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HEMINGWAY'S *THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA* : AN EXISTENTIAL APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to approach the novella *The Old Man and the Sea* with the view of existentialism which emerged at the time when Hemingway began to create this novella. Hemingway emphasizes the uniqueness of individuality, freedom of choice and outcome of ones action in *The Old Man and the Sea* and all these are the essence of Existentialism. During the time Hemingway prepared for *The Old Man and the Sea*, he was confronted with two factors which might have effects on his writings. One factor was that Hemingway created the story at the peak time of existentialism and the other was that he personally underwent the falling period of his life when he began to probe into the meaning in mans existence; the result of both was that the story was to some extent colored with the views of existentialism. Human life is portrayed as a struggle against the unconquerable forces of the world and it is a struggle where man is doomed to lose. But the situation has its own silver lining: man may choose to lose in such a dignified way that his defeat itself is metamorphosed into a victory. In this novel Santiago turns his defeat into victory. Hemingway portrays both the protagonist of this novella Santiago and his apprentice Manolin as individuals who prefer existence to essence. Existentialism vehemently stresses on existence rather than essence apart from this, it also stresses on individualism and all these are seen in this novel.

Keywords: Existentialism, Individuality, Absurdity, Epoch-making

Introduction

Hemingway gave a wonderful collection of literature to the world but his magnum opus, *The Old Man and the Sea* won him the stature most befitted to him. "It was published in 1952 and it was the last major work of fiction by Hemingway that was published during his life time" (The Editors, 1952). *The Old Man and the Sea* attracted attention from all quarters of the world and it has been greatly eulogized as Hemingway is discovered as an existentialist from this novel. "In his own word, Hemingway intended to write a trilogy concerned on sea, wind and earth. Nevertheless he was probably

persuaded by his friends to publish his first finished sea part (mentioned also as a Sea Book) and the story was published under the title *The Old Man and the Sea*" (Hotchner,1966). Existentialism posits that existence is inherently meaningless; individuals are responsible for giving meaning to their own lives by overcoming feelings of angst and despair. The glaring example of Hemingways existentialist philosophy is his novel *The Old Man and the Sea*. This novel probes many themes relevant to his particular brand of existentialist philosophy. Existentialism can be considered as an exquisite attempt to work out of the implications of

individualism. The existentialist notions of freedom and value emerge from the view of the individuals. Sartres existentialism explains “existence is self-making-in-a-situation” which outlines that ones identity is not shaped by culture or by nature, but to “exist” is exactly what forms such an identity” (Sartre,1984). Since we are all ultimately alone, like isolated islands of subjectivity in an objective world, we have absolute freedom over our internal nature, and the source of our value can only be internal. Santiagos vanity in the novel *The Old Man and the Sea* is what makes him enables to endure, and it is probably endurance that matters most in Hemingways conception of the world- a world in which death and destruction are unavoidable. But through Santiagos beating of his inner struggles, he is able to decide his views and values to construct his future; which enables him to achieve his most true and complete self. The theory of existentialism is expanded in the novel through the basis of the mood, the characters inner and physical struggles, and through the inner spirit of the characters.

Research Methodology

In this research paper the researchers use *The Old Man and the Sea* as the object of the research. The researchers apply qualitative research to collect data until the researchers reaches a point of data saturation. The data sources are split into two, namely primary data and secondary data source. The source of primary data is *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway. The secondary data are collected from other sources which are related to the primary data such as articles, website, journal, and some books which deal with the research. The technique of data collection of the researcher used in this paper is library research by collecting and selecting both of primary and secondary data sources compatible with the issue of this paper.

Literature Review

This portion reviews the literature related to the research topic. According to Philip Melling (2006), “the existential struggle of Santiago greatly influences his apprentice Manolin. Though physically wounded but psychologically undefeated, Santiago at last defeats the Marlin and he remains in a sustaining position”. He remains undefeated even in

his failure with the Sharks. “What makes him an existential hero is his determination, endurance and capacity for intense suffering” (R.N. Sign, 1999). Clinton J. Burhans (1960) pointed out “Hemingways concern for the relationship of the individualism and interdependence”. Individualism is the key factor of existential theory.

