

Understanding Superego, Sublimation and the Use of Moral-Philosophical Approach: An Analysis of *The Old Man and the Sea*

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Abstract

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is regarded as one of the most significant novels in World Literature. The novelist projects an aged man, Santiago, a Cuban fisherman as the protagonist who fails to catch any fish for eighty-four days. For the first forty days, Santiago had his apprentice, Manolin with him to accompany, but after consistent failures, the boy is withdrawn by his parents. Thereafter, the old man continues his fishing mission alone. As he hooks a marlin fish at the noon of the eighty-fifth day in the Gulf Stream, remains unable to control and lash the fish to his boat until the third day. As the marlin bleeds, sharks chase, attack and eat the meat of the marlin fish. When Santiago reaches home before daybreak, it is a mere skeleton from head to tail that remains with him. The journey of Santiago presents the endless struggle of the outer as well as the inside world of an individual. This research paper analyses how the old man, Santiago epitomizes the Freudian Superego and how his character becomes more sublime in adverse circumstances. Besides this, this paper applies the Moral-Philosophical Approach to understand *The Old Man and the Sea*, thus, universalizing the values the old man, Santiago stands for.

Keywords: Superego, sublimation, Santiago, Moral-Philosophical Approach

Sigmund Freud divides the human mind of the psyche into three parts i.e. the ego, the superego and the id. The ego is the conscious mind. We use and work with this mind. We are aware of this mind in the present most of the time. It is the conscious mind that mediates between the unconscious id and superego to make decisions and rational thoughts. The Superego

can be called our conscience. It represents socio-cultural values, ethics and morality. It influences the way the conscious works. The id is Sigmund Freud's favourite territory. The id is the area of instincts, dreams, and desires, and all that does not come to the fore in our consciousness, is unconscious. (Nayar 65) A significant term emphasized by Freud is 'sublimation', where the repressed material is promoted into something grander or disguised as something noble (Bary 93). The artist person, for example, possesses an especially high degree of power to sublimate for example to shift the instinctual drives from their original sexual goals to nonsexual 'higher' goals, including the goal of becoming proficient as an artist. In simple words, an individual possesses the ability to shift socially unaccepted content into socio-cultural willful acceptance. It is an ability to elaborate fantasied wish fulfilments into the manifest features of a work of art in a way that conceals or deletes their personal elements. This makes them capable of satisfying the unconscious desires that other people share with the individual artist. Sublimation not only allows the artist to overcome personal conflicts and repressions but makes it possible for the artist's audience to obtain solace and consolation from their unconscious sources of gratification which had become inaccessible to them. (Abrams 321)

The moral-philosophical approach is as old as classical Greek and Roman critics for example Plato emphasized moralism and utilitarianism whereas Horace stressed that literature should be delightful and instructive. The most popular exemplars are the commentators of the age of Neoclassicism (1660-1800) in English literature, especially Samuel Johnson. The basic position of such critics is that the larger function of literature is to teach morality and to prove philosophical issues. They would interpret literature within the context of the philosophical thought of a period or group. From their point of view, Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus can be read profitably only if one understands existentialism. Likewise, Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man* may be grasped only if one understands the meaning and the role of reason in eighteenth-century thought. In the larger sense, all great literature teaches. The Critic who employs the moral-philosophical approach insists on ascertaining and stating what is taught. If the work is in any degree significant or intelligible, the meaning will be there. For example Robert Frost's "Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening" suggests that duty and responsibility take precedence over beauty and pleasure. The Victorian critic Matthew Arnold insists that a great literary work

must possess “high seriousness”. The important thing is the moral or philosophical teaching. But it does not mean that the critics working from a moral bent are not unaware of form, figurative language and other purely aesthetic considerations rather they treat them to be secondary while their primary intent is the moral or teaching of a literary work. (Guerin 78-79)

Ernest Hemingway’s *The Old Man and the Sea* presents the struggle of the aged protagonist, Santiago in the sea at fishing, his bonding with his apprentice boy, Manolin, the attitude of the fishing community towards the old man, Santiago’s sense of dutifulness, his love for nature, birds, fish, and baseball, his guidance to Manolin, his exemplary patience for work while putting persistent efforts despite deprivations and old age. The novelist thus, immortalizes Santiago for certain values he stands for.

