had almost disappeared in serious fiction (Rovit, 1963, p. 24).

Hemingway, therefore, creates his typical heroes as “winners who take nothing”. They are “self-generated, within situations largely of their own choosing”, and under situations in which their “native resources for physical action and courage are given every possibility of expression” (p. 25).

The protagonist of *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago, is depicted with the qualities of being a true hero, a winner who takes nothing, and an old yet masculine fisherman who has shown great courage of physical action dealing with nature. Santiago, the old man, has gone fishing for eighty-four days without catching any fish. He is a widower and it seems he does not have any children since there is no mention whatsoever about the existence of his children. He only has Manolin, a boy who is a genuine friend of his and also his great admirer. However, Manolin's parents have told him to work with another fisherman because they considered Santiago as a *salao*, or “bad luck” (Hemingway, 1993, p. 5) due to those eighty-four days without catching a fish. Nevertheless, Manolin is still loyal to the old man and he keeps on helping him with his preparation to catch ‘the big fish’ on the eighty-fifth day. Being full of hope, Santiago goes far out into the sea to catch the big fish. Finally, he is able to hook a giant marlin, which is the biggest fish he has ever seen. For the next forty-eight hours he has to endure the severe pain and suffering, yet he refuses to give up his war with the big fish. On the third day, both Santiago and the marlin are exhausted, and the fish is beginning to come near the surface, so that Santiago is able to throw his harpoon to the fish's heart. Since the fish is too big for his skiff, he ties it alongside the small boat. Unfortunately, on the way to the shore, a group of sharks smell the scent of the bloody marlin and attack Santiago's precious fish. The old and tired fisherman desperately fights back with all his simple weapons and his tattered strength. Finally, he is able to kill those hungry sharks, yet there is nothing left of the fish except its skeleton.

Indeed, the portrayal of Santiago's three-days-battle in the sea is enriched with intense irony. When Santiago reaches the shore with just the skeleton of the big fish, Hemingway perceives him as the undefeated, whose victory lies in the nobility of his struggle. His victory is not based

on the result, but the manner in which Santiago faces his difficult and deadly situation (Hamid, 1985, pp. 34-35). From the characterization of Santiago, Hemingway invites his reader to identify him as a mere common man away from civilization. He is a simple old man with his human limitation. Nevertheless, he is able to survive, as Santiago proclaims “a man can be destroyed, but not defeated” (Hemingway, 1993, p.89).

Hemingway’s craftsmanship in depicting “the vicarious excitement of physical and sensuous experience” is considered best illustrating the characteristic of primitivism, that is, the use of sensuous language and experience:

The vicarious excitement of physical and sensuous experience that Hemingway offered in abundance to an audience increasingly urban-oriented, increasingly desensitized and immunized from a physical life of full sensory response. Hemingway’s talent for evoking physical sensations, for transmuting into prose how it is to *taste*, to *see*, to *hear*, to *smell*, to *feel* in a great variety of ways is a staple ingredient of his prose. And these sensations are typically presented within a framework of physical or psychological stress, in which the narrative perspective is left open-ended so that the attentive reader is forced to serve as the “ground” for the powerful prose-currents of the presented action. That is, the sensations are not merely described, but presented within a controlled frame of dramatic awareness, and the reader is invited to participate in, as well as to observe, the bombardment of the sensory stimuli (Rovit, 1963, p. 25).

His concrete, specific, and sensory use of language depicting the visual and motor perspective for the reader can be seen in his description of Santiago’s ‘brother’: the marlin, when it comes out for the first time. The giant fish is described gracefully as if the reader was sitting next to Santiago in his skiff, watching the fish “unendingly and the water poured from his sides” (Hemingway, 1993, p. 52), revealing the length and the strength of the marlin. Celebrating the beauty of nature, Hemingway also depicts the fish as a beautiful creature:

He was bright in the sun and his head and back were dark purple and in the sun the stripes on his sides showed wide and a light lavender. His sword was long as a baseball bat and tapered like a rapier and he rose his full length from the water and then re-entered it, smoothly, like a diver ... (p. 52).

The description of the marlin is able to evoke physical sensation for the reader as if s/he sees the marlin itself with its beautiful colors, and hears the soft ripple of the water when it "smoothly like a diver" goes into the sea. The reader is also able to share Santiago's feeling in perceiving the enormous fish with its long sword.

Why does the reader not find the story boring, since it is merely about an old man on a small skiff being toyed by a giant fish for three days? Hemingway always depicts Santiago as a man who engages in some purposive activities, and the reader has no choice except to join him in the activities. At the same time, the activities of the protagonist take place within the atmosphere of external activities: the day is changing, the time is progressing, and the current of the sea is flowing:

Once he stood up and urinated over the side of the skiff and looked at the stars and checked his course. The line showed like the phosphorescent streak in the water straight out from his shoulders. They were moving more slowly now and the glow of Havana was not so strong, so that he knew the current must be carrying them to the eastward (pp. 38-39).

