

Symbolism and the Functions of Symbols in The Old Man and The Sea

Assts. Lecturer Fatima Hadi
fatima.hadi@uokerbala.edu.iq

University of kerbala/College of Education for Human Sciences/Department of
English

Abstract

This study revolves around symbols and how they function in The Old Man and the Sea. This novella by Ernest Hemingway centers on the story of an aging Cuban fisherman named Santiago and his relentless struggle against a giant marlin in the Gulf Stream. Symbols play a significant role in the narrative, enhancing the thematic depth and emotional resonance of the story. Overall, symbols in The Old Man and the Sea help to enrich the narrative by conveying deeper meanings and universal themes such as the human condition, the pursuit of dreams, the struggle against adversity, and the inevitability of mortality. They invite readers to reflect on the complexities of life and the indomitable spirit of the human soul.

Keywords: symbols, struggle, dreams, humanity, mortality.

خلاصة

تدور هذه الدراسة حول وظائف الرموز في رواية "العجوز والبحر". "الرجل العجوز والبحر" لإرنست همنغواي هي رواية قصيرة تحكي قصة صياد كوبي كبير السن يدعى سانتياغو وكفاحه المتواصل ضد سمكة مارلن العملاقة في تيار الخليج. تلعب الرموز دورًا مهمًا في السرد، حيث تعزز العمق الموضوعي والصدى العاطفي للقصة. بشكل عام، تساعد الرموز في "الرجل العجوز والبحر" على إثراء السرد من خلال نقل معاني أعمق وموضوعات عالمية مثل حالة الإنسان، والسعي لتحقيق الأحلام، والنضال ضد الشدائد، وحثمية الفناء. إنهم يدعون القراء إلى التفكير في تعقيدات الحياة وروح الروح البشرية التي لا تقهر. الكلمات المفتاحية: الرموز، الصراع، الأحلام، الإنسانية، الموت.

1. Introduction

Symbols are signs that are believed to supplant objects or thoughts. They are words or signs that are used as stand ins for something else, using as point of reference characteristics such as quality, reflection, and thoughts. Therefore, symbols represent the significance of a special arrangement of qualities that sets something apart (Metts 5). Usually, symbolism can be seen through the use of metaphors and allegories in a short story or novel (Gray 4). It can appear in a variety of formats: water as a symbolization of rebirth, fall representing time change and growth, or the color yellow as a representation of happiness are all common examples. Other common symbols used in literature consist of colors, objects, and seasons (1).

Symbolism plays an important role in creating a certain mood, feeling, or emotion within a work. Symbols are deciphered in a restricted manner as familiar signs (Linde 4). Using symbolism in a story is a way of positively manipulating readers' emotions so they might arrive at a certain understanding or find the work more pleasing (Gray 4). Using symbols is an important device in the literary field, since it can make a story more effective and interesting (Metts 4). It can beautifully represent the ideas and writing quality of a writer.

Symbolism can take place in different forms, namely, general and specific. In the first instance, the meaning of the symbol is universal and not bound to the special text in which it has been placed. The latter type is not universal in its meaning, but acquires a specific significance based on how it relates to the content of a novel, poem, etc. The symbol's significance exists only within the context created by the author (Metts 12). The purpose of this study is to discuss and analyze Hemingway's use of symbols in his works in order to convey certain messages to his readers, that is, to demonstrate the complexity of human reality, to provide a comprehensive view of the troubled human psyche, and to emphasize the importance of the environment and its influence on human beings.

1.1. Symbolism: A Historical Overview

Symbolism was a late 19th century artistic movement that originated by a group of French poets, including Arthur Rimbaud, Stéphane Mallarmé, and Paul Verlaine, who communicated ideas through symbols choosing subject matter based on visions, dreams, and mythology instead of depicting reality directly. It was created as a reaction to art movements that depicted the natural world realistically, such as Impressionism, Realism, and Naturalism. The beginnings of the movement can be traced back to 1886 when Jean Moreas published his famous Symbolist Manifesto. In their efforts to escape rigid metrical patterns and to achieve freer poetic rhythms, many Symbolist poets resorted to the composition of prose poems and the use of vers libre (free verse), which has become a fundamental form of contemporary poetry. Returning to the personal expressivity advocated by the Romantics earlier in the nineteenth century, symbolist artists felt that the symbolic value or meaning of a work of art stemmed from the re-creation of emotional experiences in the viewer through color, line, and composition. Ultimately, the aim of Symbolist art was to express universal truths, which could only be depicted through metaphorical imagery and suggestive forms containing symbolic imagery (Metts 14).

