



Liminality and Ritual in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*

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Abstract

This paper examines Santiago's journey as a ritual in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) from a liminal perspective. Liminality is the intermediate state between two phases, where normal boundaries fade away and transformation or a new identity becomes possible. The unusual experience of the protagonist during the fishing trip reflects a ritual shared by the Cuban people. Santiago, the aging protagonist, embarks on an extraordinary fishing expedition in Cuba. He goes eighty-four days without catching a single fish. The crucifixion symbol transforms Santiago's journey into a ritual. As a widely recognized hero, his actions provide new insights for scholars. Therefore, this paper explores how Hemingway constructs his novella within a liminal space and how Santiago's journey functions as a ritual. The study uses the concepts of liminality, as developed by Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner, to interpret the story. Santiago's heightened perceptions are shown through his energetic performance. The old man's blue eyes and the blue hue of the sea draw the reader's attention. Hemingway depicts fishing as an endurance ritual. The liminal aspects of the ritual are reflected through imagery of Christ, symbols of baseball, and lions on the beach. The analysis discusses the separation, liminality, and integration of the protagonist. Through this

approach, the research examines how the sacrificial image transforms the journey into a ritual, offering a new perspective for young scholars.

Keywords: Ancestral, liminal, ritual, transformation, transitional

Introduction

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) depicts the epic struggle of a Cuban fisherman, Santiago, at sea. Hemingway's protagonist, Santiago, parallels Joseph Campbell's concept of the hero's journey. Campbell's concept of the hero is the universal journey of self-discovery, transformation, and entry to a new world. Santiago's eighty-four-day fishing trip, without a single catch, is filled with both tragic and heroic moments. This episode demonstrates Santiago's dedication to his profession despite the hardships he faces during his journey. In this context, the protagonist's adverse situations necessitate a distinct type of analysis in a research paper. Therefore, this paper regards Santiago's journey as a ritual in a Cuban setting to explore how an individual transforms during rituals in our community. The transformation of an individual is evident in their actions and behavior. The same applies to Hemingway's protagonist. Santiago's determination to fish alone far out at sea is a ceremonial act. Solon T. Kimball, in the introduction of *The Rites of Passage*, emphasizes the importance of "religious belief and ceremonialism" (Kimball, 1960, p. vi) in interpreting the journey through liminal space. Santiago's departure, journey, and entry into a new world are no different from a ceremony. A brief understanding and interpretation of Santiago's journey becomes meaningful if the reader considers Hemingway's frequent references to religion, such as Christianity. Besides religion, symbols and imagery are equally important in showing the transitional phase of a journey. After all, Hemingway's way of celebrating fishing culture is ceremonial, and rituals are celebrated with the same joy across cultures. This is why Hemingway's work continues to attract scholars today with the same interest and affection.

Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* remains a mysterious work of art in literature. New researchers explore the mystery of the novella with keen interest even today. Santiago's heroic journey and his tremendous sense perception demand a different analysis since its publication. There is no systematic study of Hemingway's novel from a liminal perspective. Thus, this paper attempts to answer the following research questions:

Research Questions

How do the aspects of liminality and rituals reflect the totality of the story?

What are the essences of rituals conjoined with the heroic journey of Santiago and other incidents in the text?

Hemingway's use of the crucifixion symbol transforms Santiago's journey into a ritual in the story. In this context, the main objective of this research article is to explore how the sacrificial image transforms the journey into a ritual and to introduce a new paradigm among young researchers.

Review of Literature

Hemingway's masterpiece, *The Old Man and the Sea*, has garnered worldwide attention since its publication in 1952. Researchers and critics continue to examine Hemingway's story from various perspectives, but it is almost impossible to scan all the reviews and criticisms of Hemingway's work. Clinton S. Burhans perceives a tragic vision of man in Hemingway's work, despite Santiago's heroic performance. ". . . Hemingway has achieved a tragic but ennobling vision of man which is in the tradition of Sophocles, Christ, Melville, and Conrad (Burhans, 1960, p. 453). The names mentioned above reiterate the theme of tragedy and suffering in Hemingway's text. Conversely, Leo Gurko explores the heroic impulse that emerges amidst the tragedy and pain surrounding the protagonist, Santiago. "The Old Man and the Sea is remarkable for its stress on what men can do and on the world as an arena where heroic deeds are possible" (Gurko, 1955, p. 377). Gurko emphasizes that heroism is attainable if an individual dares to transcend the limitations of the world. In the words of William E. Cain, Hemingway seeks in this fiction to make the tragic and comic coincide, coalescing the heroic and the laughable in his sentences (Cain, 2006, p. 114). Cain delves into the tragicomic elements present in Hemingway's fable. In conclusion, the reception of Hemingway's novella extends beyond these few interpretations.