Existentialism

“Existentialism is the work connected mainly with certain late-19th- and 20th-century European philosophers who, despite profound doctrinal differences, shared the belief that philosophical thinking begins with human subject” (John Macquarrie,1972). “The predominant value of existentialist thought is commonly acknowledged to be free; its primary virtue is authenticity” (Flynn Thomas, 2006). “Many existentialists have also regarded traditional, systematic or academic philosophies, in both style and content, as too abstract and remote from concrete human experience” (Ernst Breisach, 1962). “Soren Kierkegaard is generally regarded to have been the first existentialist philosopher, though he did not use the term existentialism. He proposed that each individual—not society or religion—is solely responsible for giving meaning to life and living it passionately and sincerely, or authentically” (Walter Lowrie, 1969). Soren said, “The thing is to understand oneself, to see what God really wishes one to do. The thing is to find a truth which is true for me.” It is important to notice the emphasis there on his feelings about what is right and what is wrong, not necessarily what God thinks about the matter. That statement is the basis for Ernest Hemingways statement good is what you feel good after doing and bad is what you feel bad after doing. (Stanford Encyclopedia of philosophy) <http://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stanford>.

“Existentialism became popular in the years following World War II, and strongly influenced many disciplines besides philosophy, including theology, drama, art, literature, and psychology” (Guignon and Pereboom, Derk, Charles B. 2001). The Novella *The Old Man and the Sea* was written in time of significant political changes in Cuba. Just for the atmosphere of the 1950s, it is added that the post war Europe lived under the thread of a cold

war. The United States led its policy to form the United Nation and got involved into the Korean War. These changes were essential for lives of many people and there is no doubt that literature stayed at the end of general interest. Naturally new genres and writings appeared reacting to the situation. Literature mostly followed the socio-economic topics. The range of motives varied although most of the first post-war writings expressed the war experience. The feeling of war, depression and vainness of life appeared in existential works or absurd drama, novel, etc. As a branch of philosophy, existentialism focuses on human existence though its meaning varies from philosopher to philosopher. Whatever the variation, an existentialist generally assumes that existence precedes essence and the significant fact is that things have no meaning (essence) of their own as we through acting upon them can create meaning. Jean-Paul Sartre claims that the fundamental truth of existentialism is in Descartes formula, "I think; therefore, I exist" (Descartes, 1637). It is the key concern of Hemingway as the personal commitment is manifested through his characters Santiago and Manolin. It attempts to codify the irrational aspect of mans nature to objectify non-being or nothingness and see it as a universal source of fear, to distrust concepts and to emphasize experiential concreteness. The existentialists point of departure is the immediate sense of awareness that man has of his situation. A part of this awareness is the sense that man has of meaninglessness in the outer world; this meaninglessness produces in him discomfort, anxiety, loneliness in the face of mans limitations and a desire to invest experience with meaning by acting upon the world, although efforts to act in a meaningless, "absurd" world lead to anguish, greater loneliness and despair. Man is completely free but he is also wholly answerable for what he makes of himself. This freedom and responsibility are the sources for his most intense anxiety. An existential viewpoint takes into account a holistic person (Hacker, 1994). Existentialism basically urges us to live our lives to the fullest, according to our own individual understanding. The message of existentialism unlike many more obscure and academic philosophical movement, is about as

simple as it can be. It is that every one of us, as an individual, is responsible for what we do, responsible for who we are, responsible for the way we face and deal with the world. It is, in a very short phrase, "the philosophy of no excuse!" (Solomon, 2000). We see in the novel that Santiago and Manolin lead their lives on their own sweet will.

Towards Approaching *The Old Man and the Sea*

The storyline of *The Old Man and the Sea* well approaches the dynamics of existentialism as it tells a story of Santiago, an aging fisherman who struggles with a giant Marlin far out in the Gulf Stream. In this story Hemingway uses external conflict between Santiago and the fishermen, the fish and the struggles at Sea to enforce the idea of Existentialism. This struggle gives both a literal and metaphorical perception since it signifies conflict in its core. Such a philosophical attitude can result in nihilism and hopelessness as it has with many of the literary existentialists. Santiago, the old man, had troubles catching fish. He was an old man who fished isolatedly in a skiff in the Gulf Stream. He had gone eighty-four days without taking a fish. He was expected to be able to catch fish although he could not. Day after day he kept fishing but he failed. The other fisherman teased him constantly and Santiago did not care. He made the choice not to care or listen to what other people said. Wolfgang Wittkowski (1951) comments that Santiago attains an alikeness to Jesus when he calls the fish brother. Santiago is endowed with Christian virtue:

He was too simple to wonder when he had attained humility. But he knows he had attained and he knew it was not disgraceful and it carried no loss of true pride (Hemingway, 1970).