Though it began in France, Symbolism was an international avant-garde movement that spread across Europe and North America during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The techniques of the French Symbolists, who exploited an order of private symbols in a poetry of rich suggestiveness, had an immense influence

throughout Europe and America on writers such as T.S. Eliot, W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Wallace Stevens, Ernest Dowson, Dylan Thomas, Hart Crane, and E. E. Cummings (Al-Doory 2)

Symbolist art was subjective rather than objective; a symbolist artist would have focused on an idea or the 'Ideal,' which was a particular truth or story that they wished to convey to the audience, and then would have sought to express this idea through the use of their own symbolic references. The Symbolic poems very often dealt with topics which focused on the edge of consciousness like dreams, hypnosis and visions and through that truth and reality melted with imagination and allusion and created another invisible world (3).

1.2. Symbolism in Novels

In novels, symbolism can be employed to enhance themes, create atmosphere, convey emotions, or provide social and cultural commentary. There are a number of common types of symbolism found in novels, which this article will briefly elaborate. Archetypal symbolism uses symbols with ageless, universal meanings, frequently derived from cultural or mythical symbolism (Marshall 34). Allegorical symbolism is used in allegorical literature, where moral principles or abstract concepts are represented by various objects, characters, or situations (35). In symbolism of nature, symbols can be derived from natural aspects such as plants, animals, weather, and landscapes (Radjaa 9). Object symbolism is when in a novel, commonplace objects can acquire symbolic meaning (French 6). Color symbolism uses colors to express thoughts or elicit feelings by carrying symbolic meanings (7). Mythological or religious symbolism can lend depth to novels (Cuddon 12). Social and political symbolism is used when the novelist wants to make certain commentaries (13). Lastly, character symbolism can be used when individual characters may serve as symbolic embodiments of particular concepts or attributes. They could represent roles in society, vices, or virtues (14).

1.3. The Function and Significance of Symbolism in Literature

Symbolism is the use of a symbol, which can be a word or an image, to communicate a distinct idea. The world is populated by many symbols, examples of which include flags, icons, and even colors. An understanding of the symbolism at work in the world can result in a better navigation of the said surroundings. Symbolism in literature functions in a similar way. It is a language writers use to communicate messages visually, even when their work is not illustrated. Within a text, symbolism works visually as pieces of imagery that create a picture in the reader's mind. It is also used to communicate details about a character, setting, or plot point (Al-Doory 7).

Symbolism is one of the many literary devices writers use to make their work more vivid. In a way, symbolism (and certain other literary devices, like personification and

imagery) illustrates a piece of writing by creating pictures in the reader's mind. In fact, some other literary devices, such as metaphor and allegory, are often considered to possess close affinity with symbolism. These devices, similar to symbols, use the similarity between something the writer aims to describe with another object, and by highlighting the said similarity, bring up connotations that the original item lacked had it been described on its own. As can be understood, literary devices are the techniques writers use to communicate ideas and themes beyond what they can express literally (Kramer 1).

1.4. Ernest Hemingway

Ernest Miller Hemingway was born in 1899, in Oak Park, Illinois to an upper middle-class family. As he was growing up, he began to nurture a love for the outdoors and the activities that took place there, such as hunting and fishing. These activities later impacted his work as well (Metts 23).

As a high school student, he was an accomplished athlete involved with a number of sports, including boxing, track and field, water polo, and football. During his last two years at high school, he edited the school's newspaper and yearbook, where he imitated the language of sportswriters. Like Mark Twain, Stephen Crane, Theodore Dreiser, and Sinclair Lewis, Hemingway was a journalist before becoming a novelist (Cowley 1).

