



The Triple Decline Narrative in *The Old Man and the Sea*

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Abstract

The Old Man and the Sea, as Hemingway's peak work, has been interpreted from the perspectives of heroism, symbolism or metaphorical interpretation, but Santiago's "oldness" has been rarely studied even neglected. Under the framework of Age Studies, this thesis focuses on the "decline narrative" in this novella to reveal the triple decline: Santiago's aging body, Hemingway's waning writing talent, and Spain's fading empire power. The intertwining decline narratives deconstruct the story of a "tough guy" presented on the surface of the short novel by Hemingway, exposing the facts of ageism, creation anxiety, and the iterative renewal of the empire.

Subject Areas

Literature, Age Studies

Keywords

The Old Man and the Sea, Ernest Hemingway, Age Studies, Decline Narrative, Mirror Stage of Old Age

1. Introduction

The Old Man and the Sea, a short novel written by Hemingway in 1952, tells the story of an old fisherman, Santiago, who sets out into the far sea alone on the eighty-fifth day after eighty-four consecutive days without catching a fish. After three days and two nights of struggle with a huge marlin, he finally catches it, but is attacked by a group of sharks on his way back, and only brings back the fish bones. Previous interpretations of this novella have mostly focused on heroic, existential, or ecological dimensions. However, as a timeless literary classic, its connotation is far more than that. Notably, many analyses seem to have overlooked a key element: Santiago's identity as an "old man". The title of the novella directly

points to “the old man”, yet few studies have delved deeply into Santiago’s aging state and its narrative significance. Among various literary theories, “age studies” has gradually come into view and become an important tool for analyzing texts. As the third edition of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* shows, age studies, together with gender studies, ethnic studies, disability studies, etc., constitute an important spectrum of biopolitical studies [1], which shows its value in literary studies.

Among the many issues in age studies, “decline narrative” is a core concept. American scholar Margaret Gullette points out in her book *Aged by Culture* that contemporary Western mainstream culture often constructs aging as “decline narrative” [2]. This narrative model simplifies the life process into a one-way trajectory of decline, solidifies stereotypes of different age stages, and implies that aging is inevitably accompanied by an inevitable decline in body and ability [3]. Gullette’s concept of “decline narrative” will be used to analyze Santiago’s physical deterioration, social marginalization, and psychological crisis, and to examine Hemingway’s creative anxiety and identity crisis; it also informs the reading of Spain’s imperial decline.

Another key concept is Kathleen Woodward’s “mirror stage of old age”, which she develops in *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* [4]. Drawing on Lacan’s mirror stage, Woodward argues that in a culture that worships youth and fears aging, the elderly are confronted with a terrifying mirror image of decline, illness, and death, and thus refuse to identify with it, experiencing a profound split between the inner self and the aged body. Woodward’s concept will be applied to analyze Santiago’s refusal to accept his aging and his dependence on the boy as a shield against the aged mirror, and again to frame Hemingway’s refusal to acknowledge his creative decline.

When Hemingway portrayed the elderly hero Santiago in *The Old Man and the Sea*, his brushstrokes touched upon this “decline narrative” logic, which pervades the culture. Through close reading of the text, analyzing the details of Santiago’s physical condition and his struggle with the fish, and delving into his background, as well as considering Hemingway’s own writing career, readers can clearly identify the triple “decline narrative” contained in this short novel.

2. Santiago’s Aging Body

Unlike the young or middle-aged protagonists in many literary works, Santiago is an old man approaching the end of his life. His aging is reflected in many parts of the novella. In shaping this figure, he both reinforces the negative features of old age and, beneath the surface, subverts the stereotypes attached to it [5].

