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Marine Ecology and Human Ethics: An Eco critical Reading of Seascapes in The Old Man and the Sea

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Abstract

Ernest Hemingway's novel The Old Man and the Sea (1952) portrays the Gulf Stream not merely as a backdrop for Santiago's heroic struggle but as an ecological matrix. It depicts the human action, marine life, and ethical responsibility. This novel is the most noble work of classic literature. It is considered a milestone in the history of literature, and it successfully describes the relationship between man and nature. After the 1990s, ecocriticism aimed to discuss the relationship between literature and the natural environment. This paper examines Hemingway's seascapes through the dual lenses of blue humanities, deep ecology and environmental ethics in the portrayal of the sea and its creatures. Beyond the narratives of struggle, the novel presents the ocean as an ecological system. Santiago, the protagonist, becomes a representative of eco-ethical consciousness. His engagement with the marlin, sharks, and the broader marine environment embodies respect, restraint, and emotional kinship with non-human life. Through the lens of eco-criticism and ecological imagery, ethics, and interspecies relationships, this novel situates Hemingway's seascapes as an early form of marine ethics that echoes with contemporary environmental concerns.

Keywords: Marine ecology, marine life, environmental ethics, responsibility, eco consciousness, human water relationship, seascapes, marine species.

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Introduction

Eco-criticism is a field of study that signifies nature in literature, culture and political implications of human environmental interactions. More recently, blue humanities and oceanic studies have extended to marine environments. It recognises the ocean as a dynamic ecological and cultural force deserving its own literary and cultural frameworks. Blue humanities argue that the sea is a place of cultural, natural and philosophical need. Blue ecology centres on oceans, marine life and water-based ethics[2]. It exemplifies the ocean as a dynamic moral space and the Marlin as a symbol of marine dignity [8]. Hemingway's seascapes align with these ideas by depicting the ocean as a space where humankind is shaped by ecological forces. The Deep Ecology theory which was developed by Norwegian philosopher Arne Naess, he examines the way in which literature and the natural world is interrelated. According to him, Deep Ecology is a protest against anthropocentric conceptions of the world. It also emphasizes that nature and all its components should be persevered for their own sake, and also states that humans are not superior to other species. Santiago's respect for the sea highlights the inherent worth of non-human species, ecological equilibrium, and human humility [1].

The Sea as an Ethical and Ecological space

The Old Man and the Sea tell the tale of Santiago, an elderly Cuban fisherman who resides off the coast of Havana. A young boy named Manolin, who has been sailing with him, feels unlucky that he went to another boat and left the elderly man alone in the water after he failed to catch any fish in forty-eight days[4]. He catches a monster fish one day and battles it for three days before killing it. He ties it to the side of his boat, but the fish's bleeding attracts a lot of sharks, which then attacks it [6]. Santiago eventually arrives at the harbour with just the bones of his fish after a protracted battle. The fish represents a nobility of Santiago, while the sea represents the setting in this novel. Here are two ways to look at nature: the way Santiago interacts with it and the way it is viewed as a symbol. This novel presents nature from a distinct angle [9].

Santiago's Ethical Relationship with the Sea

To catch a giant Marlin, Santiago plans to go far into the sea. However, he is fighting not just for fish but also for the sea, the sun, and sharks. Santiago has an affiliation, a respectful, and sympathetic relationship with nature. The sea, which he lovingly refers to as "la mar," is a feminine entity. Santiago has a symbiotic relationship with the sea rather than an offensive one. According to him, the waterways are active biological systems that are made up of species that interact with one another through migration, predation, and survival. As Santiago states, "The sea is sweet and kind, but she can be cruel" (Hemingway 29) [5]. The true nature of marine ecology depends on both species and environment. The younger fisherman has viewed the water as a male enemy[3]. This demonstration of sea explains Santiago's deep awareness of the environment, his respect for the natural world, and his representation of the water. According to him, nature is a friend that must be respected and understood rather than an opponent.

