

# An Analysis of the Old Man and The Sea from the Perspective of Ecologism

Haochen Wang<sup>1, a</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Soochow University, China.

<sup>a</sup>wanghaochen1997@foxmail.com

## Abstract

**Ernest Hemingway is a world-renowned writer of all time. His famous work *The Old Man and the Sea* has great repercussions around the world. Many scholars have explored different aspects of this work such as the “code hero” and feminism reflected in the work. From the perspective of ecologism, this paper analyses the relationship between the human beings and nature from three aspects: admiration for nature, conquest of nature and reflection of the human-centered approach so as to point out how to proper handle the relationship between human beings and nature. Besides, it also puts forwards some suggestions as to how to solve the present environmental problems and appeal to people to conserve the environment and construct an ideal model to coexist harmoniously with nature.**

## Keywords

**The Old Man and the Sea, Ecologism, nature.**

## 1. Introduction

Ernest Hemingway is a world-renowned journalist, writer and sportsman. What he wrote during his lifetime is a precious heritage of all mankind. His most prominent works include *The Sun Also Rises*, *A Farewell to Arms* and *For Whom the Bell Tolls*. In 1954, he won the Nobel Prize in Literature for *The Old Man and the Sea*, which wins great praise from all people around the world.

After the Second World War, the morality of society was getting degenerate and the values of working hard for a better life faded away. Hemingway, a man who revered courage and striving, felt that the differences between human beings lie not in how it starts and ends, rather in how it proceeds and that the only invaluable thing human beings pursue is the mentality in the process. That is his inspiration, which is why he chose to end his life after realizing that he was incapable to create and strive. Before *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway hadn't produced a work that caused great repercussions, which tortured his inner soul. He would never surrender to failure and he wanted to excel in literature. Therefore, he buried himself in reflections on himself. He condensed all his inspirations and ideas into this work and created this monumental novel.

*The Old Man and the Sea* is based on Hemingway's own experience. His encounter with the old fisherman in Cuba gave him the inspiration of creating this work. *The Old Man and the Sea* mainly depicts the battle between the old fisherman Santiago and the big marlin fish. Santiago hasn't caught a fish for as long as eighty four days and he believes that his bad luck has come to an end. On the eighty-fifth day, he sails out to the Gulf Stream. There, a big marlin fish bites his bait and after three days of battling with the marlin, Santiago finally defeats him. Meanwhile, a sense of admiration well up in his heart. Nevertheless, the blood of the marlin fish has attracted sharks. Despite the fact that Santiago does his best to foil sharks' attempt, the marlin fish is devoured and Santiago comes back to shore with a skeleton of the marlin fish.

One of the themes of Hemingway's works is nature and human beings, the most prominent of which is *The Old Man and the Sea*. Thus, in this paper we will analyze the relationship between human and nature in *The Old Man and the Sea* from the ecological perspective. It is divided into five parts. Part one gives a brief introduction of the author and historical background in which the author wrote this novel. Part two is the literature review of the relationship between human and nature in *The Old Man and the Sea*, providing how other critics see this relationship. Part Three is an overview of ecological perspective, illustrating what ecological perspective is and its origin. Part Four is an analysis of the relationship between human and nature in *The Old Man and the Sea* from the ecological perspective, including three aspects: love and admiration for nature, conquest of nature and reflection of the human-centered approach. Part Five is the conclusion, summarizing the inspirations from *The Old Man and the Sea* in how to live in harmony with nature.

## 2. Literature Review of the Old Man and the Sea

When it comes to Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, we will think of the old fisherman Santiago. Since its publication, a great number of scholars have come to analyse this novel from different perspectives.

Some critics comment on *The Old Man and the Sea* from the perspective of "code hero". When he fights against the marlin, he holds on to the belief that he will win this battle when he is exhausted by the violence of the marlin. He bravely fights against the sharks to protect what he has gained. Even in the inner self he understands that he is doomed to defeat and loss, he shows his courage and braveness and hits back the sharks at all costs. Even if he is in a desperate situation that seems to show no hopes, he still backs himself back holds on the belief that he cannot be defeated.