Unable to enlist in the armed forces due to an eyesight problem, Ernest volunteered to drive ambulances for the American Red Cross in Italy. During his time in Italy, Hemingway was seriously wounded in the legs and feet by shrapnel. He was eventually taken to the Red Cross Hospital in Milan, where he spent part of the summer and fall of 1918. While cooped up in the hospital Ernest fell in love with a nurse, Agnes von Kurowsky of Washington, D.C., but their love affair came to an abrupt end, when she jilted him for an Italian officer. Later, he used some of these experiences in his novel *A Farewell to Arms* (Kramer 20).

After his broken love affair with the beautiful nurse, Ernest went on to get married four times. After his move to Paris, Ernest became part of the literary group later called *The Lost Generation*. He spent his time writing short stories and working as a foreign correspondent for the *Toronto Star*. He managed to travel to Austria and Spain, where he discovered bullfighting. Later on in life, he moved to Key West, where he occupied himself with writing, deep-sea fishing, sometimes off the coast of Cuba, with friends and imbibing with them. He did some travelling to Spain, Wyoming and a months-long African safari (Linde 13). His personal experiences would find expression in his fiction. In mid-1961, he died by suicide with a shotgun (Mammadov 2).

1.5. Ernest Hemingway's Writing Style

Ernest Hemingway is widely regarded as one of the most famous American writers. He uses symbols, images, and reality in his works. The symbolism in his works help highlight different aspects of those characters of his for whom simple descriptions would have been insufficient. He prefers to focus on action rather than reflection. His technique is unproblematic with simple grammar and easily approachable language, attributes that clearly set him apart from some of the other famous writers of his generation. The powerful impact of Hemingway's writing on other writers remains to this day.

Hemingway did not enjoy discussions on the symbolism in his famous works. Regarding this matter, Fraser Drew stated, "No good writer ever prepared his symbols ahead of time and wrote his book about them, but out of a good book which is true to life symbols may arise and be profitably explored if not over-emphasized." In Hemingway's works, the language is precise and natural, because he always prefers choosing particular and colloquial words. His power consists in his short sentences and very particular details. He also tends to link several parts of the sentence in a consecutive manner (Kramer 4).

Hemingway's writing style was short and straightforward. In other words, the significance of Hemingway's writing does not lie in the surface level of the prose or writing style. His writing does not include many adverbs or flowery language used to expand on his main point. Rather, Hemingway states the main point, allowing connections within the text to be made by the readers on their own—or not. One can read Hemingway's stories for what they are on the surface, but almost always, a reader lives vicariously through the characters, and as a result, applies emotions to Hemingway's writing and makes their own connections in an accessible way. Much of the influence behind this writing style can be credited to Hemingway's journalistic career (Valenzuela 1).

An excellent example of Hemingway's style is found in "A Clean, Well-Lighted Place." In this story, there is no maudlin sentimentality; the plot is simple, yet highly complex and difficult. Focusing on an old man and two waiters, Hemingway says as little as possible. He lets the characters speak, and, from them, we discover the inner loneliness of two of the men and the callous prejudices of the other. This masterful form of narration was lauded when Hemingway was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature in 1954, as his writing style was singled out as one of his foremost achievements. The committee recognized his "forceful and style-making mastery of the art of modern narration" (Mammadov 6).

Hemingway's prose style was probably the most widely imitated of any in the 20th century. He wished to strip his own use of language of inessentials, ridding it of all traces of verbosity, embellishment, and sentimentality. In striving to be as objective

and honest as possible, Hemingway hit upon the device of describing a series of actions by using short, simple sentences from which all comments or emotional rhetoric had been eliminated. These sentences are composed mostly of nouns and verbs, have few adjectives and adverbs, and rely on repetition and rhythm for much of their effect. The resulting terse, concentrated prose is concrete and unemotional yet often resonant and capable of conveying great irony through understatement (Young 1).