Apart from the Marlin and sharks, Santiago fights to flying fish, dolphins, sea turtles, and even tiny shrimp dwelling in the Gulf weed. The Old Man and the Sea offers a vivid depiction of marine biodiversity, illustrating the interdependence of species within an oceanic environment. It depicts a large ocean's peak ecosystem [10]. Man-of-war birds, flying fish, tuna, marlin, broadbill, shark, dolphin, yellow Gulf weed, Sargasso weed, aqua mala, warbler, hawks, bonito, shrimp, squid, wild ducks, sucking fish, and many more are among the aquatic ecosystem participants in this novel [11]. It also depicts the interdependence and existence of different animals and plants within the watery ecosystem.

Santiago enjoys watching sea turtles having the aqua mala, which looks like bubbles. At one point, he notices many flying fish in a particular area and says there must be a dolphin nearby, demonstrating how dolphins depend on flying fish for food. On his way back, he finds more than a dozen when he catches yellow Gulf weed to collect the tiny shrimps living in it [12]. The novel often defines its presence in the sea [7]. Plankton also appears in some parts, prompting us that it is an important part of the ocean ecosystem. Along with plankton, the story also mentions weeds such as Sargasso weed and aqua mala. Birds are part of this aquatic ecosystem, too. In one opinion, Santiago looks to a man-of-war bird to help in finding fish. The story also describes a bird resting on the line where the Marlin is bowed. As the old man sets out to sea, he thinks about how birds seem to be gentle, but they manage to survive the sea's cruel circumstances.

Marine Ecology in the Novel

The novel features many creatures and plants, such as plankton, Sargasso weed, and aqua mala, to exemplify a complex natural world that Santiago respects and understands. He views the Marlin as an earnest rival, which highlights the difference between predator and prey. Sharks are natural predators in the sea and are a relentless threat, demonstrating a powerful force of nature. flying fish means dolphins are showing how one animal's movement can reveal the presence and behaviour of another in the food chain. The old man also watches the sea turtles eating "aqua mala" (a type of jellyfish), which is an example of a predator-prey relationship.

After landing on the boat's firm, the bird naps, and it circles the old man's head. It lands on the line and relaxes in. The old man asks the bird, "How old are you?" Is this a first-time traveller? The bird turns to face him when he starts talking. The old man looks to have sympathy for the little bird. He talks with it as if it could comprehend. This shows Santiago's treatment of animals as fellow victims; in particular, he feels the same way about the fish in the story. According to him, every component of the "universe" is connected in some way through love. He feels for the bird as he does for every other species he encounters at sea. He describes the flying fish as "his principal friends on the ocean" and articulates sympathy for the turtles killed by other fishermen. He has no enchantment with turtles, even though he spends a lot of time in turtle boats. He feels horrible even about the massive trunk-backs, which weigh a ton and are as long as the rowing boat. Most people have no empathy for turtles because their hearts beat for hours after they are separated and killed. However, the old man has decided that his hands, feet, and heart are like those of birds and fish. Santiago reveals ecological knowledge through his understanding of currents, wind patterns, migratory routes for birds, and their feeding habits.

The Marlin as a Moral and Ecological Subject

The Marlin is essential to the ecosystem. Its strength, intelligence, and agency are highlighted in this novel. He portrays the fish as a moral companion rather than just prey. The conflict between ecological sensitivity and human necessity is demonstrated by its struggle with Santiago. "I love and respect you very much," adds Santiago. However, I shall murder you before the day is out (Hemingway 52). It anxieties the moral challenge of reverence and survival fishing that coexists with the need to persist.

Hemingway accurately and scientifically illustrates the food chain at sea. The health of the ecosystem is well-founded on the trophic relationships between flying fish, dolphins, jellyfish, sharks, and seabirds. Santiago recognises sharks as inevitable mechanisms of nature's design rather than disapproving of them as evil. According to him, "everything kills everything else in some way" (Hemingway 104). The author recognises ecological interconnectedness rather than moralising predation. The novel has numerous allusions to humans interfering in the natural world. It states that an old man's curiosity about the aquatic ecosystem is the novel's central issue. When Santiago sets off, he chooses to work out where he can catch more fish. The fact that he cannot see any land nearby is also mentioned more often in this novel. It suggests that he went too deep into the ocean and upset its natural ecosystem. "An aeroplane passed overhead on its course to Miami, and he watched its shadow scaring up the schools of flying fish" (Hemingway 69). This suggests that an ecosystem with the largest neighbours is disrupted even by an aircraft flying at high altitudes.