2.1. The Reflection of Santiago’s Aging

Hemingway directly describes his physical aging at the beginning of the story. The old man is “thin and gaunt with deep wrinkles in the back of his neck”, his cheeks are covered with “brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer”, and “his hands

had the deep-creased scars". In summary, "Everything about him was old except his eyes" [6]. Santiago's aging body is a crucial factor contributing to his difficulties in the fishing trip, though other elements—such as his decision to sail too far from shore, sheer physical exhaustion, and the relentless shark attacks—also play significant roles. Nevertheless, Hemingway repeatedly emphasizes Santiago's age-related physical decline as a persistent underlying condition that amplifies all other difficulties. When the marlin takes the bait, Santiago, due to his aging and lack of strength, cannot subdue the fish as quickly as he did when he was younger. His cramped left hand is described "as stiff as rigor mortis", which he views as "a treachery of one's own body" [6]. In this prolonged "battle", the huge marlin drags Santiago's small boat, and "his left hand was still as tight as the gripped claws of an eagle" [6], forcing him to use his shoulder to bear the drag of the marlin, and even feeling dizzy due to physical exhaustion. Santiago's "life-and-death struggle" with the marlin exhausts his strength, and he can only maintain his strength by eating the fish raw. Although he eventually succeeds in killing the marlin, the fish's blood attracts sharks. After beating several waves of sharks, he is too exhausted to continue the "fight" and can only sadly admit, "I am too old to club sharks to death" [6]. In the end, all that Santiago brings back to shore is a skeleton of the marlin.

Santiago's aging is not only reflected in his appearance but also in the changes in his dreams. The novella mentions, "He no longer dreamed of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor of his wife. He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach. They played like young cats in the dusk" [6]. This change in his dreams fully reflects Santiago's aging. First, the cessation of dreaming of women or his wife implies the natural fading of his love and sexual desire, which accompanies old age. The loss of his wife is not only in life but also in his memory [7]. Taking down and covering her photo is not only to avoid the loneliness of seeing her photo but also reflects his subconscious alienation from the needs of "love" and "sex". Second, the disappearance of images such as storms, great occurrences, fights, and contests of strength from his dreams is a portrayal of his aging physique and energy. The only recurring image of the lions on the African coast, which "played like young cats in the dusk", is Santiago's deepest nostalgia for his lost youth. Lions symbolize primitive vitality and strength, in stark contrast to the old man who is suffering from aging. Santiago was probably in his early twenties when he was in Africa, in the prime of his life, both physically and mentally. Therefore, repeatedly dreaming of this time precisely reflects his deep response to the powerlessness of aging in the present and his infinite yearning for the past strength.

2.2. Santiago's "Mirror Stage of Old Age"

However, Santiago always stubbornly refuses to accept his own aging. This mentality is what Kathleen Woodward calls the "mirror stage of old age" in the book *Aging and Its Discontents: Freud and Other Fictions* [4]. Influenced by the prev-

alent “decline narrative” and “gerontophobia” in society, individuals often resist identifying with their old age. Drawing on Lacan’s concept of the “mirror stage”, Woodward points out that old age, like youth, is a socially constructed category. The image of the elderly constructed by Western culture is a terrifying one, which includes death. The elderly refuse to identify with it and thus become alienated from the image. It is precisely this stage that Santiago shows. His sensitivity to the early morning reveals his anxiety about the passage of time. “Age is my alarm clock”, “Why do old men wake so early?”, “Is it to have one longer day?” [6]. This self-questioning reveals the old man’s subconscious sense of urgency regarding the limits of life. He attempts to “prolong” the day by waking up earlier, which is actually a silent struggle against the relentless passage of time. When Manolin asks with concern, “But are you strong enough now for a truly big fish?”, the old man answers firmly, “I think so. And there are many tricks” [6]. Later, he reiterates, “I may not be as strong as I think”, “But I know many tricks and I have resolution” [6]. In front of the boy, he tries hard to hide and deny his aging and physical decline. However, when alone at sea, struggling with the marlin, he repeatedly thinks that if only Manolin were here, which reveals his true physical state and inner need. When he utters the famous line, “But man is not made for defeat”, “A man can be destroyed but not defeated” [6], it is more a reluctant admission of his aging than an encouragement to himself. It is a process of gradually recognizing reality and being forced to compromise, until facing the sharks, he has to sadly admit the limits of his body brought by age. Even so, he is full of contradictions. He asks himself, “And what beat you”, and then he firmly denies that aging is the main reason, says aloud “Nothing”, “I went out too far” [6]. Manolin’s youth is a mirror reflecting Santiago’s aging. The boy’s vitality reflects the old man’s twilight. Santiago’s love for Manolin is essentially a deep remembrance of his lost youth. In Santiago’s eyes, Manolin is like a younger version of himself.