Santiago's demonstration of actions, his freedom of choice especially when he ventured far out into the sea brings a uniformity of his own. He knew that people did not fish far out as it could be dangerous. His actions of fishing far out caused him to starve in the sea. He was hacked by Sharks and injured. He chose to fish, to stay and to endure. He had opportunities to walk away but he did not. His choice of catching a giant fish the Marlin caused to a dreading confrontation which causes physical and mental sufferings to Santiago. The deep sea is

always full of whims and fear and it may be life threatening but Santiago did not fear to go there like others. The outcome of Santiagos actions made him a role model for his apprentice fisherman Manolin. Generally people yield to nature because they think that man cannot conquer nature but Santiago does not yield to nature and this spirit of Santiago makes him different from others. Both Santiago and Manolin went through the experiences of an outward, literal conflict with a group of other fishermen and the inner conflict of their own selves. The outer conflict with the other fishermen might be an outcome of jealousy. On the other hand, the inner conflict embodying the requirements of perception makes ones fit for fighting against any situations, favorable or unfavorable. Santiago well enough could attain that very insight in finding a perception of self dignity and self meaning without yielding to the hostile nature or to the uncomprehending inner world. The external conflicts with the fisherman and battle at Sea made Santiago a hero in Manolins eyes. Out of negative situations, the old man was able to function positively. Santiago still had charisma and hope. He did not allow negative ideas to drag him down. Santiagos attitude and decisions towards life is inspirational to Manolin. The old mens approach to obstacles gave Manolin the ability to make his own decisions and become an individualist. Manolin utters –

“But there is only one you”

(Hemingway, 1970).

Existentialists find the beauty in themselves and make their own decision. They do not follow society. Existentialists see the uniqueness in individualism, have the freedom of choice and take responsibility for their actions. Santiago has his own values. He lived differently, made his own decisions.

Existence before Essence

Everyone has existence and the existence is the way of his goal, the goal is what he wants to become. People have freedom to define themselves as what they want. “By saying that existence precedes essence, existentialist Sartre means that man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world and defines himself afterward” (Sartre, 1984). It is in the course of ones existence that man

chooses and defines himself as he wills. As far as mans existence and essence concerned, the term “Being-in-itself” and “Being-for-itself” are the key issues which must be referred to Sartre gave “existence” another synonym “Being” in his classic philosophical work “Being and Nothingness” (Sartre,1984). Being includes both Being-in-itself and “Being for itself” but the later is the subject of the former. As far as the man is concerned, Being-in-itself refers to the aspects of man who is what he is, including his face, his body, his skin, his ability, his capacity and all the things contained in him with actual objectiveness. Being-for-itself is the one appearing in our mind or consciousness, which does not exist now, the one we want to be in future. In general, Being-in-itself is what we are and Being-for-itself is what we hope to be. Existing, in this continuous process, man grows and defines himself. Instead of simply being, as the object in-itself does, man, as an object-for-itself, actuate the intimate interaction with himself through the transcendence between being-in-itself and being-for-itself. Existence is not only the lashing transcendence between the in-itself and for-itself but also “Self-making in a situation” (Sartre, 1984). The fundamental contribution of existential thought lies in the idea that ones identity is constituted neither by nature nor by culture. Man is nothing else but what makes himself out of his existence with freedom. It is freedom that is the foundation of all essence as only a man with freedom could exist with choice and make his own possibilities. Each one in this world exists in order to make and find his or her essence and in this story both Santiago and Manolin want to continue their lives with full freedom.

It seems at the beginning of the story that the old man was abandoned by Gods blessing. The other fisherman considered him a “Salao” (The worst form of misfortune). They even stopped his friend, the boy Manolin from helping him. All of these were the situations of the old mans in-itself: without any fish, any fortune, any help whereas in his for itself he still clings to his dream to catch fish in future. It is believed that dream is the reflections of ones thought. According to Freud, dream is the embodiment of ones sub-consciousness. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, the old man dreamed about lions.