Others think that we should see *The Old Man and the Sea* from the perspective of futilitarian. He is lonely and defeated by the sea. The tragedy of the old man is predestined. Of course, life as a fisherman is lonely. Sailing on the sea for so many days is certain to make any person feel lonely. The old man is no exception. Besides, his loss to the sharks is a reflection of his defeat by the nature itself. The fact that old man speaks to himself on the sea reflects the sense of loneliness and loss of the old man himself. Therefore, the sense of loneliness and defeat is also a perspective of the *Old Man and the Sea*.

Still others view *The Old Man and the Sea* from the perspective of feminism. In the above utterance, the author seems to regard the sea, that is to say, the nature as a charming lady and a mother, who is gentle and kind. This description vividly shows the author's admiration and love for the nature. Also the author pays great attention to the feminism, giving this work a gleam of the equality of man and woman.

All the aforementioned researches focus on feminism and "code hero" in *The Old Man and the Sea* but fail to analyze the relationship between human beings and nature from the perspective of ecologism.

This paper will view *The Old Man and the Sea* from the perspective of ecologism.

## 3. An Overview of Ecologism

Ecologism, by its definition, refers to the protection of the natural environment and to call attention to the sustained development of nature. Ecologism is, to some extent, similar to Environmentalism, differing slightly in the regions where they are used.

Ecologism originates from the early environmental legislation in response to the severe atmosphere pollution engendered since the advent of the Industrial Revolution and now has developed into some new forms of ecoactivism such as tree-sitting.

With the rising popularity of the ecologism, this concept has aroused the interest of many renowned writers, Hemingway included. They permeate the concept of ecologism in their works so as to reflect their own viewpoints regarding the nature and the environment.

The ecofeminist Rosemary R. Ruether says: "The most pressing task of the ecological culture is to transfer from the consciousness of man to that of Earth. Only in this way can we use our own brain to understand the web of life and live in this web as a protector" (Rosemary, 1992: 250).

Albert Einstein puts forward that "humanity is originally part of universe. Nevertheless, they make themselves separated from the other parts... The task we will face in the future is to expand sadness and embrace nature" (Tyson, 1989:76).

The famous ecologist Paul W. Taylor proposes the four principles : No harm, No interference, loyalty and reconstruction of justice and the view that "Not interfering with these unities means that we should never try to control, change or administer the ecological system of nature or interfere with their proper functions in other aspects" (Taylor, 1986:172-175). This point proposed by Taylor explains that along with admiration for nature comes control and interference with the nature. He calls on human beings to eliminate their conquest of the nature and give nature due respect. The main features of his view is the abandoning of attempts to control and interfere with nature and respect the law of nature and return to our original admiration and protection for the nature. In a nutshell, according to Taylor, ecologism refers to love and admiration for nature, the denial of the conquest of nature and the reflection of the human-centered approach in a narrow sense.

#### **4. An Analysis of the Old Man and the Sea from the Perspective of Ecologism**

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, the most predominant point is the old man's struggle with the force of nature. The marlin and the sharks are all the symbols of the nature whereas the old man represents the force of human beings. The battle between Santiago and the sea is a miniature of the relationship between human beings and nature.

Nevertheless, from the viewpoint of the ecologism, we can conclude that the relationship between human beings and nature goes through several stages: love and admiration for nature, conquest of nature and reflection of the human-centered approach.

##### **4.1. Love and Admiration for Nature**

As a fisherman, Santiago earns his life from the sea. He has to catch fish for food and for selling so as to support his lives. To a great extent, Santiago coexists with the sea. At this stage, Santiago harbors love and admiration for the nature.

