



Research Article

© 2019 Saed Jamil Shahwan.
This is an open access article licensed under the Creative Commons
Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs License
(<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>).

A Lacanian Study of Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea

Dr. Saed Jamil Shahwan

Associate Professor, Department of English,
Faculty of Arts, Hail University,
Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Doi: 10.2478/mjss-2019-0009

Abstract

This paper sought to explore the role played by Lacan in the analysis of Hemingway's work in The Old Man and the Sea. It is clear from the analysis that Lacan contributed immensely to the growth and improvement of the literary work between 1901 and 1981. Similarly, for effective analysis of the novel, Lacan sought to bring out issues on desires, conscious, unconscious, subconscious, psychology and others in the interpretation of the Hemingway's literature. However, to achieve the objective, Lacan adopted his psychological stages of development that includes the real, mirror, and the symbolic stages. Through these stages, Lacan clearly brought out the content as perceived by Hemingway of social, cultural and religion. Ultimately, the analysis of the old man and the sea by Lacan showed that as people become aware or conscious they start to hope for unconsciousness.

Keywords: Conscious, Sub-Conscious, Unconscious, Desires, Psychology, Nature

1. Introduction

Lacan's definition of psychological theory gives a clear picture of the work done by Ernest Hemingway in the novel of The Old Man and the Sea. Jacques Lacan argues that the journey (along with the ocean) as portrayed by Ernest Hemingway reflects the attitude, desires and hopes to embrace certain aspects of nature and eventually the return to the initial stage of life. Hemingway adopted the use of nature in his story as an allegory to help achieve the in-depth thinking, feelings and analytical view that he referred to as the fifth dimension. In the novel "The Old Man and the Sea", Hemingway uses various themes to help address issues surrounding individual feeling and nature. As such, the choice of structure, tone and the language by Hemingway plays important role in ensuring that the reader can feel the presence or connection to the scene.

Lacan played a major role in contributing ideas for literary criticism in the field of psychology between 1901 and 1981. As a French sycophant of psychology, he has been associated closely in the development of psychological theories that are used up to date in analyzing the works of literature. According to ("Lacan reinterpretation of Hemingway's the Old Man and the Sea," 2017), psychological theories developed by Lacan constitute the conscious and the unconscious concepts of social engagement. Some of these psychological theories or stages help in the understanding of personal identification, unconsciousness/consciousness, and their desires in life. In recognition of these facts, Lacan is of the view that the concepts are simply production sites that allows an individual to grow mentally ("Lacan reinterpretation of Hemingway's the Old Man and the Sea," 2017). Therefore, Lacan used his main psychological theories/stages in exploring the conscious and unconscious views of Hemingway in The Old Man and the Sea. .

According to Lacan, the real stage of psychology connects the mother to child. It puts emphasis on the mutual link between the two. The stage is characterized by a sense of

dependency and unconsciousness. In this regard, the child feels the aspects of oneness to the mother. Secondly, as the child becomes older, it gains the independent abilities. This stage is described as the mirror stage. At this stage, it is determined that the child has the ability to detach itself from the mother. It can now feel independent and appreciate itself as the other among the rest. Lacan also presents the symbolic stage where the child has the ability to appreciate the society and the language. According to ("Lacan reinterpretation of Hemingway's the Old Man and the Sea," 2017), the symbolic stage tends to encompass all the attributes of nature into human actions and activities. Other studies associate the Lacan symbolic stage with many prohibitions and restrain in the context of authority and power ("Descriptive Language in The Old Man and the Sea | Study.com," 2017). During this stage, the reality of separation and or the absence of the mother daunts heavily on the person. However, Lacan argued that regardless of what one feels or perceive, the effort to go back to the unconscious sense might not be possible. Therefore, one has no option but to appreciate other available means for survival in life.

Lacan used the concept of sub-consciousness in his psychological analysis of Hemingway's novel "Old Man and the Sea". In the psychoanalytic approach, the subconscious involves the frustrations, fears, water, and dreams that are perceived to have greater influence in the personal character and behavior within the novel ("Introduction to Jacques Lacan, Module on the Structure of the Psyche," 2016). The fact that various conscious parameters have their unique connotation and denotation, their effectiveness relies heavily on the choice of language styles. According to the study conducted by Jungman & Tabor (2003) on literature analytical view, the use of subconscious concept metaphorically brings out the idea of unconsciousness that helps in the understanding of the author's main objective in a literary work. In the analysis of The Old Man and the Sea, Lacan interpreted various styles used to help bring out the message.

2. Discussion

In the novel "The Old Man and the Sea", Hemingway employed the use of subconsciousness, consciousness and unconsciousness to help address the objective of the story. Additionally, Hemingway adopted the use of metaphors and symbolism to achieve his objectives of cultural and spiritual beliefs. Through his fascinated approach, the concept of the novel shows the author's ability to retreat in the wild and then back. By the use of this allegory gives Lacan the opportunity to explore the role of faith and beliefs. As such, one would argue that there is an ability to restore individual memory from dilution and mental drainage. In other words, Lacan is of the view that the idea of unconsciousness is temporary and not permanent. This is also justified by the Hemingway's hope to be part of nature through the state of unconsciousness.

