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On Reading *The Old Man and the Sea*

“He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish” (Hemingway 13). In the opening sentence of Ernest Hemingway’s masterpiece *The Old Man and the Sea*, the reader can discern much about what lies in the pages ahead, if they know what to look for. Fortunately, after reading *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, I have been armed with such knowledge. I applied this knowledge while reading the novella, and it drastically influenced how I perceived the work as a whole. I was able to dissect the author’s choices, from the setting and characters to the various symbols interspersed throughout the narrative, as I’ll discuss later. It created a fuller reading experience as it rounded out the relatively simple plot of the story, effectively allowing for a much more participatory role on my part. Additionally, I know I will be able to further utilize this knowledge to future reading; the lessons taught in *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* are so multifaceted that it’s nearly impossible to find a literary work which does not relate in some way to one of them. I can revamp my reading process now to ensure that I am patiently unpacking whatever may be in front of me, applying the lessons I’ve learned to get as much as I possibly can from any given piece of literature.

In the very first chapter of *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, author Thomas C. Foster relates a mundane story of a young boy who goes on a seemingly straightforward trip to the supermarket in order to buy some bread. However, as Foster dissects the story, he reveals a surprising truth about the true significance of the journey: it’s a quest. Now, when we generally think of a quest, we tend to think of fantastical tales involving knights and dragons and damsels in distress. However, Foster contends that to be classified a quest, a story need only fulfill a very simple set of requirements. It is clear from the outset that *The Old Man and the Sea* is intended to be a quest story. All of the prerequisites for such a classification are present. We are immediately introduced to Santiago, the titular “old man” who “had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish” (Hemingway 13). As the subject of the novella, we have a quester (the first requirement for any quest). Next, we need a place to go and a stated reason to go there. These requirements are quite clearly fulfilled: Santiago is clearly going to the sea in order to catch a fish. After the quester, location, and aim have been defined, the quest must actually begin and the quester must encounter “challenges and trials en route” (Foster Ch. 1). We see these challenges take multiple forms throughout the course of the novel, whether it be the gargantuan marlin Santiago struggles with for days, his insatiable hunger and thirst while stranded out at sea, or the sharks which set their sights - and jaws - on the freshly-caught fish. The only possible diversion *The Old Man and the Sea* takes from the traditional quest story is that Santiago deals with one challenge for the majority of the novella, as opposed to moving from challenge to challenge in the search for the target. However, I believe that this difference is not significant enough to disqualify the book from quest consideration. With all other points addressed, only one requirement is left: a real, originally unapparent reason for the quest. I believe the old man has another, deeper meaning for pursuing a fish; I believe he is attempting to prove his worth both as a fisherman and as a man to his town, the boy he’s mentored, and himself. We see the first seeds of doubt planted in Santiago’s mind as he converses with the boy. After the latter contends the Santiago is in fact the best fisherman, Santiago states “I hope no fish will come along so great that he will prove us wrong” and that he “may not be as strong as I think” (Hemingway 23). However, Santiago overcomes his doubts and, after completing his journey and proving his worth as a fisherman, we can at last accurately define *The Old Man and the Sea* as a quest.

One of Foster’s best sections of writing in *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* is the chapter in which he discusses symbolism. With such an emphasis placed on identifying and analyzing symbols written into various literary masterpieces in contemporary high school english classes, I was anxious to see what Foster’s thoughts on symbolism would be. To briefly restate the gist of the chapter, Foster claims that oftentimes any item or event can be a symbol for practically everything else; it’s all dependent on the reader’s perspective and ensuing interpretation. With this in mind, I was drastically able to rethink how I read *The Old Man and the Sea*. Rather than searching for the symbols Hemingway disguised in the text, I was able to take a much freer approach to determining symbolism throughout the story. According to my interpretation, there are a few fairly obvious symbols and a few others that are more vaguely hidden. Starting with the obvious ones, the two main human characters in the story represent a classic dichotomy: youth and old age. Santiago, who is humbly referred to as “the old man” more often than his actual name, is the very embodiment of old age, described as having “no life in his face” (Hemingway 19). On the other hand, the boy is depicted as being strong and filled with vibrant energy. We see him filled with emotion, especially at the end when he cries again and again upon seeing Santiago’s state after his venture. This contrast is perfectly summated in the final paragraph of the novella, as the old man is shown sleeping (a symbol for death) while the boy watches him dream. Alternatively, other symbols are harder to spot in the context of the passage. After finishing the story, I believe both the marlin and the sharks (and therefore the adventure as a whole) represent the story of Santiago’s life. He sets off to prove himself as a fisherman and toils endlessly to build a good reputation (catching the marlin) in order to become the best. However, as soon as he’s achieved his objective, his luck runs out, and he is helpless to watch as his reputation is destroyed by his own village (the sharks eating the marlin), leaving him alone and weary. His resignation can be observed when he says of the impending shark attack “Now it is over” (Hemingway 87). Of course, other readers may have different interpretations for different parts of the story, but, thanks to Foster’s gracious definition of symbolism, I was free to draw my own conclusions about the symbols in *The Old Man and the Sea.*

Finally, on more specific terms, I want to examine one of Hemingway’s choices and how it relates to Foster’s explanations on the topic. One very distinctive aspect of *The Old Man and the Sea* is the act that nearly the entire narrative takes place on the open ocean. This unique setting choice surely means something if Foster’s chapter on geography has any credence to it. The sea is described by Santiago “as something that gave or withheld great favours, and if she did wild or wicked things it was because she could not help them” (Hemingway 27-28). Through Santiago’s internal dialogue, Hemingway paints a picture of the setting as something rough, untamed, and wildly unpredictable. This perfectly foreshadows what is to come as the old man continues on his journey. Additionally, Foster states that “geography can also, and frequently does, play quite a specific plot role in a literary work” (Foster Ch. 19). This is especially true when it comes to *The Old Man and the Sea*. The village in Cuba plays a key role in establishing Santiago’s character, motivations, and reasons for setting off on his epic journey. Because such an emphasis is placed on fishing in the village, we understand how important Santiago’s adventure is. Throughout the novel, Hemingway makes excellent use of geography to both foreshadow future events and provide useful exposition for the main character.

All in all, I truly believe that *How to Read Literature Like a Professor* has greatly influenced my perception and interpretation of Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea*. From relating the story to other similar tales of quests to identifying my own symbols to understanding the significance of certain plot choices, I’ve been able to more fully comprehend and experience the book. However, it is my hope that these lessons I’ve learned continue to impact the way I read for years. I plan on reading with more intentionality, patience, and thought. Then perhaps, where other people may simply see an opening sentence, I can begin to uncover the mysteries hidden by the author inside those humble pages.