The novelist projects the Freudian superego through the character of Santiago. Santiago stands for morality, ethics and human values throughout his life and never steps back from adhering to these codes of conduct in adverse circumstances. In the first place, Santiago proves himself as a selfless and true guide to Manolin, the boy he has trained in fishing. Here is an extract of their conversation:

‘Santiago,’ the boy said to him as they climbed the bank from where the skiff was hauled up, ‘I could go with you again. We have made some money.’

The old man had taught the boy to fish and the boy loved him.

‘No,’ the old man said. ‘You’re with a lucky boat. Stay with them.’

‘But remember you went eighty-seven days without fish and then we caught big ones every day for three weeks.’

‘I remember,’ the old man said, ‘I know you didn’t leave because you doubted.’

‘It was Papa who made me leave. I am a boy and I must obey him.’

‘I know,’ the old man said. ‘It is quite normal.’

‘He hasn’t much faith.’

‘No,’ the old man said. ‘But we have. Haven’t we?’

‘Yes,’ the boy said.’ (4)

Though Santiago’s larger interest could have easily been realized by allowing Manolin with him on the fishing mission, he does not permit him. He never wishes the boy to disobey his father, therefore, he counsels him and guides Manolin selflessly. The bond between them can be seen from the fact that the boy keeps on visiting Santiago after his return from the adventurous day of trial in the sea. Secondly, self-esteem is the only thing that matters most for the old man, Santiago. Neither he begs in his starving poor conditions nor does he disrespect whatever is offered to him by anyone. He lives in a shack made of the tough bud shields of the royal palm and in the shack he has one bed, one table, one chair and a place on the dirt floor to cook with charcoal, besides these, he has two photographs hung on the leaves wall one of Jesus and the other is of the Virgin of Cobre. (8) He spends his life in extremely poor conditions but never expects anything from anyone. The novelist writes, “His shirt had been patched so many times that it was like the sail and the patches were faded to many different shades by the sun” (11). When the boy, Manolin asks Santiago in the evening of his eighty-fourth-day adventure, Santiago tells him that he has a pot of yellow rice with fish for dinner, but when he comes later to see Santiago he has fallen asleep. Manolin is aware that Santiago is just pretending will sleep without eating anything as has nothing, and brings dinner for him from Terrace, a restaurant whose owner had sent Santiago. Knowing this, he tells the boy to thank the owner, and says, “I will give him the belly meat of a big fish,’ the old man said. ‘Has he done this for us more than once?’ ‘I think so.’ ‘I must give him something more than the belly meat then. He is very thoughtful for us” (12). This statement shows Santiago’s sense of gratitude for those who extend their helping hands towards him. Thirdly, Santiago is the epitome of love. He loves the sea, the sun, the birds, even the fish marlin he is hunting. Whatever Santiago does becomes the representation of values, ethics and the idealistic codes of the society.

The character of Santiago exhibits sublimation with his commitment to work. He moves on the path of sublimation as soon as he is termed as “*salao*, the worst form of unlucky” (3). The novel opens while describing Santiago's efforts:

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. In the first forty days, a boy had been with him. But after forty days without a fish, the boy's parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally *salao*... and the boy had gone at their orders in another boat which caught three good fish the first week. (3)

After that Santiago forgetting his age, health and starvation-like condition devotes his energies to fishing, makes special plans for the eighty-fifth day, and struggles for the next three days until he hooks a marlin fish, more struggle follows as he is alone and feels unable to lash the fish to the boat, but finally when he reaches his village. A crowd of fishermen gathers around the skiff to see what is lashed beside it. The fisherman, who was measuring the length of the skeleton, shouts aloud, "He was eighteen feet from nose to tail" (95). They are surprised at the struggle of the old man. His stature rises in their eyes as he never gave in even after consistent failures for eighty-four days.