The artistic makeup of Hemingway's fiction lies in sensuous details. Ernest Hemingway once remarked that he wrote "to be read by the eye and no explanations nor dissertations should be necessary" (qtd. in Johnston, 1970, p. 388). Hemingway admits that sense perception enables the readers to comprehend the totality of the story. Bickford Sylvester believes that Hemingway's fiction reveals the reality of the world because it aims to discover "a harmony between human and natural affairs" (Sylvester, 1966, p. 134) in the novella. Sylvester's claim indicates Hemingway's environmental concern among the writers of the Lost Generation. Similarly, Kedar Bhattarai's paper discusses the concept of ecofeminism, where Hemingway "seeks the nexus between women and the sea" (Bhattarai, 2023, p. 102). Hemingway's protagonist addresses the sea as feminine and wants her to do a favour because he holds an androcentric belief. Conversely, Charles K. Hofling interprets the role of the protagonist, Santiago, from a psychological perspective. "The Old Man's victory-in-defeat is, for the reader, a recapitulation of some of the favorable aspects of latency" (Hofling, 1963, p. 173). In the light of psychoanalytic criticism, Hofling applied the term latency to study Santiago's powerful psychological condition from the time he left home for fishing. This is how Hemingway and his novella influence critical thinkers throughout the world.

Humans fear the continuation of human civilization, which is tied to their existence in the world. This theme echoes in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. "Santiago serves as a remarkable embodiment of an existential hero, defying an indifferent universe" (Ghimire, 2023, p. 91). Hemingway's character, Santiago, reflects the existential crisis faced by modern people in the novella. However, Fouad Abbas Ali argues that "spiritual power is more trustworthy than worldly force" (Ali, 2024, p. 13) in Hemingway's story. Ali emphasizes the

importance of spirituality in overcoming dangers in the material world. Jeffrey Herlihy also notes religious symbolism in the story: "Hemingway, a convert to Catholicism, draws heavily on religious symbolism in *The Old Man and the Sea*" (Herlihy, 2009, p. 32). Hemingway's faith is expressed through Christian symbols. While these literature reviews highlight various aspects of the novella, this research specifically explores how Hemingway designs his narrative from a liminal space, and Santiago's fishing trip functions as a ritual to fill the gap in the study. As a result, this research aims to establish the trend of studying literature from the liminal space because it is structured, unbiased, and reliable.

Methodology

This study is based on a descriptive textual interpretation of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* from a liminal perspective. The paper primarily draws ideas of liminality from Arnold van Gennep and Victor Turner. Their concepts of liminality are used to analyze the artistic structure of the novella. Additionally, opinions from other scholars are included to support the paper's argument. This article is limited to Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, and the focus of the study lies on explaining how Santiago's journey functions as a ritual. The researcher does not discuss the novel's other aspects.

The Concept of Liminality

The concept of liminality has drawn attention from scholars, particularly in the humanities and social sciences. Van Gennep introduced the term "liminality" in his 1909 book, *Rites of Passage*. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee translated the French version into English in 1960. Van Gennep divides the rites of passage into three categories: pre-liminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and post-liminal rites (rites of incorporation). The rites of separation involve detaching an individual or group from certain cultural or social identities. During the liminal phase, individuals are in an ambiguous state and experience a different cultural realm. The rites of incorporation mark the end of the transition, as the person integrates into society with a new role. Van Gennep's conclusion in *The Rites of Passage* states like this:

... life itself means to separate and to be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn. It is to act and cease, to wait and to rest, and then to begin acting again, but in a different way. And there are always new thresholds to cross: the threshold of summer and winter, of a season or a year, of a month or of a night; the thresholds of birth, adolescence, maturity and old age; the threshold of death and that of the afterlife — for those who believe in it. (Van Gennep, 1960, pp. 189-90)

Van Gennep believes that everyday life is a performance, and thresholds occur in different cultural and social conditions from birth to death. Physiological, cultural, and seasonal thresholds are central to rituals in our society. The state of in-betweenness during our ceremonies is what Van Gennep refers to as liminality.