1.6. Hemingway's Use of Symbolism

Hemingway is widely regarded as a founding father of the contemporary American short story, since he invented and popularized new approaches that had a profound influence on the art of short story writing. He employs symbols to convey a message about the trials of existence and how humans battle to live (Jameel 3).

The features of a symbol are connected to the abstractions it comprises. The meaning and image of a symbol express far more than mere words. Ernest Hemingway examines this by his effective use of symbolism in his works to explore the disillusionment and the determination of individuals against the background of a pitiless environment.

The use of symbols in Hemingway's works differ from the brilliant to the apparently miniscule. He fills his narrative with a mixture of symbols that help portray the complete essence of the story (Young 2). He employs symbolism in his stories in order to represent themes, ideas and concepts. For instance, in the "Hills Like White Elephants," Hemingway uses the train station as a symbol for transition, since it is a place from which people move from one place to another (Kramer 3).

Hemingway also makes use of symbolism in "A Day's Wait." In this short story, a father reads to his sick son a from book about pirates, whiling away the time by reading these tales that symbolize masculine conventions. The young boy has so internalized these old notions of masculinity that he chooses to go out and about despite being sick, believing that resting would make him seem less tough and resilient, ultimately emasculating him in the eyes of others (Valenzuela 7)

In "The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber," a weak, emasculated man with a life of luxury faces a lion, an animal symbolizing bravery and masculinity (Mammadov 3). In "A Clean Well-Lighted Place," Hemingway uses three symbols, that of the soldier, the café, and the shadows of the leaves in order to symbolize nihilistic philosophy and show that there is no miraculous reason or clarification of how the world is today (Kramer 5).

As is apparent from the brief review of symbolism in some of Hemingway's works, the significance of this literary device in his writing cannot be denied; therefore, the next section of the article discusses how *The Old Man and the Sea* uses this literary device in order to poignantly shape the narrative and permeate it with meaning.

2. Body

2.1. Symbolism in The Old Man and the Sea

The Old Man and the Sea recounts the story of a fight between a maturing, experienced angler, Santiago, and a large marlin (Kushwaha 49). This novella of Hemingway's is ripe with symbolism, as he uses the different appearances in the work to represent concepts greater than themselves. Throughout the story, Santiago finds himself in a state of utter isolation, both physically and emotionally. This isolation is a significant theme explored throughout the story. In response to this isolated state, the sea takes on a symbolic meaning, representing various aspects of life and the human condition (Craey 3). It stands for the course of life through which man must sail. In both sea and life, there are several possibilities that lie hidden from the common eye, some are boons to be treasured, and some are difficulties to be defeated. Fortunately, the hero Santiago possesses respect, power, bravery, and affection, admirable qualities that can help him in his life (Kushwaha 849).

The sun can be interpreted as a symbol of happiness; it is what men live for, as human endeavors are geared toward the pursuit of happiness. The sun is the harbinger of good news to fishermen, as it promises them that the weather will be favorable. Good weather will help them sail safely and comfortably (Bloom 24).

The mast of Santiago's boat holds symbolic significance as well, serving as a metaphorical representation of Santiago's strength, resilience, and connection to the natural world. The mast symbolizes Santiago's physical strength and endurance. As an old fisherman, Santiago relies on his physical prowess to navigate the challenges of the sea and battle against the marlin. The mast, as a sturdy and reliable structure supporting the sails, reflects his own resilience and determination to endure the hardships he faces. The mast is an obvious allusion to the cross of Jesus. It is on his skiff, where stands the mast, that Santiago suffers. Santiago pines at sea for three days with painful injuries to the palms of his hands and his back (Craey 5).

In fighting the sharks' attack against him, Santiago makes use of his harpoon. Later on, he loses the harpoon as he tries to fend them off, an event which is symbolic of individuals who lose their faith as life's woes attack. Much like Santiago without a harpoon, those without faith are defenseless in their predicaments (Sandamali 6).

The old man himself can be read as a symbol of an optimist. He possesses the quintessential characteristics of someone living an optimistic life: he nurtures hope; he is faithful enough to this hope to fight in order to attain it; he musters his power to prepare for times of struggle; he enjoys a positive relationship with other creatures, no matter human or animal; and he harbors positive thoughts as well (Radjaa 12).

