Hemingway’s Cante Jondo: The Old Man and The Sea

Michael J. Tucker, James Madison University

Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 License

Date of Award
Spring 1999

Degree Name
Master of Arts (MA)

Department
Department of English

Advisor(s)
Joanne V. Gabbin

Abstract

The Old Man and The Sea leads to a reading of The Epistle of James through Ernest Hemingway’s deep understanding of Spanish Catholicism and Cuban culture; Hemingway’s greatest work, it is his cante jondo, his “deep song” in homage to the suffering of his generation. Cante jondo, like The Old Man and The Sea, moves at a ballad tempo, speaks to life and death struggles, and embraces sorrow and joy in equal measure. Cante jondo, similarly, casts a mournful tone in its flamenco rhythms not unlike that Hemingway reveals in The Old Man and The Sea. What Flamenco Sketches is to the lexicon of Miles Davis - a highly-crafted, lyrical, deeply spiritual, and passionate expression of Davis’ jazz aesthetic framed in the cante jondo of Spanish flamenco music - The Old Man and The Sea is to Hemingway's work: an impassioned expression of Hemingway's lyric voice evoking the soul of Spanish culture and Cuban culture, rich in spiritual and mythological connections.

Santiago is a fitting protagonist for Hemingway’s greatest work. Like Hemingway all of his life as a writer, Santiago is willing to enter the seas of life with joy for the journey before him, with faith to endure any struggle and a will to survive. Cuba, as the contemporary Cuban scholar Mary Cruz relates, “is a land of Santiagos” (Cruz 204). Cuba is a land of fisherman poor in material possessions but wealthy beyond measure in spirit. It is no coincidence that Hemingway comes upon the tale of a Cuban fisherman towed out to sea by a great marlin, and after four days, rescued by other fishermen who drove off sharks circling his small skiff, lashed the skiff to their craft, and brought him home to Havana in 1934 (Scribner xxvii).

Hemingway is in Cuba in the early 1930s because he, like Santiago, follows his calling. Hemingway’s calling leads him to his greatest catch as a writer, just as Santiago’s refusal to abandon his calling leads him to his greatest catch, the spiritual victory at the end of his odyssey at high sea on the Gulf Stream. Santiago’s journey of the soul in The Old Man and the Sea is at one with his outer journey to catch the great marlin in the hurricane season in the Caribbean, when he goes to sea knowing that death may storm down upon him.

Santiago, like Hemingway and other artists of his time, does not hesitate to follow his calling in the face of death. We witness his pain, his suffering, and his survival on his four-day journey as Hemingway witnesses the pain, suffering, and survival of his comrades in desperate circumstances throughout his life: in Northern Italy in the Great War, in the mountains of the Guadarrama and the streets of Madrid in teh Spanish Civil War, and in Europe in the Second World War.
Cante jondo, at its core, is a classical flamenco expression of suffering. Hemingway’s generation suffers in its struggle to defeat totalitarianism like no other generation in American history. *The Old Man and The Sea* reads to me as only natural for Hemingway to write. Ultimately, it is his destiny as a writer. Everything in his life as a writer directs him to create this passionate and lyrical story or a man’s struggle to fulfill his destiny. I argue *The Old Man and The Sea* is Hemingway’s cante jondo, his “deep song” for the tremendous sacrifices his generation endures to sustain Western culture in the face of oppressive forces of fascism and communism in Asia and Europe; likewise, it is Hemingway’s lyrical “deep song” inspired by a Cuban fisherman in 1934 who goes far on a journey for a great marlin on the Gulf Stream and loses his dream catch to sharks on his return to his home shores of Cuba (Scribner xxvii).

**Recommended Citation**

https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/master199099/1

**Document Type**
Dissertation/Thesis

The old man taught him to fish when he was young, and the boy brings the old man food. Does our language sound elementary and clipped? That’s because Hemingway’s prose is. His is just eight million times better than ours. So that sets the stage. We’d also like to note that the old man has a name (Santiago), as does the young boy (Manolin), but the text always refers to them as “the old man” and “the boy.” So this old man goes to sleep dreaming of the lions he used to see back in the day in Africa. He wakes before sunrise and does what fishermen do—get in his boat and head o Baskett gives a detailed analysis of *The Old Man and the Sea* starting from biblical allusions to the aura of strangeness possessed by Santiago, which he claims contributes to Hemingway’s fifth dimensional prose. Baskett lists several examples of how Hemingway uses fifth dimensional prose, such as how Santiago is rarely referred to as “Santiago” but often referred to as “the old man”. Many comparisons made are between passages in the bible and the Santiago’s dreams about the lions are clear. Psychoanalytic Critical Theory Analysis. *The Old Man and the Sea* is a simple story, but has a deeper message. It speaks of a man’s existence, where tenacity, pride, respect and dreams drive his mission to prosper in the presence of struggle. Author: Ernest Hemingway. *The old man and the Sea* is a novel which could be named a short novel also and it was published in 1952 for the first time in the magazine Life. It is written as a inner monologue in which we find out the thoughts of the main character. The plot is not the center of this literary work. The theme is the relationship between man and nature. Even though at the beginning Santiago is represented like a man who is defeated in life and has no strength with time we find out that he is the real hero characterized by strength and faith. There is an interesting description of