Turner made significant contributions to the development of the concept of liminality in anthropology. Turner states, "Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner, 1969, p. 95). Like, Van Gennep, Turner sees liminality as existing somewhere between two points or origins. The idea of in-betweenness is present in ceremonies, traditions, and laws. Turner explains the concept of liminality through the symbols used in rituals. "As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions" (Turner, 1969, p. 95). During rituals and ceremonies, traits of liminality are expressed symbolically. In conclusion, the ideas of Van Gennep and Turner about liminality highlight a threshold in a cultural setting and the transformative power of in-betweenness.

Reviews and Interpretations

Researchers from different parts of the world examine Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. The analysis of a literary text begins with a close reading. It requires imagination and sensitivity to critically analyze the work. The succeeding sections analyze the novella through a three-part structure proposed by Van Gennep and developed by Turner.

Narrative of Separation

Santiago's fishing trip in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* reflects the idea of a hero's journey. The protagonist shows incredible strength during his tough time at sea despite being separated from his young apprentice, Manolin. This separation marks the beginning of a ritual, as explained by Van Gennep. According to Gennep, an individual or group is detached from certain cultural or social identities in this stage of the journey. In this context, Santiago's separation from the boy signals the ritual of the Cuban people.

The separation of an individual from a social structure marks a transitional phenomenon. Hemingway's protagonist, Santiago, finds himself alone in the sea after forty days, and the fact reverberates in the opening line of the novella. Robert P. Weeks states, "from the first eight words of *The Old Man and the Sea*...we are squarely confronted with a world in which isolation is the most insistent truth" (qtd. in Burhans, 1960, p. 453). The eighth word of the opening line of the novella, alone, indicates the transitional world of the protagonist. This is how Hemingway describes Santiago's separation from Manolin:

...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*, which is the worst form of unlucky, and the boy had gone at their orders in another boat which caught three good fish the first week. . . .The sail was patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat. (Hemingway, 1952, p. 3)

Hemingway's description of Santiago's separation from Manolin highlights a new phenomenon. Manolin leaves Santiago because he believes his parents' words that Santiago is

unlucky. Similarly, the sail's "flag of permanent defeat" explains why Santiago is separated from Manolin. Or "flag of permanent defeat" contributes to the separation of Manolin and the old man because a sign of defeat affects the perception of an individual or a group. Santiago's separation from the boy signifies a transition or liminality in his fishing journey.

Even in such an adverse situation, what keeps Santiago's performance lively? Hemingway used symbols to bring vibrancy to Santiago's performance, but he admits that the pain of separation dominates his life, except in his eyes. "Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 4). The old man's performance remains vibrant through his eyes, which are the same color as the sea, or blue. Santiago's performance comes alive because of the blue color, symbolizing heroism. Hemingway uses symbols of 'baseball' to illustrate the narrative of separation in the story (Hemingway, 1952, p. 5). Manolin admits, "It was papa made me leave. I am a boy and I must obey him" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 4). The young boy's remark explains how he was separated from Santiago. In this way, Santiago's journey resembles a ritual, and it can be viewed from a liminal perspective.

Rituals in Liminal Aspects

Santiago did not lose hope or confidence during his journey despite being separated from a companion. His transformation starts with memories of past days. The more he recalls, the stronger he becomes for the journey. As discussed by Van Gennepe and Turner, experiencing strange things in the liminal phase of life is necessary to reshape the self. Symbols and images reflect this transitional period in a person's life. In this sense, Santiago must face many upheavals on his journey before he can reintegrate into society.