Additionally, Santiago represents another aspect of human life. He himself acknowledges that he has gone too far out into the sea, and in this regard, he resembles

other literary overreachers, those who attempt to do more than they are capable of and pay a heavy price for their ambition, familiar names such as Prometheus, Victor Frankenstein, Odysseus, Dr. Faustus, and Lucifer. His prideful error cause him to lose his prized catch. Hemingway, however, does not condemn Santiago for his mistake (Sandamali 9).

Other humans in the work also serve as symbols for greater concepts. Manolin, the young boy who cares for and accompanies the old man, acts as a symbol of hope in the novella. Additionally, he represents the old man's future life (13). Joe DiMaggio is a symbol of perseverance, faith and bravery to pursue the truth and endure in the face of pain. DiMaggio inspires the old man with leadership qualities and the determination to win in spite of handicaps. The image of the baseball hero playing while in pain gives the old man renewed power and stamina to bear his own agony (15).

The other fishermen populating the novella use new equipment for fishing, whereas Santiago goes fishing in a small skiff. When Santiago brings back the skeleton of the large marlin, they try to undermine him. Hemingway uses these fishermen and the proprietors of the coffee shop for the symbolic representation of people who bring others down. They represent those who would rather think more about themselves than others. In this regard, they resemble the sharks wanting to rob Santiago of his possessions, whereas the old man himself has closer affinity with the marlin (Sandamali12).

Animals are used symbolically in the work as well. For example, birds are portrayed as symbols of help. Man is a social being who cannot live without others. Therefore, for him, help becomes at once a right and a duty. The birds, by flying in a specific formation, lead the old man to a place where the fish abound, helping him catch his marlin (Sandamli 7). Conversely, sharks act as symbols of problems and the destruction that befalls everyone in their efforts to reach greatness (8).

The lion is a symbol of power and strength, and different types of power such as the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual that are attributes essential to existence. In the concluding pages, Hemingway once again uses the symbolism of lions in the old man's dream. These lions represent his lost youth and decreasing strength. When he needed strength on his long and strenuous voyage, he thought of his dreams about the lions, and gained strength through them. Having finished the long voyage during which he experienced intense struggles and spent all his strength in order to defend his prized fish, the old man arrives at his shack to rest. He never stops hoping and dreaming to regain his strength to rise again; therefore, he eats and rests in order for that physical strength to return back to him (Bloom 25).

Lastly, the marlin is the ideal opponent and it symbolizes the last chance that can be given to an individual. It struggles to avoid death, the ultimate reality taking shape in the lives of all beings.

2.2. The Function of Symbols in The Old Man and the Sea

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway presents us with a story about life and its struggles, how to survive and continue even though one is plagued with problems, and the importance of hope. Understandably, had he chosen to do so while speaking directly, the resulting work would have been little more than a threadbare moralist outpouring.

Instead, he opts to imbue his work with different symbols that help expand his work and give it multiple layers of meaning. On the surface, he is simply portraying the isolated state of Santiago after a dry streak, and how he chooses to get out of his comfort zone in order to achieve what is necessary. In the ordeal that he faces, he manages to come out as reaffirmed in his strength and endurance. The overall structure of the work is emblematic of many of Hemingway's great works of art: the short and terse sentences, simple style, and lack of an overflow of descriptive language clearly marks the passage as his. Therefore, the work reads as the simple story of the life of a simple fisherman, minimally embellished by some struggle.

Throughout *The Old Man and the Sea*, manhood, as demonstrated by Santiago, is performed in isolation, far out beyond other fishermen, where the big fish dwell. Even after Santiago catches the marlin, the struggle remains hopeless as sharks attack his catch. Santiago still fights. Injured and beaten, but never defeated, he resists inevitable defeat. When looking at the prominent themes in the novella, it is important to remember Hemingway's philosophy on struggle and death. For him, it is the inevitability of death and struggle that allows humans to prove their worth (Marshall 3). The symbolism at work in the novella helps give voice to this philosophy.