It is clear from the novel that Hemingway was found to nature through his ability to connect the characters, themes and the society. In this regard, Lacan appreciates the role of nature through his rigorous attempt to interpret and analyze the novel. According to ("Descriptive Language in The Old Man and the Sea | Study.com," 2017), the context of nature with respect to Hemingway's perception is not only a seductive, mirror, and a "bountiful mother" but also a feminine and tragic that needs understanding. The use of Lacanian phrases such as "bountiful mothers" helps in explaining three sections of Hemingway's perception reflected in the real stage of psychoanalytical view. According to Lacanian theory, in the context of a "bountiful mothers" the associated infant has the ability to identify and engage with the mother in life (Jungman & Tabor, 2003).

From the Lacan's view, most of Hemingway's literary works in The Old Man and the Sea tend to increase the association of creature and human beings. For instance, the beast (marlin) is regarded as human. Santiago in this case places himself in the fish's position when he pondered "is it hunger that made it desperate or was just frightened something else at night?" (Yang & Zhang, 2014, p. 51). Therefore, according to Lacan, Santiago seeks strategies to overcome him (the fish). In this view, it is clear that through his mental act of communion, Santiago has established a strong imagination of protection before he is drained into the water by the fish. Similarly, the elements of unconsciousness are also evident in Santiago's dreams where lions are portrayed as friendly rather than the obvious dangerous predators that can cause harm. In the Lacan interpretation of this, Santiago seems to have a strong history and relationship that forms part of his sub-consciousness.

Lacan real stage of psychological development is also evident in the story of the Old Man and the Sea. According to ("Introduction to Jacques Lacan, Module on the Structure of the Psyche," 2016), the real stage of development requires high attachment of a child to the mother. There is a high level of dependency and unconsciousness. In the novel, Hemingway presents the unconscious characters of Santiago that are related to his fishing art. In this case, Santiago has to find out his desires and identity as an angler, which also demands to Hemingway as an author. Santiago seems to have forgotten his art. According to Hemingway, the old man could not catch the fish in 84 days of consistent fishing (Coles Editorial Board, 2004). He was demoralized by the negative views of his friends (Manolin) and other colleagues. However, he had to work hard towards his desires in life regardless of how many days he had to undergo the process to realize his identity. According to ("Lacan reinterpretation of Hemingway's the Old Man and the Sea," 2017), the realization of identity arouses the element of sub-consciousness that helps to prove the existence of inner being. As such, most of the human desires tend to reflect the individual attached recognition. From the novel, Santiago represents the Hemingway's unconscious attitude and conflicting views for recognition and the pain associated with his perpetual failure in his work as a writer.

In the context of *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway appreciates the Lacan stage of the mirror. Similar to Lacan believe, Hemingway links the aspects of nature to the state of oneself. As explained before, during this stage, one starts to have in-depend mind and feeling of being separate from others. In this case, the story of the old man and the sea, Santiago and the marline represents a parallel mirror for each other. There ideologies and beliefs are different. According to Lacan, the old man and the fish are separate entities pursuing a different route. The image presentation between the pursuer and the pursued are oblique and blurred. This is justified by Hemingway when Santiago falls into the water being overpowered by marlin. The fact that the fish line connects the two, one would also wonder whether it acts as a fishing tool or rather a gear to help the old man protect his life. This is true especially when "fish" said to the man, "I have to cling on you until I m lifeless" (Burhans, 1960, p. 78). In other words, it is evident that with Santiago's effort the catch the fish, he is desperate for his life. In fact, he has to clink onto the line to avoid being dragged by the water. The aspect of a separate entity is portrayed when both the fish and the man starts to be canny against each other. When the fish circled, the water makes the man happy but only to realize that it is playing with him. Besides, they are only predators and pray hence nothing in common. Furthermore, the aspect of "mirror itself" is evident in the story when the man and the fish are circled by the sun and the moon an indication of perpetuity.