Besides, the novelist expresses the old man, Santiago through dreams after crucial encounters and experiences of his life. Sigmund Freud has given utmost importance to dreams. He has described dreams as the royal road to the unconscious arguing that dreams best express the repressed desires in human beings. Whenever the conscious mind is not active or is shut down as during sleep, it is a dream that gives access to the unconscious mind. The wishes and desires that are not permitted to be actualized by the conscious mind under the influence of the superego are stored in the unconscious mind as the repressed material. As these repressed desires get instant gratification, there is only one way in this respect i.e. gratification through dreams. The other way is sublimation, but it may take a longer route comparatively. (Nayar 67) In his first dream, Santiago dreams of Africa, the long golden and white beaches as a boy. He dreams about the coasts, he explores every night now. In his second dream, Santiago undergoes a series

of dreams that begins with a vast school of porpoises that stretched for eight or ten miles as it was their mating time. Then:

He dreamed that he was in the village on his bed and there was a norther and he was very cold and his right arm was asleep because his head had rested on it instead of a pillow.

After that, he began to dream of the long yellow beach and he saw the first of the lions come down onto it in the early dark and then the other lions came and he rested his chin on the wood of the bows where the ship lay anchored with the evening off-shore breeze and he waited to see if there would be more lions and he was happy.

The third dream is the last sentence of the novel which reads "The old man was dreaming about the lions" (99). The first dream shows his clarity of vision and his readiness towards the mission. The second dream can be interpreted as the old man missing his youthful energy as he has become old and weak. In addition to this, he seems planning and well-indulged in his adventurous mission. The dreams of lions show Santiago's spirit of bravery. He seems to derive inspiration from them.

The novelist preaches some universal values like patience with persistent efforts, hope, optimism, strong determination despite old age and deprivation, feeling the dignity of labour, love for flora and fauna and the role of self-esteem while struggling in life through this novel. When Santiago hooks the fish but is unable to control him, he says, "Fish, I'll stay with you until I am dead" (38). Further, when the shark pounces and takes away about forty pounds of meat as Santiago observes. "But man is not made for defeat," he said. "A man can be destroyed but not defeated" (80). Santiago's love for the sea (54), the fish (67), the sun (22), the turtle (25), the bird (40) and love of nature can be seen in abundance.

One of the most important things emphasised by the novelist is the role of society in an individual's survival. Generally, a man is said to be a social animal. After being cursed by the fishermen's community as the unluckiest one, Santiago's ethics compel him to counsel Manolin, his apprentice to obey his parents and after forty days, Santiago is left alone on his mission of fishing. During the crucial junctures of his fishing mission, Santiago misses the boy seven times

throughout the novel. When the fish escapes Santiago's baits, Santiago misses the boy for the first time as he says aloud, "I wish I had the boy" (32). As he fishes alone, he uses his critical thinking skills with the help of his lifelong experience in the sea and finally catches the desired fish with persistent self-motivation whenever he feels disappointed or defeated. In simple words, the novelist has put more emphasis on the role of teamwork or companionship in achieving goals without difficulty whereas the same becomes the most difficult without any companion or teammate.

The above analysis shows that Santiago stands for morality, ethics, and the universal values in *The Old Man and the Sea*. He showcases love, hope, honesty, loyalty, self-esteem, patience, persistence of efforts, and courage. By possessing and exhibiting these attributes despite old age, weak health, and poor economic conditions, Santiago guides Manolin selflessly and while struggling alone in the battle of life, becomes a sublime character. His dreams express his nostalgia and what he desires. Besides this, the novel predominantly champions the never-dying spirit of an individual while chasing certain missions persistently with patience on the battlefield of life. Moreover, Santiago exhibits all the qualities suggested by Rudyard Kipling in his poem, 'If' to be a successful and happy person in this world, especially his extraordinary patience, consistent action and strong willpower (Kipling 17-18) which enable him to become an ageless character while leaving his footprints on the sands of time (Longfellow 4) as H.W. Longfellow says in his poem, 'A Psalm of Life'.

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