Although Manolin is consistently referred to as “the boy” throughout the novella, Herlihy convincingly argues, based on Hemingway’s own typescript correction and the baseball reference to George Sisler, that Manolin is in fact twenty-two years old [8]. Hemingway’s deliberate choice to retain the term “boy” thus serves not to indicate Manolin’s actual youth, but to emphasize the relational dynamic between the aged Santiago and his younger companion. The boy’s youthful vigor makes the old man feel as if he has not aged. He directly admits that “The boy keeps me alive” [6], because Manolin’s presence is an important support for his life. The boy becomes a living shield against the “mirror of old age”. When Manolin praises Santiago as “the best fisherman” [6], the old man can temporarily escape the label of “decline” and gain a moment of comfort. However, as Woodward reveals in the “mirror stage of old age” dilemma, this escape is ultimately illusory. When Santiago looks at Manolin, he is actually desperately refusing to identify with the senile self defined by society as “other”. The brighter the youthful illusion represented by Manolin, the more deeply it reflects his own unavoidable twilight years.

3. Hemingway's Waning Writing Talent

In *The Coming of Age*, Simone de Beauvoir profoundly reveals the universal fear of human beings about aging, and even the great persons such as Voltaire, Yeats, Wagner, Flaubert and so on were not immune to the “gerascophobia” [9]. Ernest Hemingway, the literary giant known for his tough-guy spirit, was also trapped in this anxiety.

3.1. Hemingway's Writing Anxiety

The Old Man and the Sea ostensibly depicts the old man Santiago suffering from aging, but a deeper exploration reveals that it is a poignant portrayal of Hemingway's own struggle with the decline of his writing talent. In a letter to Bernard Berenson in 1952, Hemingway said, “Then there is the other secret. There isn't any symbolism (mis-spelled). The sea is the sea. The old man is an old man. The boy is a boy and the fish is a fish. The sharks are all sharks no better and no worse... What goes beyond is what you see beyond when you know” [10]. However, after winning the Pulitzer and Nobel Prizes, Hemingway reflected on the novella in a December 1954 interview with *Time* magazine, “I tried to make a real old man, a real boy, a real sea and a real fish and real sharks. But if I made them good and true enough, they would mean many things”. By “mean many things” he also meant to include himself.

When writing this short novel, Hemingway was fifty-two years old. Although he was not yet in his twilight years, he was already in a period of fading creative talent. After the great success of *For Whom the Bell Tolls* in 1940, he experienced a decade of silence and doubt. In 1950, *Across the River and into the Trees* provoked a sharp judgment of “exhaustion” in the critics. It was like Santiago in his short novel, who had not caught a single fish for eighty-four consecutive days, suffering the pity and ridicule of everyone. In the novella, Santiago, in order to prove himself and defend his dignity, insisted on sailing far out to sea, determined to catch a “thousand-pound fish”. This was a reflection of Hemingway's determination to write “the best novel”. On the eve of the novella's publication, Hemingway wrote to Charles Scribner, “This is the prose I have been striving for all my life [*The Old Man and the Sea*]... It is as good prose as I can write at present” [10]. The short novel is undoubtedly a success, just like Santiago's brief capture of the huge marlin. However, after the glorious peak of *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway's writing life was like a burnt-out star, never again able to shine with the same brilliance. *The Old Man and the Sea*, in respectful terms, describes it as Hemingway's “recovery” from the disaster of *Across the River and into the Trees*, but not a recovery for Hemingway. It is both the climax and the end of Hemingway's career as a published writer [11].

3.2. Hemingway's “Mirror Stage of Old Age”

Hemingway, like Santiago, was in the “mirror stage of old age”, refusing to identify. After *Across the River and Into the Trees* was criticized by scholars, Heming-