When the old man felt lonely and needed some encouragement, he would hope to have lions come to his dream. The frequent appearance of the lions in the old mans dreams illuminated that the old man had the will to live as the lions did and the lion could be thought of as a symbol of the old mans spirit. With the firmed spirit and his hard working he got back the respect from his villagers. Santiago is the Superman. He has seen all, felt all and lived through all to champion the dynamic phenomenon of humanity. He is not Tom, Dick, and Harry to fool around idle fancies to amuse himself. He entertains a passion, chases his goals, fights for its possession, and fights for its preservation. He is disappointed but not disheartened and it is what proves the victory of the tireless, undying and indomitable human spirit over all the odds of life. By his big catch, he proved to everyone that he was a true fisherman. Hemingways heroic act under strange pressure finally reaches a state of tranquility which is also called Santa Rasa (Fernado, 2003), according to classical Indian scholars. Hemingway prepares his heroes for ruthless pains and sufferings but never to give up on life. In "A Farewell To Arms" Frederic Henry not only bids farewell to the arms of warfare, but also to the arms of his beloved Catherine, thereby reaching a state of equanimity. In "For Whom The Bell Tolls" Roberto convinces Maria to take care of herself and his unborn child and enters a state of absolute peace. Similarly, in *The Old Man and the Sea* the old man after losing his big catch to the sharks, returns to his shack and rests in quietude dreaming again of the lions in the eastern coast of Africa. All this significantly suggests the working of the Santa Rasa which is tranquil and sweeping victory against all the odds of life. This Rasa which is a combination of *vibhava* (cause), *anubhava* (result), and *vyabhicarin* (transient feelings) that makes the *sthayi* (mood in potency) helps to comprehend and explicate the unique dimensions of literature.

Angst and Dread

"Existential angst", sometimes called existential dread or anxiety, or anguish, is a term that is common to many existentialist thinkers. It is normally held to be act of feeling arising from the experience of human freedom and responsibility. The archetypical example is the experience one has

when standing on a cliff where one not only fears falling off it, but also dreads the possibility of throwing oneself off. In this experience that "nothing is holding me back", one senses the lack of anything that predetermines one to either throw oneself off or to stand still, and one experiences one's own freedom. The same thing happens in the life of Santiago. When he meets disaster he gains moral victory by his courage and resolution. The old man may be physically broken but psychologically undefeated. The Christian symbolism which Hemingway uses is very subtle and suggestive. Santiagos injured palm which draws blood, the expression of anguish when sees the sharks and his stumbling under the weight of the mast as he climbs the hill to reach his home symbolize the quality of Zesus Christ. "Santiago has been regarded as a Christ figure for his suffering and endurance. He shows certain qualities of mind and heart which are closely associated with the character and personality of Jesus Christ" (Carlos Baker, 1956).

At the time of Santiagos sufferings, he feels his junior friend Manolin. Friend is the one with whom one shares his interests feelings and faiths. The old man chose the boy, who was so different from him in their ages and experiences. The old man taught him how to fish, talked with him and trusted him. So when the boy departed, the old man fell into a deep sorrow of missing. He talked to himself many times that he needed the boy by his side when he was fighting alone with the Marlin on the Sea. Here his loneliness reminds us the loneliness of the old mariner in The Rime of the Ancient Mariner —

"Alone, alone, All alone, alone

on a wide, wide Sea

And never a saint took pity on my soul in agony" (Coleridge, 1834).

The old man in the interaction with himself and in the transcendence between For-itself and In-itself made him what he was and actuated his being through the choices he made on himself and on his friend, including the choice of being a fisherman, inclining to the dreams of lions and making friendship with Manolin.

According to existentialist Sartre (1984), "ones Being-for-itself or ones consciousness about oneself is free. Each individual is free to make

choices to build him the one he or she wants to be". Apart from the limitation on him, the boy Manolin still makes the choice in accordance with his consciousness to be the one he wanted to be. Thus it was seen in the story that he chose the old man as his friend though his parents opposed. Since the old man did not get a fish for forty days the boys parents ordered him to work in another boat. The boy decided to follow his parents order not to fish with the old man through which he made himself a filial son. Although he could not go with the old man for fishing, he tried to the utmost to help Santiago, which made him a faithful friend. His concern on the old man unveiled from his words.

"I would like to go. If I cannot fish with you, I would like to serve in some way"
(Hemingway, 1970).

Knowing the old man had no food for supper, the boy provided food for him. Through his choices the boy recognized his identities as a son and as a friend.

Absurdity

Among the most famous ideas associated with existentialism is that of 'absurdity'. Human existence might be described as 'absurd' in one of the following senses. First, many existentialists argued that nature as a whole has no design, no reason for existing. Although the natural world can apparently be understood by physical science or metaphysics, this might be better thought of as 'description' than either understanding or explanation. Thus, the achievements of the natural sciences have also empty nature of value and meaning. The concept of the absurd holds the idea that there is no meaning in the world beyond what meaning we give it. This meaninglessness also encloses the unfairness of the world. This contrasts with the notion that "bad things don't happen to good people"; to the world, metaphorically speaking, there is no such thing as a good person or a bad person; and it may just as well happens to a "good" person as to a "bad" person. Because of the world's absurdity, at any point in time, anything can happen to anyone, and a tragic event could plummet someone into direct confrontation with the absurd. Ernest Hemingway in this novel through the creation of Santiago uses absurdity.