The transitional phase in Santiago's journey becomes clear through his emotional conversation with the boy. Manolin explains why he left Santiago on the journey, but when other fishermen mock Santiago, Manolin stands by him. Santiago's talk with Manolin reveals his mindset as he is in a state of transition. Kimball states in the introduction of Van Gennepe's text, "In one sense, all life is transition..." (Kimball, 1960, p. ix). All lives must pass through some transition over time. Hemingway illustrates Santiago's transitional phase through the symbols. 'No. Go and play baseball. I can still row and Rogelio will throw the net' (Hemingway, 1952, p. 5). Santiago asks Manolin to play baseball and remembers how Rogelio used to help him throw the nets. During this transitional time in life, Santiago finds motivation through baseball. The frequent mention of baseball allows Santiago to connect with the legendary figure, Joe DiMaggio. Similarly, he interprets the movement of the wind in the sea through his ancestral knowledge. Santiago argues, "Tomorrow is going to be a good day with this current" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 7). The protagonist's argument insists that he is optimistic even in a liminal phase of the journey. In conclusion, Hemingway uses symbols and ancestral knowledge to indicate the transitional phase of Santiago's journey.

Santiago finds strength in his solitary life through religious faith. The images of the 'Sacred Heart of Jesus' and the 'Virgin of Cobre' give spiritual power to the old man. Cuba's

fishing tradition dates back to the indigenous Taino people. Malcolm Cowley states, "...Hemingway's rituals are very much like those of "primitive peoples" (qtd. in Burnam, 1955, p. 20). Hemingway links Cuban rituals to primitive people, and these rituals hold cultural, traditional, and national importance. Santiago's wish "to take the great DiMaggio fishing" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 13) reflects Cuba's fishing traditions. Besides their ancestral knowledge of fishing, ordinary Cuban fishermen have strong faith in the legendary DiMaggio. In this way, fishing remains a ritual in Cuban life, and Santiago's fishing experience in the liminal phase echoes the practices of the indigenous people.

The liminal space in Hemingway's novella is rooted in the old man's dreams. Santiago often dreams of the lions on the beach in the story. These lions symbolize the old man's resilient spirit and eternal youth. They frequently appear in his dreams to bring him peace and courage during his transitional phase. "...He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 16). Santiago's dream of the lion on the beach provides him with comfort and mental peace during this transitional stage. Liminality exists in both Santiago's psychological and physical struggles.

Santiago shows a deep respect for other creatures at sea during his fishing trip. He demonstrates ecological sensitivity by respecting and forming bonds with them. The Cuban community emphasizes the connectedness between birds, animals, and humans. Turner discusses the "generic human bond" (Turner, 1969, p. 97) in forming community. Human connections with other creatures lay the foundation for the community. Santiago's talk with the sea creatures reflects Hemingway's sense of community. 'I wish I had the boy,' the old man said aloud. 'I'm being towed by a fish and I'm the towing bitt... Thank God he is traveling and not going down' (Hemingway, 1952, p. 32). Santiago strongly misses Manolin's absence during his fishing trip, and his conversation with the fish shows the importance of reciprocity in a Cuban community. Additionally, Santiago's mention of God adds religious fervor to the story, and some see his fishing trip as a Cuban ritual. In other words, Hemingway presents fishing as a ritual of endurance, survival, and dignity. Through this conversation, Santiago's true battle begins with the marlin: the fight symbolizes the intense experience of a Cuban ritual.

The real battle between the old man and the marlin happens at sea, where no land is visible. Santiago often thinks of Manolin and wishes he were not alone in his old age. The liminal phase of Santiago at sea signals a possible change in his life. Van Gennep argues that "... a man cannot pass from one to the other without going through an intermediate stage" (Van Gennep, 1960, p. 1). The transformation of a person becomes possible if they overcome the in-between phase in life. Santiago's struggle with the marlin shows a potential change in his life. During the fight, he has a cut below his eye, blood drips down his cheek, and then dries before reaching his chin. This imagery emphasizes the intensity of Santiago's suffering during the liminal phase. Still, Santiago shows great strength during the fight. 'I'll kill him though,' he said. 'In all his greatness and glory' (Hemingway, 1952, p. 49). Santiago admires the greatness and glory of the marlin at sea, which is two feet longer than his skiff. The dream

of the lions gives him strength for the fight. Likewise, he finds power through his epic struggle when he remembers Christ. Religious practices guide him during the liminal phase of his journey.