way defended that “Book is truly very good [*Across the River and Into the Trees*]... But I have read it 206 times... I loved it very much and it broke my fucking heart for the 206th time... But pan it, ride it, or kill it if you should or if you can” [10]. Hemingway was reluctant to admit that he had exhausted his talents and tried to prove himself again through writing, but he inadvertently conveyed this anxiety in his writing. The name “Santiago” appears only four times in the novella, and the dominant reference throughout the novella is the functional designation “the old man” [7]. It suggests that Santiago’s regression from a former “champion” to an anonymous existence is actually Hemingway’s profound projection of his own anxiety over the possible extinction of his identity as a great writer. The contradictory imagery of “the flag of permanent defeat” and the old man’s “undefeated” eyes is precisely Hemingway’s dialectical understanding of his own situation. In his Nobel Prize acceptance speech, Hemingway said that a true writer must dare to be “driven far out past where he can go, to where no one can help him”, and Santiago’s solitary monologue on the vast sea, “I went out too far” [6] is undoubtedly an outpouring of Hemingway’s inner thoughts. He desired to find a breakthrough but was defeated by reality. This isolation is also a harbinger of his self-destruction. Hemingway’s eventual suicide may be understood, as several critics have suggested, as an extreme response to the waning of his creative powers—though this interpretation remains speculative [11]. Hemingway’s son John said after his father’s death, “I keep thinking what a wonderful old man he would have made if he’d learned how. I don’t think he had faced up to becoming old” [11]. Hemingway was not prepared to face a self without creative vigor, and chose to end his life out of fear of “aging”.

4. Spain’s Fading Empire Power

Most of Hemingway’s novels are centered on war, and he himself believed that “war is the best subject of all” [10] for writing. Even *The Old Man and the Sea*, which ostensibly depicts fishing, is essentially a narrative of war.

4.1. Santiago’s Identity as a Spaniard

Hemingway’s carefully crafted protagonist Santiago is not Cuban, but an immigrant born in the Canary Islands of Spain. Hemingway employs the perspective of a Spaniard in Cuba to broaden the scope of the narrative [8]. As the author explains in a letter to Lillian Ross, “The Old Man was born a catholic in the island of Lanza Rota [sic] in the Canary Islands” [10]. The Canary Islands are located in the northwest of the African continent and are an autonomous region of Spain. Santiago’s “eyes the same color as the sea” symbolizes his European heritage and marks him as an ethnic “other” in a predominantly Afro-Cuban community. He came to Cuba precisely during the period when the Spanish Empire was implementing its colonial policy and encouraging Canarians to immigrate to Cuba to dilute the influence of the Afro-descendant population [8]. Hemingway’s choice of this identity is by no means accidental. Rather, it reflects the rise and fall of the

Spanish Empire through the personal ups and downs of this Spanish immigrant.

The rise of the Spanish Empire was extremely rapid. In the “famous” year of 1492, Christopher Columbus’s voyage on behalf of Spain discovered the Americas, marking the first significant step in the move towards an “imperial enterprise” [12]. Thereafter, through global exploration and colonial conquests, Spain quickly established a vast colonial network spanning the Americas, Asia, and Europe. With vast wealth of gold and silver plundered from the Americas and a powerful navy, Spain reached its peak in the middle of the 16th century, becoming the world’s first “empire on which the sun never sets”. Philip’s empire spanned such vast territories, surpassing all previous monarchs, that he could rightfully declare that “sunne always shineth upon me (Sol mihi semper lucet)” [12]. Until the 1650s, Spain was the most powerful state in the world and was one of the most powerful countries until the early 19th century. However, by the 19th century, the wave of Latin American independence movements caused the loss of most of Spain’s overseas territories. This process coincided with the end of Spain’s colonial rule over Cuba. Spain’s colonization of Cuba began with Columbus’s discovery of it on 27 October 1492 [12], which lasted for four hundred years.

4.2. The Spanish-American War

At the end of the 19th century, Cuba launched an independence movement to resist Spanish colonial rule. In 1898, the United States seized this opportunity to launch the Spanish-American War in order to seize Spanish colonies in the Americas and Asia, including Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. The results were Spain’s defeat by America and the 1898 Treaty of Paris, which allowed temporary American control of Cuba, and ceded indefinite colonial authority over Puerto Rico, Guam and the Philippine islands from Spain. For the Spanish, the failure was not just bad news, but a “disaster”, and exacerbated their pessimism, even questioning whether Spain and its institutions had the right to exist [13]. However, the United States gained several island possessions spanning the globe and a rancorous new debate over the wisdom of expansionism. Cuba gained “independence” in this war and was no longer colonized by Spain. Many Spaniards left for Spain or other places after that, so the number of Spaniards in Cuba decreased significantly. Only “40 percent of the half million Spaniards who came to Cuba in the first 20 years of the Republic remained there” [14]. However, the pain and resentment accumulated during the long colonial rule did not dissipate. The native Cuban society generally held a deep historical hostility towards Spanish remnants like Santiago, who still stayed there. This hostility was the social root of Santiago’s being ridiculed, alienated, and lonely in the community. The coast he repeatedly dreamed of was actually a symbol of his native Canary Islands, and the lion represented the former glory, strength, and imperial majesty of Spain.