When the fish swims near to his boat, he could even distinguish which is male and which is female. The words uttered by the old man can also exhibit his love and admiration for the nature: "They are good," he said. "They play and make jokes and love one another. They are our brothers like the flying fish" (Hemingway, 1952:17). From this utterance, we could see that the old man see the fish as his brothers. As a fisherman, Santiago earns his livelihood from the fish in the sea. He has to extract resources necessary for his livelihood. His relationship with the nature is inseparable. Therefore, Santiago has established close link with the sea, that is, the symbol of the natural environment. He has to give respect to the nature and observe the ecological rules of nature so as to extract the life-dependant resources from the nature. From this aspect, we could conclude that Santiago harbors an admiration for the sea, the miniature of the nature.

When he launches a battle against the marlin, the old man also exhibits his love and admiration for the nature. "You are killing me, fish, the old man thought. But you have a right to. Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or nobler thing than you, brother. Come on and

kill me. I do not care who kills who" (Hemingway, 1952:35). Even when the old man is fighting against the marlin, namely, the force of nature, he still believes that nature has the right to take away his life. That is because of his underlying belief that he is part of nature and that nature has the right to splinter part of itself. Unlike other people who devote themselves to the conquest of nature heart and soul, the old man seems to have an awareness that he is just one link of the natural environment and that he has the responsibility to be subject to the control of nature. Although he is in battle with the marlin, he still does not forget that human beings are part of nature and he does not put on airs against nature, thus reflecting his respect for the nature.

When a bird settles on his boat, he says: "Stay at my house if you like, bird," he said. "I am sorry I cannot hoist the sail and take you in with the small breeze that is rising. But I am with a friend" (Hemingway, 1952:20). From this utterance, it is obvious that Santiago treats the bird as his companion. He even thinks about hoisting his sails so as to send the bird home. The bird Hemingway wrote here is still a miniature of nature. The attitude Santiago shows to the little bird also reflects his viewpoint about the nature, that is to say, his respect and admiration for the nature. Just imagine the scenario where a bird flip to the edges of our windows, what we would do? There is a great possibility that we may go to have a closer look at or even overlook the bird completely. However, the old man is entirely different. Not only does he treat the little bird as someone whom he could talk to and who could understand his utterances, but also he thinks about sending the bird home! It is universally acknowledged that life for a fisherman is fairly hard. Generally speaking, people under such circumstances will adopt every method he could find to hunt for the resources he needs so as to support the livelihood of his family and his own. In contrast, the old man does not overuse and raid nature with greed. Instead, he grants the bird the status of his companion and even wants to bring it to where it belongs. This action vividly reflects his ecological viewpoint, that is, love and admiration for the nature.

"The fish is my friend too." he said aloud. "I have never seen or heard of such a fish" (Hemingway, 1952:28). In this utterance, the old man regards the fish as his friend. He seems to take the fish as his companion. Also the old man attempts to kill the fish, he still harbors admiration and respect for his opponent. This, from another aspect, shows the old man's admiration for the nature. Earning a livelihood is a tough task on the sea. He interacts with living beings in the world by intuition. He sees living beings in nature as the companion and friends of the human race. He seems to do not care who is defeated or who is killed. The old man tries to elevate the status of the fish instead of dismissing it as his enemy and treats it as someone who is equal to him.

#### 4.2. Conquest of Nature

"Fish," he said, "I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends" (Hemingway, 1952:20). As a fisherman, it is his work to fish and sell for money. It is his obligation and duty to catch fish so as to provide a decent life for himself. Although the old man harbors a feeling of love and admiration for the fish and the sea, he has to subject himself to his livelihood and set his foot in conquering the nature. At this stage, the old man Santiago is a symbol of the whole human beings. The attitude the old man takes towards the fish and the sea is a miniature of that the whole humankind takes towards the nature. There is no denying that human beings definitely harbor a wish to protect the nature and not exert a negative effect on the nature. Nevertheless, guided by the increasingly prevalent materialism in the human society, the whole human race is indulged in the swamp of materialism, ever pursuing the endless commercialization and consumption, with no regard for our part we play in nature and the limits and rules we should obey when interacting with nature. Such action is sure to have dire consequences. Subject to this indulgence, the human beings act against nature and overlook the laws of nature. Their action is only for their livelihood but also for the so-called