With the intense concentration on action and active response, Hemingway is admirably able to secure the effect of vicarious sensory response. The reader is invited to participate and feel the intense moment of waiting, experiencing the active flowing of time and the surrounding where Santiago exists, and sharing Santiago's strong urge to end the struggle with the marlin soon.

However, as time goes by, Santiago also shares his reminiscence of his past, which is a typical characteristic of primitivism found in the *novella*:

The notion of progress has always been counterbalanced by the idea of spiritual degeneration from a primitive *saturnia regna*, a golden age of the past. Progress itself, indeed, on any other than material

ground, was often represented as little more than the messianic or dream journey toward this lost earthly paradise ... voiced the nostalgia for an earlier simplicity and joy (Shipley, 1970, p. 250).

While the time of his present moment is in progress, Santiago recalls his past life as the champion of hand game in the tavern of Casablanca defeating a great Negro from Cienfuegos: "For a long time after that everyone had called him The Champion ..." (Hemingway, 1993, p.59). Old Santiago has to face the fact that his cramped left hand is now "a traitor", and it is not as strong as when he was young. As a typical characteristic of primitivism, there is always a tendency to recall the glory of the past when the protagonist faces difficulties, and those problems have never appeared or bothered him in his 'golden age'.

The wistful desire for the good old days may rise in part from the individual's regret for his vanished youth, and from the urge of the elders to maintain their prestige ... Along with and partly out of these impulses is a journey within: a tendency to idealize the child and the childlike ... It is the primitive that Freud found in the realm of the unconscious, in endless conflict with the later impressed and repressing patterns of society and its law. In literature, the urge of the primitive may be regarded as a refreshing impulse, which may prevent tradition from encrusting to stagnation (Shipley, 1970, p. 250).

Santiago's glorifying attitude toward his past life makes him adore Manolin, the image of Santiago's boyhood. Santiago used to be like Manolin, who is strong, brave, yet sensitive. He is the only one who understands Santiago and is very sensitive towards his needs and feelings. Manolin cries for Santiago, and laughs with him as well. He also admires Santiago ('There are many good fishermen and some great ones. But there is only you') and learns to grow 'like a man' by buying Santiago a beer. He was once nearly killed when Santiago took him fishing because Santiago brought the fish into his shiff too early: "he brought the fish in too green and he nearly tore the boat to pieces" (Hemingway, 1993, p.8). Manolin is able to remember the details of the incident, and he is a brave boy because his near-death-experience does not hinder him to go fishing again with Santiago, which makes Santiago admire him even more: "The

old man looked at him with his sunburned, confident, loving eyes. 'If you were my boy I'd take you out and gamble,' he said." (p. 8). Although Santiago yearns to have someone like Manolin, he can never have him because Manolin does not belong to him. Manolin is the portrayal of Santiago in the past, something that he can see, or imagine, but can never own again. He sees Manolin as the image of his boyhood: a pure, innocent figure of the past, the golden time of his life, where life is so easy and fine, and there is nothing to worry about except trying hard to be the best child in his family.

Nevertheless, it is particularly significant to notice the way Santiago always reveals his regret of not taking the boy with him when he faces the problems dealing with the marlin alone. When he is being towed by the fish (p. 36), when he feels uncomfortable for being old and alone (p. 39), when he recalls the bitterness of killing a female marlin while the male one is waiting in the water (p. 41), and when he is hungry and tired, he will simply say loudly, "I wish the boy was here." The boy is his source of spirit, the recollection of his boyhood and strength, the reason for him to survive and stay alive. However, he never dreams about the boy because the boy belongs to his reality. The boy is his living reminder of the glory of his past as seen in the spirit of Manolin. The way Manolin admires Santiago is like an injected spirit for him to drag his skiff everyday to prove himself, and Manolin, that he is still the best fisherman in the village.

Another Santiago's way of mesmerizing the past is to dream of the young lions and the white beach in Africa. Dream is also used by Hemingway to glorify the past. The old man regularly dreams of Africa and the young lions walking on "the long, golden beaches" (pp.18-19). While he has Manolin in his real life as a reminder that he is a worthy creature, he also has the young lions in his dream that functions the same role. The lion, the king of beast, is at the top of the animal hierarchy, and it is the metaphor for Santiago himself:

Santiago is a lion; Santiago is therefore king, since dreaming of the lions is the ultimate endorsement of selfhood. However, not only does he feel unlucky, he also sees his inadequacy, old age, and incompetence reflected in the eyes of the other fishermen ... it represents a semantic transposition from the present sign (lion) to an absent sign (king) (Scafella, 1990, p. 200).