4.3. The Invasion of American Culture

The exit from Spanish imperial hegemony did not bring real independence to

Cuba. Instead, it was replaced by a more covert but powerful wave of American imperialism, whose colonization was manifested as a cultural invasion. The United States systematically exported its values and lifestyle to Latin America through mass cultural media such as film, radio, and newspapers [15]. This method of cultural infiltration was implemented by the United States even before the outbreak of the Spanish-American War. With the help of the “yellow journals”, the United States successfully fanned the flames of anti-Spanish colonialism in Cuba, thus triggering the Spanish-American War [12]. In the decades following its victory over Spain, the United States continued to colonize Latin countries through cultural invasion. The film section also produced Spanish-language newsreels and films with a message. In 1939, the United States offered about twelve hours of programming a week to Latin America. By 1941, the United States was broadcasting around the clock, including numerous daily newscasts in Spanish and Portuguese [16]. Santiago’s obsession with baseball, especially with American baseball player Joe DiMaggio, is the most prominent manifestation of this cultural colonization. It shows that the glory of the Spanish Empire was ultimately undermined by the invasion of American culture. His familiarity with baseball news and terms, as well as his longing for a radio to seek spiritual solace, all indicate that his spiritual world has been profoundly shaped by American popular culture. American culture permeates his life, while the lion, a symbol of the Spanish Empire, only appears in his dreams, which undoubtedly contrasts with the decline of the Spanish Empire.

Therefore, Santiago’s identity transcends individual decline to suggest the fall of an empire. He can be read as a witness to the fading glory of Spain’s maritime past, a bearer of the confusion of cultural identity in post-colonial Cuba, and a figure whose devotion to baseball and American celebrities can be seen as a form of cultural conditioning—a subtle but pervasive influence that aligns him with American values rather than his Spanish heritage. His physical exhaustion, scars and economic poverty resonate metaphorically with the diminished status of Spain in the post-1898 Caribbean, though Hemingway does not explicitly equate the two. Santiago’s blue eyes not only reflect the waters of the Caribbean but also the after-image of the old Spanish Empire and the illusory light cast by the new American Empire, as well as the soul caught between the two, seeking a place to belong yet remaining adrift.

5. Conclusions

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway presents not only the unyielding spirit of an old “tough guy” in the face of adversity, but also the universal human sensitivity to age. This age-studies reading does not intend to dismiss the familiar heroic or existential interpretations of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Santiago’s determination, his stoic endurance, and his claim that “a man can be destroyed but not defeated” remain central to the novella’s appeal. However, an age-studies framework complements these readings by exposing the cultural assumptions that un-

derlie them: the heroic narrative is itself constructed against the backdrop of age-related decline. Hemingway's text does not simply celebrate the "tough guy" spirit; it also registers the anxieties—both personal and historical—that accompany aging. The triple decline reading thus enriches, rather than replaces, the existing critical tradition.

Under the framework of age studies, a deep analysis of the "decline narrative" in the novella reveals that Hemingway "means many things". Through the portrayal of Santiago's aging body and his resistance to the "mirror stage of old age", Hemingway shows how physical decline becomes the root cause of failure. At the same time, Hemingway also pours his anxiety after the failure of *Across the River and into the Trees* into Santiago, making the novella implicitly reflect his fear of the exhaustion of his own writing talent. By carefully designing Santiago's special identity as a Spanish immigrant, Hemingway extends Santiago's individual predicament to the context of Spanish colonial history, presenting the decline of an empire and exposing the cruel reality that the Spanish Empire was replaced by American neocolonialism after the Spanish-American War.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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