Through the symbolism he works into his text, he manages to make the simple story into something more. By employing these symbols, the story changes into a tale about the struggle to live, a heroic effort to maintain dignity, the mistakes that make the hero all the more human, and the hope that fires a fallen man's last efforts. Also, the fact that the symbols are not laid over the top allows the readers to impart their own meanings to the text, thus functioning as a universalizing element.

The symbolism thus works to Hemingway's great advantage: helping him maintain his usual style, allowing him to discuss deep truths about the human condition and what it really means to be human, and letting him free his audience from the shackles of restrictive texts so as to impart their own meanings to his work.

3. Conclusion

The Old Man and the Sea is a novella penned by Ernest Hemingway, first published in 1952. The story revolves around Santiago, an old Cuban fisherman, and his relentless struggle to catch a giant marlin in the Gulf Stream. Throughout the novel, various symbols are used to convey deeper meanings and themes. Two important symbols in the story are the old man and the sea itself.

The old man, Santiago, serves as a symbol of human determination and resilience in the face of adversity. Despite his age and physical limitations, Santiago displays unwavering courage and a refusal to surrender. He represents the indomitable human spirit and the pursuit of personal goals, even when the odds seem insurmountable. Through Santiago, Hemingway explores themes such as endurance, pride, and the inherent dignity of human beings.

The sea, on the other hand, represents both the beauty and the harshness of nature. It serves as a symbol of the unknown and the unpredictable forces of life. It is portrayed as a challenging and unforgiving environment, testing Santiago's strength, skill, and willpower. It symbolizes the cycle of life, with its moments of triumph and defeat. Hemingway uses the sea to explore themes of struggle, fate, and the complex relationship between humankind and nature.

In addition to the old man and the sea, Hemingway makes use of many other symbols as well, a tactic that allows him to maintain his usual style of simple, unadorned sentences while exploring fundamental human experiences. Throughout the work, the symbols help him delve into themes of determination, resilience, the human spirit, and the interplay between humanity and the natural world.

Works Cited

- Al-Doory, Awfa Hussein. A Short Review of Symbolism Movement and W. B. Yeats' Modern Symbolist Poetry. Tikrit University, 2019.
- Bloom, Harold. Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea. Bloom's Modern Critical Interpretations. Yale University, 2008.
- Cowley, Murthy. Exile's Return. The Viking Press, 1969.
- Craey, Gary. Cliffs Notes on The Old Man and the Sea. 1973. University of Colorado, Master's thesis.
- Cuddon, Jack. A Dictionary of Literary Terms. Doubleday & Company, 1977.
- French, Warren. Great Writers Student Library: 20th-Century American Literature. The Macmillan Press, 1980.
- Gray, Jordan. Symbolism in Literature, Definition, Types & Examples. University of Washington, 2023.
- Jameel, Adnan. The Symbolism in Hemingway's Social Relationships and Perversion Stories. Ankara, 2022.
- Kramer, Lindsay. What Is Symbolism? Examples of Symbolism as a Literary Device. University of London, 2022.
- Kushwaha, Varsha. A Study: Utility of Symbolism in Ernest Hemingway's Writing. Aligarch Muslim University, 2015.
- Linde, Mauricio Damian Aguilera. Hemingway and Gender: Biography Revisited. Glasgow, 2005.
- Mammadov, Ruslan. An American Writer Ernest Hemingway's Life Style and Its Influence to His Creative Activity. Delhi, 2009.

Marshall, Charles. Literary Symbolism. Ohio, 2006.

Metts, John. Ernest Hemingway Biographic: A Comprehensive Psychological Profile. London, 2015.

Radjaa, Belarbi. Symbolism in Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea. University of Ankara, 2016.

Sandamali, Saul. Symbolism In Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea. Edinburgh, 2015.

Valenzuela, Austin. Ernest Hemingway: Works, Books & Writing Style. University of Manchester, 2023.

Young, Philip. Ernest Hemingway. Beijing, 2023.