Santiago's compassion and affinity for sea creatures are seen with flying birds and fish. He loved flying fish because they were his main aquatic companions.

The birds have a harder life than we do, except for the robber birds and the heavy, strong ones, he thought, feeling sad for the birds, particularly the little, delicate dark terns that were always flying, searching, and nearly never finding. Why were the birds created? When the water may be so harsh, is it really as delicate and exquisite as those sea swallows? (Hemingway 26).

Santiago's observations of the organisms he comes across in and around the seawater may add to his experience at sea. For example, he recognises the presence of dolphins nearby when he sees a man-of-war bird circling in the sea. In the end, the water and its creatures serve as Santiago's mentors and guides, helping him navigate challenging situations and rescue his catch. The sea itself is his greatest teacher. The novel vividly portrays the companionship that nature provides to its inhabitants and the kind of suppression it creates among them.

A warbler that reposes on the skiff provides company with the old man when he is lonely at sea. Santiago continues to reverse with the warbler until the bird takes off again. He even makes an effort to be friendly with the dolphins and flying fish. And as time goes on, the fish continues to pull the skiff in its direction. However, the relationship between Santiago and the Marlin might be the best illustration of companionship. When Manolin isn't around, Santiago is accompanied by the fish. In spite of their observed enmity, some events at sea unite them. Even if they were not able

to see one another, they have a strong bond. The novel's deep ecological features can be explained by their strange relationship.

The Sea as a Moral Teacher

Santiago's separation from the natural environment serves as a metaphor for human hostility toward it. In addition to being physical, loneliness has an existential quality that clarifies how modern humans are divided from the natural world. However, Santiago's interaction with birds, the water, and Marlin suggests a wish to re-establish contact. This reflects eco-critical worries about how industrialisation and modernity have alienated humans from the environment. Hemingway neither romanticises nor discredits nature. The sea is uncaring, the sharks are relentless, and the Marlin is elegant but mortal; the interconnected character of existence, ecological realism, can also be viewed as an existential perspective. And Santiago's relations with marine life are ruled by a personal code of ethics. He never slaughters for fun, money, or waste. His fishing is cautious, careful, and aware of the environment. According to Santiago's ethics, humans are responsible for all living things and are part of a greater biotic community.

Ecological Ethics in the Novel

The author artfully captures Santiago's sense of duty and guilt. He understands that taking a life requires morality and validation. Even though Santiago has to kill the Marlin to survive, he undergoes sensitively because he is conscious that the fish has agency and dignity as he mentions: "You were born to be a fisherman as the fish was born to be fish," (Hemingway 75). His environmental ethics are based on this mutuality. By depicting overfishing, species extinction, the vulnerability of marine ecosystems, and moral interactions with non-human animals, he proposes environmental ethics. The Old Man and the Sea serves as an example of how literature can represent ecological issues, and the author urges the readers to acknowledge the moral and emotional significance of marine ecosystems through poetic narrative. Santiago views the sea as an archive of memories. It includes his past as a fisherman, his moral values, and his personal losses. Hemingway treats water as a moral agent that is fluid, unpredictable, and life-sustaining. Despite being written before modernism, the novel slightly criticises overfishing and unsustainable exploitation. He appeals to a comparison between the destructive potential of industrial fishing fleets and Santiago's modest way of life as a fisher. His techniques don't damage ecosystems and he respects the ecological balance.

Conclusion

The novel The Old Man and the Sea by Ernest Hemingway is a timeless tale of human resilience, but its ecological facets make it relevant in the current environmental crisis. The story offers a widespread perspective on human ethics and marine ecology through Santiago's close connection with the sea. Santiago serves as a moral participant in the interrelated marine world rather than a defender of nature. His respect for marlin, empathy for animals, understanding of eco cycles, and acceptance of natural boundaries are all examples of a sustainable and moral attitude to interacting with maritime ecosystems. His description of fish as emotional beings, the sea as a healthy ecosystem, and fishing as an ethically questionable activity is a powerful illustration of environmental consciousness. The Old Man and the Sea serves as a strong reminder of the value of humility, respect, and moral interaction with the world's oceans.

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