Recalling his golden moment as the champion of hand-wrestling, Santiago begins to miss his status as 'a king', his manhood and power. He remembers how life is easier to control when he was young because he was as strong as the young lions, and was capable of facing any challenges. In both reality and dreams, Santiago has his own reminder of his good old days, something that makes him able to survive, and makes him a man of dignity.

The way Hemingway created a man of dignity like Santiago is also considered as one of the characteristics of primitivism. Santiago is portrayed differently from any Hemingway's heroes. Santiago is a non-American old man with cramped hand, who tries hard to survive with his limited physical strength and yet skillful fishing method against nature. Although he is an American author, Hemingway does not try to depict an American hero. Instead, he chooses a common, simple Cuban man dealing with everyday occurrence, but still revealing the fundamental dignity of a human being.

The basic requirements of dignity for Hemingway are "native intelligence", and "the qualities of real humility and self-abnegation" (Rovit, 1963, p. 65), and both of them can be found in Santiago. When Manolin claims that Santiago is the best fisherman, he simply says:

'No. I know others better.'

'*Que va*', the boy said. 'There are many good fishermen and some great ones. But there is only you.'

'Thank you. You make me happy. I hope no fish will come along so great that he will prove us wrong.'

'There is no such fish if you are still strong as you say.'

'I may not be as strong as I think,' the old man said. 'But I know many tricks and I have resolution.' (Hemingway, 1952, p. 17)

Santiago's quality of real humility makes him negate Manolin's compliment, although deep down in his heart he does need the compliments and the admiration. He is not an educated man, but he has skills and experience, "tricks and resolution" (p. 17), which make him able to defeat the marlin and the sharks with his "native intelligence". The way he prepares his baits for fishing, which are "tied and sewed solid", decked out with fresh sardines for "scent" and colorful fish like the



blue runner and the yellow jack for “attractiveness”, strongly reveals the old man’s experienced skill in fishing. His plan is to catch any fish from different fathoms as seen from the way he makes different length of “sweet-smelling and good tasting” baits (p. 24). It is obvious that his battle is indeed a war between human existence, armed by trained skill rather than intellectual, using the power of nature itself.

However, Santiago never regards nature as his enemy. He perceives the sea as *la mar*, a female personification whom he loves and adores. He also treats and admires his opponent, the giant marlin, who is so beautiful, strong, and strange like him, which makes him regard it as his ‘brother’, and Santiago treats him with dignity. When he kills the sharks, he justifies his act as self-defense since he respects them as motivated creatures. Like Santiago who sails and fishes for his daily needs, those sharks also need to survive by eating the marlin. Therefore, he deeply understands why they attack him and his marlin, but he also has to fight back to protect his life. These are the whole networks of the circle of life.

Santiago is a unique character whose manhood is challenged by nature during his day-to-day effort to keep going. That is why “he is more representative of the human race than any other Hemingway characters”.

He is more or less at peace with himself and not at war with his world ... Of all the Hemingway protagonist, he is the closest to nature, feels himself a part of nature; he even believes he has hands, feet, and a heart like the big turtles ... he seems a simple man, another primitive ... On the Gulf waters Santiago meditates on the drama of love against hate and life against death which nature perpetually stages for us ... Though always Santiago feels affectionate kinship with creatures who must prey on one another, he knows he in his turn must prey on them (Hovey, 1968, pp. 192-193).

Ernest Hemingway has created a ‘noble savage’ who will always be remembered by his reader as a simple yet dignified man. He is a man who is able to confront and embrace the world. This is Hemingway’s criticism toward the development of civilization, the advancement of technology, the urban and industrialized way of life. Without the

contamination of civilized touch, he develops an unforgettable Santiago who is far from the typical hero of other modern fictions: a primitivist with dignity and respect toward nature.

Hemingway glorifies Santiago's manhood by juxtaposing the icons of Western art, reinforcing the binary of primitive (savage) and the modern (civilized), a common method of revealing the elements of primitivism in literary works (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 1999, p. 196). He created an old fisherman who lives in the simplicity of nature, who survives not using sophisticated modern tools but involving skills and experience. Ernest Hemingway received the 1953 Pulitzer Prize for *The Old Man and the Sea*. In 1954, Hemingway received another prestigious award, the Nobel Prize for Literature, the greatest formal international award a writer can receive. The award specifically mentions *The Old Man and the Sea*. With this masterpiece that the author loved to address as his little gem, Hemingway celebrates the values that make a man.

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