Santiago's journey takes a turn when sharks follow the marlin in the sea. Sharks are fearsome creatures of the ocean, and they are also dangerous to humans. Santiago acknowledges this when he says, 'If sharks come, God pity him and me' (Hemingway, 1952, p. 51). His words reveal the fearless nature of sharks at sea. The sharks devour all of the marlin's flesh, leaving only the skeleton, but Santiago declares, 'A man can be destroyed but not defeated' (Hemingway, 1952, p. 80). His statement emphasizes that humans are not meant to be defeated. Instead, he shows a strong sense of endurance, which is key to fishing. Hemingway presents fishing as a ritual of endurance.

The liminal phase of Santiago's journey ends with the symbol of the crucifixion. Van Gennep argues that "... all individuals go through the same endless series of rites of passage from life to death and from death to life" (Van Gennep, 1960, p. 194). The liminal space exists between life and death, as shown in Santiago's fight with sharks. Santiago feels "... the nail go through his hands and into the wood" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 83). The crucifixion symbol represents the climax of Santiago's suffering during this liminal phase. Later, Santiago realizes he should not have gone so far out alone to fish in the ocean, and he feels remorse for the fish. Ultimately, this insight helps Santiago connect with the sphere of Cuban society.

Santiago's Reintegration in Society

Reintegration signifies the end of the transitional phase of a ritual, during which a person is reintegrated into society with a new role. Santiago's journey at sea mirrors a ritual. Hemingway's hero discovers the truth near the end of the liminal phase and feels remorse for the sea creatures. Santiago integrates into Cuban society with a meaningful message: self-realization. His reintegration begins when he is near the "glow of Havana" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 89). The light of Havana signals the arrival of human settlement. Likewise, Santiago understands whether Manolin and the other older fishermen worry about him or not. That is why Santiago declares, "I live in a good town" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 89). Santiago feels proud of living in a good city. These are signs of how Santiago becomes part of Cuban society.

Finally, Santiago arrives at the seaside with the skeleton of the marlin. He had to sit down many times to reach his shack. The conversation between the old man and the boy reflects the Taoist worldview. It is a way of embracing a natural and balanced life in a cosmos. Santiago arrived with this philosophical insight when he was badly beaten. "Whoever passes from one to the other finds himself physically and magico-religiously in a special situation for a certain length of time: he wavers between two worlds" (Van Gennep, 1960, p. 18). Santiago experiences two different worlds in a short time. It seems as if Santiago's journey is guided by magic and religion. Santiago transforms into a fighter in the sea magico-religiously, along with the dream of the lions on the sea. "Up the road, in his shack, the old man was sleeping again. He was still sleeping on his face and the boy was sitting by him watching him. The old

man was dreaming about the lions" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 99). The final lines of Hemingway's novella show how Santiago integrates into society. They explain the importance of the lion's dream in Santiago's journey. Therefore, Santiago's actions during the three phases of the journey remain meaningful because they depict his behaviors, interactions, and relationships.

Conclusion

Van Gennep and Turner's concept of liminality breathes life into Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, which grounds the idea that art cannot be separated from a ritual in a performance. Santiago, the protagonist, begins his journey at sea like a magician. His act remains lively because it is full of sensory details. Similarly, his performance stirs emotions in readers. Santiago's journey becomes a ritual because Hemingway uses the crucifixion symbol near the end of the novella. The image of Christ, the baseball symbol, and the lions on the beach emphasize Santiago's journey as a ritual. Religious symbols strongly depict the transitional phase of Santiago's voyage at sea. Santiago's suffering mirrors Christ's suffering during the liminal phase. Additionally, Hemingway's novella is packed with ritualistic elements. Hemingway portrays fishing as a ritual of the Cuban people. Like other fishermen, Santiago depends on ancestral knowledge for fishing, and his ecological awareness resonates with readers. Most importantly, his respect for ocean creatures and feminization of the sea shows the dignity of an ordinary Cuban fisherman. Santiago's actions near the story's end also reflect a Taoist worldview. In this way, Santiago's journey to the sea functions as a ritual; his fight with sharks is a ceremonial act. I suggest that young researchers explore Hemingway's novella through the emerging trend of meta-modernism in literature.

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