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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Ernest Hemingway's

The Old Man and the Sea

from

Multiple Critical Perspectives™

by

Kay Hampson



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General Introduction to the Work

Genre

THE *OLD MAN AND THE SEA* is classified as a novella. A novella is longer than a short story; however, like a short story, the novella generally focuses on only one thematic idea or deals with only one character's conflicts. A novel is different from a novella in that the novel is generally longer and develops, over many episodes, multiple characters' conflicts. Differentiating the three is an approximating rather than an absolute science.

Formalism Applied to The Old Man and the Sea



Notes on the Formalist Approach

THE FORMALIST APPROACH TO LITERATURE was developed at the beginning of the 20th century and remained popular until the 1970s, when other literary theories began to gain popularity. Today, formalism is generally regarded as a rigid and inaccessible means of reading literature, used in Ivy League classrooms and as the subject of scorn in rebellious coming-of-age films. It is an approach that is concerned primarily with *form*, as its name suggests, and thus places the greatest emphasis on *how* something is said, rather than *what* is said. Formalists believe that a work is a separate entity—not at all dependent upon the author's life or the culture in which the work is created. No paraphrase is used in a formalist examination, and no reader reaction is discussed.

Originally, formalism was a new and unique idea. The formalists were called “New Critics,” and their approach to literature became the standard academic approach. Like classical artists such as da Vinci and Michelangelo, the formalists concentrated more on the form of the art rather than the content. They studied the recurrences, the repetitions, the relationships, and the motifs in a work in order to understand what the work was about. The formalists viewed the tiny details of a work as nothing more than parts of the whole. In the formalist approach, even a lack of form indicates something. Absurdity is in itself a form—one used to convey a specific meaning (even if the meaning is a lack of meaning).

The formalists also looked at smaller parts of a work to understand the meaning. Details like diction, punctuation, and syntax all give clues.

Activity One

Examining How Denotation and Connotation Contribute to the Theme

1. Copy and distribute the handout *The Old Man and the Sea: Formalist Activity One Denotation and Connotation*. Half the class should receive the handout about the sharks, and the other half should receive the handout about the marlin.
2. Review the meaning of denotation and connotation.
 - **denotation** – the definition of a word as found in the dictionary
 - **connotation** – the associations applied to a word in addition to its literal meaning
3. Distribute dictionaries to each group.
4. Have students in small groups (a number of groups divisible by two) read the excerpts describing the marlin OR the sharks.
5. Have students look up the definition of the bold-faced words as they are used in each phrase and write the definition on the appropriate blank.
6. Next, have the students decide whether each phrase/description has a negative or positive connotation.
7. Instruct the students to read the similes that are italicized.
8. Each group should interpret the simile as either positive or negative.
9. After the students have completed the worksheets, reconvene the class and have each group share its findings.

Archetypal Theory Applied to *The Old Man and the Sea*

Notes on the Mythological/Archetypal Approach

MYTHOLOGICAL, ARCHETYPAL, AND PSYCHOLOGICAL CRITICISM are all closely related. This is because Freud formulated many theories around the idea of the social archetype, and his pupil, Carl Jung, expanded and refined Freud's theories into a more cross-cultural philosophy.

Critics who examine texts from a mythological/archetypal standpoint are looking for symbols. Jung said that an archetype is "a figure...that repeats itself in the course of history wherever creative fantasy is fully manifested." He believed that human beings were born with an innate knowledge of certain archetypes. The evidence of this, Jung claimed, lies in the fact that some myths are repeated throughout history in cultures and eras that could not possibly have had any contact with one another. Many stories in Greek and Roman mythology have counterparts in Chinese and Celtic mythology, long before the Greek and Roman Empires spread to Asia and northern Europe. Most of the myths and symbols represent ideas that human beings could not otherwise explain (the origins of life, what happens after death, etc.). Every culture has a creation story, a life-after-death belief, and a reason for human failings, and these stories—when studied comparatively—are far more similar than different.

When looking for archetypes or myths, critics take note of general themes, characters, and situations that recur in literature and myth. In modern times, traditional literary and mythological archetypes are successfully translated to film. For example, Jane Austen's *Emma* was adapted into the popular Hollywood film *Clueless*. By drawing on those feelings, thoughts, concerns, and issues that have been a part of the human condition in every generation, modern authors allow readers to feel that they know the characters in a work with very little background information. Imagine how cluttered stories would be if the author had to give every detail about every single minor character that entered the work!

Activity One

Examining Archetypal Characters in the Novella

1. Copy the five archetypal character worksheets. One fifth of the class will receive Santiago as HERO; one fifth will receive Santiago as LONER; and so on.
2. Divide the class into five groups (or a number of groups divisible by five) and distribute the worksheets, one topic to each group:
 - Santiago as HERO
 - Santiago as LONER
 - The shark as VILLAIN
 - The sea as TEMPTRESS
 - The sea as GODDESS
3. Review with the class the elements of a tragedy and the archetypal character definitions.
4. Instruct each group to find instances in the book that support and/or contradict the archetypal characters assigned them and to write the examples on their worksheets.

NOTE: Students do not need to agree or come to consensus within their groups. What is important is that they examine their character from the assigned viewpoint. If the group is of two opinions, allow each to present its findings in Step 5.

5. Reconvene the class and have each group report its findings.
6. As a class, discuss whether there is sufficient evidence to support an archetypal reading of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Feminist Theory Applied to *The Old Man and the Sea*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.

Activity One

Examining the Text for Evidence of Misogyny

1. Copy and distribute the handouts Hemingway Biographical Information and *The Old Man and the Sea* Feminist Activity One: Hemingway's Women.
2. Have students—individually, in pairs, or in small groups—study the handout and answer the questions at the end.
3. Have students—still grouped as in Step 2—peruse the book and note all references to women.
 - What “women” are referred to in the book?
 - What role does each of these “women” play in Santiago's life? In the novella?
 - Why do you suppose there are no female characters in the story?
 - What impact, if any, do feminine roles play in the story arc? In any character arcs?
4. Reconvene the class and allow each student/pair/group to report its findings.
5. As a class, answer the following questions:
 - Is there evidence that suggests Hemingway was a misogynist? If so, what is it? Why does it suggest he may be a misogynist?
 - Is there evidence that refutes the idea that Hemingway is a misogynist? If so, what is it? Why does it suggest he is not a misogynist?