transient “honor”. But what is honor? Honor is a concept invented by the human beings. It, to a great extent, reflects the self-esteem of humankind itself. It makes no sense to the nature itself. Just because of the insubstantial “honor”, the old man takes away the life of the fish. It is utterly nonsense. Throughout the history of humankind, we launch battles against the heretics, fight battles against the rebels and send every soldier and hero to the brink for the sake of an insubstantial concept of honor. In some cases, honor can unite people into a force, an unstoppable force. Nevertheless, the same rule cannot apply to the interactions with the nature.. “But man is not made for defeat.” he said. “A man can be destroyed but not defeated. I am sorry that I killed the fish though, he thought” (Hemingway, 1952:38). This utterance reflects the fact that: although “Santiago is an old man suffering from a chronological exhaustion of physical strength” (Bharadwaj&Bhuyan, 2014:228). He will never subject himself to the violent force of nature and he will fight to the end. From another perspective, we could make an analogy between the old man and human beings proper. Human beings are self-confident, holding the firm belief that as long as we work together and struggle against the force of nature, we are sure to win the war against nature and make nature at our mercy. Human beings’ vanity is shown vividly in this utterance. Moved by the fish’s grandeur and feeling a renewed sense of purpose in the impending contest, he vows to fight it to the death (Daniel&Aronson, 2018:2312). The old man trusts himself that he could win the battle against the marlin, just as human beings are believing that they can conquer the nature. He wants to fight against the nature, but ultimately, he fails. It is just like the human beings themselves, who make all efforts to slave nature for their own benefit. Faced with great difficulty, they still do not admit their own defeat, they think their power and confidence are not born to be defeated. Therefore, they never cease on their path of conquering nature. The old man places a high emphasis on the force of nature while neglecting the inherent laws of nature completely. They also give high priority to their own idea, belief and mental concept such as honor. They think that a man can be destroyed. However, how can a man be destroyed while still keep fighting against the force of nature in a desperate war? It utterly makes no sense. In every sense, we have to consider the law of nature. Violating the law of nature will definitely bring dire consequences. The flesh of human body cannot be used to fight against the force of nature without consideration for the cost it may incur. Therefore, the whole utterance reflects the vanity of human beings to blindly launch the war of conquest against nature and regard the loss it may cause as something honorable, which, in my opinion, is not so feasible. Human beings highly emphasize the power of their willpower, without considering their respect for the nature

“He rubbed the cramped hand against his trousers and tried to gentle the fingers. But it would not open. Maybe it will open with the sun, he thought. Maybe it will open when the strong raw tuna is digested. If I have to have it, I will open it, cost whatever it costs” (Hemingway, 1952:22). This description vividly shows that the old man does his utmost to catch the fish. He will do it whatever the cost. It shows his strong power and determination to defeat the marlin and that he could win the desperate battle against the nature. He uses every strategy he could utilize to catch and control the fish, which clearly shows his desire to conquer the nature

“I’ll kill him though,” he said. “In all his greatness and his glory” (Hemingway, 1952:24). This utterance made by the old man makes clear the fact that the old man regards killing the fish as something honorable and great. He is so self-conceited that he sees the nature not as a companion to communicate with or interact with, but as something that he can make use of or someone that should obey his orders. He even dismisses the noncompliance of nature and the sea as something dishonorable. The old man utterly tries to make the sea to his advantage, without considering giving something back to the nature itself, which shows that the old man does not have a mature ecological point of view. Conquering nature will definitely not bring greatness and honor to the old man himself. Instead, it will exert negative effects on the environment and the continual survival of the human race itself. The vanity and self-conceit of

the human race are what leads to the battle between The Old Man and the Sea, that is, the nature. In effect, conquering nature is not something honorable, but something that will cause dire consequences. Therefore, the old man shouldn't regard himself as a master who can take advantage of the natural resources at will. He should learn how to interact and communicate with nature in equal terms

