

New Discussion about “Cannot Be Defeated”—Read *The Old Man and the Sea* from the Perspective of Ecocriticism

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Abstract

Hemingway's representative work *The Old Man and the Sea* is a milestone great work in the history of literature, and the typical works successfully describing the relationship between man and nature. Since published, after generations of review, in the 1990s, ecocriticism aimed at discussing about the relationship between the literature and the natural environment was born. In the new round of literary criticism, people attached great importance to the masterpiece. People love the novel. The symbolic novel mainly describing the nature not only has countless achievements in the past, but also is energetic today.

Keywords

The Old Man and the Sea, Ecological Literature, The Relationship between Literature and the Natural Environment

1. Brief Achievements of the Novel and Its Author

As one of the classic literary works influencing the history with the practical technique of video camera, *The Old Man and the Sea* records the whole process of the old man fishing in Santiago, and creates the image of a “unyielding” old man who remains graceful under the great pressure and is mentally forever undefeatable. The novel created an unprecedented record in the publishing history of human. 5.3 million books were sold in 48 hours! When Hemingway was declared as the winner of Pulitzer Prize, the critics all praised. “A man can be destroyed but not defeated.” This sentence of Hemingway in *The Old Man and the Sea* not only impressed the readers, but also conquered the reviewers. In 1954, because Hemingway was “proficient in narrative art, which was clearly shown in his recent work *The Old Man and the Sea*; and because of his effect in contemporary style”, Heming-

way deserved the Nobel Prize for Literature. From then on, people did a lot of research on Hemingway's representative work *The Old Man and the Sea*, but most of them focused on the unyielding man image, tragedy consciousness, nihilism, artistic features, etc.

Hemingway, the author of the novel, was born in Oak Park, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, Illinois, the United States. His father was a physician, who had passion for hunting, fishing and other outdoor activities. Under the influence of his father, he liked activities close to the nature since he was young, including hunting, fishing, swimming and skiing; and his mother loved literature. All of these had a lot of influence on Hemingway's life and creation in the future. As a writer infatuated with the nature, the attention to the nature is one of the eternal themes of Hemingway's creation. He experienced two world wars and the Spanish Civil War in his life. He was injured, and gained the medal. His brilliance and bumpy life and rich life experience inspired his love of nature, dislike of war and disappointment of human civilization. He put these experiences into his work. We can say that Hemingway search the unbroken and undeveloped nature all his life, and hope to find comfort from his work.

2. Understanding the Novel from Ecocriticism

In the 1990s, the ecocriticism started in the United States was produced when the global environmental crisis became increasingly serious. It aims at discussing about the relationship between the literature and the natural environment [1]. Cheryll Glotfelty, he main pioneer and sponsor of the ecocriticism in the United States, has pointed out that, if feminism criticism investigates the relationship between language and literature from the gender-conscious angle, the Marxist criticism incorporates the consciousness of production, economy and class into the scope of text reading; so, ecocriticism applies the ideology with the center of the earth into the literary study, and discusses about the relationship between literature and the natural environment. As a typical work successfully describing the relationship between man and nature, Hemingway's representative work *The Old Man and the Sea* draws great attention of people again in the new round of literary criticism, so that this symbolic novel mainly describing the nature has not only countless achievements in the past, but also energetic today.

The novel *The Old Man and the Sea* was written based on a true story. After the First World War, Hemingway moved to Cuba, and met old fisherman Gregorio Fuentes. In 1930, the ship taken by Hemingway was wrecked in the storm, and Fuentes rescued Hemingway. Since then, Hemingway and Fuentes had good friendship, and often fished together. In the novel, the old fisherman Gregorio Fuentes became the "unyielding" old fisherman Santiago. The novel mainly describes the fishing experience on the sea. After conquering the big fish, the old man fought with shark on the way back. However, in the past people often gave the image in the work great symbolic significance. For example, marlin stands for the ideal of life, shark stands for the tragic fate that can't be get rid of, the elephant stands for the changing human society, and the lion stands for the brave and strong person hating the evil and creating the miracle. Santiago stands for the unyielding man struggling with the powerful forces. His misfortunes in fishing stand for human's constant struggle with the misfortune.

But Hemingway thought the distinctive feature of the novel was no symbolism, but reality. And the traditional interpretation of the thought significance of *The Old Man and the Sea* focuses on the internal structure of the works, but seldom on the writer's condition of social survival environment. In his early works, Hemingway revealed the attention to human survival environment and the natural environment [2]. For example, he wrote: "... The gabbart with rubbish piled high was colorful. It had white spots and bad smell. At this time it leaned toward the side, and dumped things loaded on it into the blue sea water. When these things were scattered on the surface of the water, the sea water became blue-green, until four or five miles deep. Those easy to sink sank, and the floating things such as palm leaves, cork, bottles and used light bulbs... formed a delightful contrast." The environment pollution at that time was so serious, but the "dedicated ecologist standing on the forefront of our era" thought about not only environmental degradation, but also the survival consciousness and state of all the humans and the relationship between human and nature. In *An African Story*, Hemingway described the tragedy of cruel hunting. He called David, Juma and other people hunting partridges, elephants and other wildlife "these bastards breaking up partners". From 1938 to 1960, Hemingway lived and wrote in Havana, Cuba. His classics work *The Old Man and the Sea* is derived from this period of life, and fish and the sea.