Hope is a Christian virtue, which Santiago tries to follow in all earnest. He utters,

"Fish I will stay with you until I am dead"
(Hemingway, 1970).

The absurd hero finds solace in feeding his stubborn optimism. It is silly not to hope. Besides, pessimism is a sin. Santiago here refers not to hope as a sin which ironically establishes it as an existential virtue. But as Camus reflects, in this transgression, the absurd hero retraces his steps and clarifies and fortifies his position (Eddins, 2001).

Manhood

Hemingway's ideal of manhood is nearly inseparable from the ideal of heroism discussed above. To be a man is to behave with honor and dignity: not to succumb to suffering, to accept one's duty without complaint and, most importantly, to display a maximum of self-control. The representation of femininity, the sea, is characterized by its caprice and lack of self-control; "if she did wild or wicked things it was because she could not help them". The representation of masculinity, the marlin, is described as "great," "beautiful," "calm," and "noble," and Santiago steels himself against his pain by telling himself to "suffer like a man or a fish," referring to the marlin. In Hemingway's ethical universe, Santiago shows us not only how to live life heroically but in a way befitting a man.

Existential Struggle

Some people will go far in order to get what they want, but how many individuals would be willing to die for the sake of creating their own fate? Deciding ones meaning of life with sincerity and passion is the core of existentialism. This philosophy plays an integral part in Hemingways writing, as well as his personal life. Paradigms of existentialism appear often in Hemingways book, *The Old Man and the Sea*, especially when Santiago, the old man, is determined to fell the great marlin he pursues, wants to prove to Manolin how much of a strange old man he is, and contends against the brutal sharks when there is little chance of his succeeding.

The Old Man and the Sea focuses its plot mainly on Santiagos struggle against the marlin. Existentialism makes its appearance when Santiago chooses to pursue the marlin, stay with it the entire

way, and fight tooth and nail at the end. "My choice was to go there to find him beyond all people," is how Santiago explains his actions to challenge the fish (Hemingway, 1970). He mentions how he was born to be a fisherman, and by chasing the marlin, he will give his life the meaning for existence. Santiago also insists on staying with the fish until one of them is dead, which exemplifies his will to fulfill his goals in life. He undergoes hurdles such as nausea, cramps, and sleep deprivation because he does not want to give up and surrender his fate. During the final struggle, Santiago pits all of the pain, strength, and pride he has left against the fish in order to bring it down. Despair begins to creep in when Santiago finds it hard to pull in the marlin, but he overcomes it with every ounce of will he has. He knows that it is up to him to create this important moment in his life. He never loses heart. For example, losing the harpoon he feels that "there is nothing to be done now". But instantly he sees a way:

"Yes there is," he said aloud. " I can lash my knife to the butt of one of the oars." So he did that with the tiller under his arm and the sheet of the sail under his foot. "Now", he said. I am still an old man. But I am not unarmed" (Hemingway, 1970).

Conclusion

As Santiago decides to move further than all the other boats 'beyond all people in the world', this novella goes beyond being either Cuban or American, becoming an universal allegory for man's willpower and the spirit of endurance. The 20th century USA, with its increasingly urban and suburban lifestyle, may have seemed excessively 'safe' to Hemingway, not offering enough scope for heroic individual acts. He acknowledged the fact that Santiago's universal parable of stamina and virility needed to be free from the intervention of civilization and therefore isolated Santiago in an existentialist setting when he makes the decision to go far out. He emphasizes the uniqueness of the individual experience in a hostile or indifferent universe and stresses freedom of choice and responsibility for the consequences of one's acts - something Santiago is forced to undertake as he exercises his will against the fish, thus validating his

existence. After the birth of an individual, he has to fight with his surroundings to keep his existence in this earth. *The Old Man and the Sea* is the best examples of this reality. Though Santiago fails to catch fish, he does not lose his hope and wants to continue his trial for catching fish in the Sea. He does not want to leave this profession and he wants to continue his life in his own way. Even his apprentice Manolin continues to help Santiago though Manolin's parents forbid him to help him. Santiago actualized his being and his interaction with himself through each of his choices and acts. His determination on his career, his personality, his dreams and this choice on his friend make him an individual. All these prove that Existentialism is in the heart of the novel *The Old Man and the Sea*.

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