"You are killing me, fish, the old man thought. But you have a right to. Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or nobler thing than you, brother. Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who" (Hemingway, 1952:35). The old man shows his braveness when fighting against the fish. On the one hand, he admires the prowess of the marlin. On the other hand, he bravely faces the fish and he seems to do not fear death. In his inner self, the old man seems to believe in his certainty to win the battle. He believes the inevitability of the victory of the human beings against the nature. In reality, the old man does not really believe that he will be defeated. He really trusts himself and thinks that he will, like all the fantasy stories, defeat the opponents and win a major victory. But in interaction with the nature itself, it is not the same story. The old man has to properly deal with the relationship between himself and the sea and should not attempt to conquer the nature

"Now they have beaten me, he thought. I am too old to club sharks to death. But I will try it as long as I have the oars and the short club and the tiller" (Hemingway, 1952:42). After being attacked the violent sharks, the old man bravely to fight back and exhausted. Nevertheless, he will not give up. Even he knows in his inner self that he is doomed to fail. Nevertheless, he still tries his best to fight back for the so-called honor and greatness of the human beings.

"Fight them," he said. "I'll fight them until I die" (Hemingway, 1952:43). The old man seems to neglect his own safety and concentrates on defeating the sharks. He believes in the fact that he could defeat the sharks and that he could conquer the nature, regardless of his own safety. It seems that the old man has taken the sharks as the enemy without knowing that it is just the revenge of his preceding deeds. He thinks it is a great honor and privilege to fight against the representative of nature - the sharks. From the point of view of Hemingway, he tries to remind us of the fact that human beings and animals are just part of the complex ecological systems. The relationship between human race and the nature is interrelated, interdependent and coexistent. Human beings should pursue a simple lifestyle and colorful mental life so as to restore the harmony between human beings and the nature. By no means should human beings prove their own powers by way of conquering nature. The only way for human race to survive, thrive and prosper on this planet is to respect nature, conserve natural resources and coexist with other life forms. Otherwise, just like the old man who loses his marlin to the sharks, human beings are doomed to meet their end.

### **4.3. Reflection of the Human-centered Approach**

Experiencing his loss of battle against the sharks, the old man finally comes to realize that maybe his fight against nature is doomed to fail. He comes to reflect his approach.

"I shouldn't have gone out so far, fish, he said. Neither for you nor for me. I'm sorry, fish" (Hemingway, 1952:41). This utterance made by the old man apparently reflects the old man's reflection of his fight against the nature. Originally, he thought it is honorable to play a part in the glorious battle against the nature and that a man can never be defeated. Nevertheless, the following battle against the sharks punches him in his face and makes him realize that his approach is wrong. This utterance shows that the old man is very guilty of killing fish. Despite the fact that the old man wins the battle against the marlin and proves his prowess and power, he still harbors the guilt of killing the fish. At first, nature endows the old man the basic necessities so that the old man can earn his livelihood. Nevertheless, earning a livelihood on the sea requires the old man to abide by the law of nature and be in line with the inherent spirit of the sea. What is essentially wrong is that the old man tries to conquer the nature by killing the

marlin. He believes the above utterance that he will not be defeated, again and again launching battles against the force of nature until he is completely defeated.