In the novel, Hemingway's attitude towards the nature is not very clear, but even a collection of contradictions. On the one hand, when he fought with the big marlin and shark standing for the great power of nature, the

old man Santiago clearly showed his love and even respect of the nature. The writer did not describe the old man as the conqueror having no affection to the nature. The old man called the big marlin his brother and sincerely said to it: "Fish, I love you and respect you very much" [3]. On this basis, the critics said that the old man had this attitude because the big fish was the symbol of the old man, but that was not consistent with the actual work. The old man obviously regarded the big fish as the external existence different from him. We could find the writer's description in the work. The old man often compared himself with the big fish and found out the differences: "I am more intelligent than them. And the big fish are more noble and more able. They are beautiful and noble." The old man praised fish's virtue. In his view people and fish were equivalent. Even in terms of character, fish was higher than us. Although fish pulled the old man down and injured him, but the old man was never discouraged, because although fish was his enemy, but at the same time it was his bosom friend. At the same time the old man felt the big fish's huge power and noble character when striving for survival. In his eyes, the big marlin was bigger, better-looking, calmer and more noble than anything else. When he made every effort to insert the fish fork deeply into the fish waist, for the fish, the fork was fatal, but when the big fish died, "it struggled vigorously before death—," It jumped from the water into the air, and showed its length, width, power and beauty. It seemed to be suspended in the air over the head of the old man in the boat. And then it fell into the water, and splashed the waves all over the old man and the boat." The struggle before death accumulated all the life potential, gathered all the survival desire and the dignity of life, and burst out gorgeous color. This inspired life had the breathtaking beauty even if it was destroyed. Although it died, the big marlin did not fail. It left gracefully in the fight with the old man. It did not give up its dignity or resistance. It had been responsible for its harmonious ecological environment. It made the old man go through all sorts of hardships, and get injured all over his body, tired and frustrated, but finally he got nothing. The big marlin lost life and won the respect. The old man Santiago paid a heavy price to kill the big marlin, but he could not gain it. It can be seen that the old man Santiago and the big marlin practiced the words in the book. "A man can be destroyed, but not defeated."

3. Man vs. Nature

What is the relationship between *The Old Man and the Sea*? When he was tired, the old man considered bed as his friend. But the sea and the boat were the bed on which he gained strength. The old man loved the sea, and he considered the sea as a woman, a lovely little woman who could even act coquettishly. If she did something reckless or naughty, that was because she could help it. He would not blame her. He appreciated the beauty of the nature. At the same time, he forgave the cruel sea. In the old man's heart, human was not in the center of the nature. He made every effort to maintain a close and harmonious relationship with nature through the image of woman. In his mind, creatures in the ocean were all his friends. He loved flying fish, and he was sad for little sea swallow; he liked sea turtles and appreciated their graceful movements. After people killed the sea turtle, its heart would beat for hours. He thought: "I have such a heart too and my feet and hands are like theirs!" A pair of little dolphins swam to the boat and sprayed water. He said: "They are our brothers." He even considered stars as friends. Obviously, the old man's existence and behavior were integrated with nature. The shadow of human had been melt in the natural ecosystem. In this world, insignificant human, strong fish and wide sea were integrated together [4]. Everything was in the wonderful harmony. The sea was quiet. "The surface of the ocean was flat except for the occasional swirls of the current." When the sun rose, "the water was dark blue now, so dark that it was almost purple"; when the hot sun was high up in the sky, "the sea was very dark and the light made prisms in the water"; at night "there was light on the water surface". "Fish, boat and person floated slowly on the quiet water." This is the ecological overall view returning to nature. The old man sought for himself and the nature as a whole—the harmony and stability of the sea and every other part (flying fish, small sea swallow, sea turtle, little dolphin, stars, etc.), and the close relationship of living and dying together. On the other hand, in *The Old Man and the Sea* Hemingway also showed that people wanted to overcome the nature to realize self-fulfillment. Catching the big marlin and overcoming the ferocious shark is not only the old man Santiago's way to establish his own value and prove his ability, but also the whole village's evaluation standard of fishermen's value. In the life-and-death struggle between people and fish, the old man was proud. He considered the solemn and stirring battle with nature as the necessary and essential thing to maintain human dignity. As described in the work, the old man killed the fish "for the sake of pride" to let people and himself believe that "you're good for ever", and let nature know "what a man can do and what a man endures". He said to himself: "I must conquer it... thank God, they are not as intelligent as we who kill them." The old fish considered the big fish as his

opponent. He admitted: "Perhaps I was only better armed." Indeed, our temporarily victory gained is closely linked to the weapons created by science and technology. Science and technology has become a double-edged sword of human to conquer nature. This weapon not only induces human to the temporary victory, but also stimulates human's dream of going beyond the natural limits and ignoring the natural law, but in the end it still points to the failure and a wrong way.

Ecocriticism researchers doubt such way of self-realization of human. They do not agree to prove the greatness of human by conquering nature. They believe that human cannot ultimately overcome nature, no matter how much victory he has obtained and how many times he proves his power by conquering nature. Eventually he will receive the nature's harsh and even destructive punishment. However, the old man Santiago thought: "A man can be destroyed but not defeated." Under the background of human society, this widely quoted sentence may reflect the tragic hero spirit, but in terms of the relationship between mankind and nature, its absurdity is fully revealed. If people have been destroyed, what is the significance of being not defeated?

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway created Santiago, an old man, destroying the marine ecological environment and constantly regretting doing it, on the basis of real people and event. The old man said again and again: "I shouldn't have gone out so far, fish. Neither for you nor for me. I'm sorry, fish." It is the real reveal of Hemingway's opinion. We have to remember that nature can be trampled, but not conquered. Nature gives birth to us human, and it is bound to have some sort of rules to constraint us. Any behavior destroying the whole harmonious ecological environment will be punished by the nature.

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