“You violated your luck when you went too far outside” (Hemingway, 1952:43). We have the feeling of man being the hunted specie rather than the hunter.(Alexis&Lanior&Theophilus, 2014:169). This utterance clearly shows that the old man has lost the marlin. No matter how brave the old man is, he still could not fight against the force of nature and during the course of conquering the nature, he lost his own direction and he has violated the basic principles that he should have obeyed when interacting with nature. He tries to endlessly rob what he needs from the hands of nature and utterly overlook the law of nature. The nature revenges itself on the disrespectful deeds of the old man. The sharks that mercilessly take the spoils from the the old man are a representative of the nature’s revenge. By taking away things that do not belong to the old man, the nature tries to teach the old man a lesson. That is, his failure is not due to the interference of nature, but is attributed to the violation of the law of nature. The same rule can also apply to the human activity done to the nature in the modern era. If the human beings went too far so that infringe on the basic principles of nature, then what lies in store for the human beings is the merciless revenge of nature or even the total destruction of the human race. Therefore, the exploit of humans should be limited within a certain extent. Human beings should respect the law of nature and become a member in the nature, without ever wanting to being the master of nature. Trying to win the battle against the nature is impossible. Originating from nature, the human race should be aware that only by living in harmony with nature can human beings thrive and prosper for a long time in the near future. The violation or even the attempt to control will only backfire and bring dire consequences to the collective interests of the human race.

“Maybe I’ll have the luck to bring the forward half in. I should have some luck. No, he said. You violated your luck when you went too far outside” (Hemingway, 1952: 43). This utterance clearly shows that the old man has realized the cause that has led himself to defeat. Moderately drawing resources from nature is allowed. Nevertheless, trying to take away everything that nature has offered will lead to certain negative consequences. The interaction between human race and nature requires communication and respect, of which respect is essentially significant. The old man tries to kill the marlin so that he could grab more resources from the hands of nature. What he does not consider is the respect that he should have shown to the nature. He blindly grabs what he needs bit by bit from the nature, without considering the nature itself. The consequences the deeds of the old man induce are the appearance of sharks who take away the old man’s spoils and teach the old man the lesson that the attempt to overturn the status of nature is doomed to fail. The killing of marlin by the old man represents the temporary victory of the old man over the sea whereas the defeat of the old man by the sharks is the reflection of the dire consequences caused by the attempt of conquest by the old man. What actually defeats the old man is not the sharks, but is his own attitude towards the nature. The experience of the old man also inspires us to reconsider the relationship between the human beings and the nature. “The whole nature is an organic unity, and it has its own rule of evolvment” (Yu, 2011:173). The nature is a complete whole. “When the complete whole faces danger, non of the parts will survive, unless the whole survives” (Devall & Sessions, 1985:67).

“He unstepped the mast and furled the sail and tied it. Then he shouldered the mast and started to climb. It was then he knew the depth of his tiredness” (Hemingway, 1952:45). This scene described by the author vividly shows the status of the old man after his defeat. The furling of the sail shows that he admits that the battle against the nature is over and that he has admitted his loss to the sharks. The word “tiredness” in the sentence apparently shows that the old man has exhausted and that although he has done his utmost to protect his fish from being attacked by the sharks, his attempts are futile and that he finally loses the war against the sharks and the nature.

## 5. Conclusion

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* describes the story of the old man's battle against the nature and his final admittance of defeat by the nature. What we need to learn from it is clearly the fact that we should adopt a right approach to the nature and that we should interact with nature in equal terms. "We have to understand that environment is not something outside of our lives. If we pollute or poison our air, water or soil, we are actually poisoning ourselves" (Seed, 1988:10). Nature is not something we can exploit at will, but is a companion with whom we can reinforce each other, help each other and thrive and prosper together.

Besides, we should never take advantage of the resources nature has offered at will and regard ourselves as the master of nature. Guided by the perspective of ecologism, human beings are part of nature and we should take position in the ecological system of nature and never violate the basic principles of nature. We should try to protect our environment in our daily life. We are part of nature. Therefore, we should cooperate with the nature so that human beings can thrive and prosper within the limit of nature.

This paper analyzes the relationship between human beings and nature from three aspects: admiration for nature, conquest of nature and reflection of the human-centered approach, giving us inspirations about how to maintain a harmonious relationship with nature and calling on us to conserve natural environment.

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