Lacan thinks that the great sense of loneliness described by Hemingway brings out the aspect of nature and engagement. Indeed, loneliness has a strong relationship with nature as evidenced by the Hemingway's work of the *Old Man and the Sea*. In the story, Santiago as the main character feels intense loneliness after coming out from the sea only to find himself alone "though unavoidable one should never be alone especially at his old age" (Gurko, 1955, p. 29). In fact, the realization of alone becoming even more daunting when his only friend (Manolin) was nowhere to be seen: "he looked across the ocean, he could not see even his boy" (Yang & Zhang, 2014, p. 49). According to Lacan, Santiago becomes conscious of the role the young boy used to play in his life as he continued to travel along the ocean. He realized to have left the human company of civilization behind him. Without the boy's company, Santiago feels disconnected from the society; he hopes for the connection to come soon. Fortunately, nature became a glimmer of hope for his worry: "suddenly there was a pool of dark water that was causing disturbance to the calm and driving his attention" (Burhans, 1960, p. 43). There was also a big cloud stretching across the sky. After looking ahead, he saw the wild ducks moving here and there. At this point, Santiago realized that no man was ever alone in the sea. In the Lacan psychological analysis, the aspects of sub-consciousness have been illustrated in form of the large pool of water. In the novel, Santiago's journey along the ocean is spiritual that enhances a sense of nature. According to Lacan, it was necessary for Santiago to lose himself from the sea for easier connection with nature and the environment. This was very critical for him to gain the consciousness; he was to lose his society and religion first. In reference to Lacan's term of psychology, to transform back from the symbolic to the real stage, there was a need for Santiago to lose his sense of society and language.

The Lacan theory of symbolism is also clear in the novel "*Old Man and the Sea*" where

Hemingway adopted the use of symbolism to achieve his objectives. According to ("(PDF) Theme of Symbolism in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*," 2015), symbolism portrays images and objects inform of human emotions and feeling. With symbolism, the writer has the ability to pass implicit information to the audience (Coles Editorial Board, 2004). Hemingway used the symbol of a shark to indicate a complex situation and the sea to represent the presence of God. Lacan argues that the aspects of religious symbolism are very clear in the literary work of the old man and the sea a reflection of the desire and ambitions of Hemingway. Santiago's hands act as a religious symbol that relates to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Secondly, Santiago utters words that relate to Jesus Christ statement while on the cross, "that let the line cut him off if he ever cramps again" (Burhans, 1960, p.56). In the two scenarios, Lacan used his theoretical view of analysis to facilitate both symbolic and personification.

Throughout the analysis of the *Old Man and the Sea*, it is evident that Hemingway explored widely the issues of unconsciousness. Unlike the conscious ideals, Lacan refers to unconsciousness as a point that unifies the nature and the human being ("Lacan reinterpretation of Hemingway's *the Old Man and the Sea*," 2017). In this case, the sea is associated with a metaphor that explains the unconscious nature of the story. On the other hand, through the Lacan theoretical analysis, the role of water is real in explaining the inactive ideas of the story. To help justify the unconscious nature of water, Hemingway's narration shows that both unconscious and the water only depict the unforeseen circumstances or places. As Santiago travels far along the sea in search of fish he is unaware of what he will encounter. Lacan, therefore, argues that the old man's journey is purely a psychological one that requires him to prepare for any eventually on the way. In this regard, by the use of the sea as the subconscious element, it is necessary that he overcome his worries and fears alone. According to Hemingway, the old man seems to be in need of the boy; Santiago speaks repeatedly on how he misses the company of the boy (Hemingway, Muller, Recorded Books, & LLC, 2011). However, Lacan asserts that the need for connection is settled through the fishing process. In this case, the fishing line connects the old man to the fish. The man's desire to be closer and have a good relationship with the fish is psychological that manifested through the sea-the spirit of the subconscious. Lacan says that as the old man leaves his society for a journey, it is a temporary move to reevaluate his instincts to encounter his fears and worries. It is also evident that the sea not only represents the old man's unconscious but also the collective nature of unconsciousness in the entire story. According to Hemingway's narration, water in the sea comprises many creatures that include dolphins, turtles, sharks, and organic components. Lacan is of the view that with all constituents of water, there is a strong integration between the old man and nature.

3. Conclusion

In summary, the Lacan theories of psychology provide a clear analytical view of Ernest Hemingway's work in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Throughout the analysis by Lacan, it is important to note that Hemingway achieved the social concept of admiration, hope and attitude for effective utilization of the environment. In fact, nature played a cohesive role to help the author understand the themes of the novel. As a French psychologist, Lacan has made an immense contribution to the analysis of literary work from 1901 to 1981. His role through various theories has increased the number of critics and proponents in the world of literature. In the analysis of *The Old Man and the Sea*, Lacan stages of development (theories) helps to explore the desires, subconscious, unconscious and the conscious concept of the narration.

With the use of Lacan theories or stages of development, the reader can easily explain the relationship that exists between the human being and the creatures. They also provide the opportunity for the readers to engage along with the content of the story. In the analysis, Lacan demonstrates the relationship between the mirror and the real stage through characters such as Santiago in the old man and the sea. In the symbolic stage, the water and other inherent creatures such as the turtles and sharks act the role of sub-consciousness to the character. Lacan also argues that in the world of consciousness (mirror) where there is high independence and oneness do not last since the subconscious entities such as water prompt the individual to hope for

consciousness. In this case, with the realization of the expected fears and worries, most people like Santiago in the novel wish to remain unconscious. On the other hand, Lacan through symbolic stage explored vividly the story of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

References

- (PDF) Theme of Symbolism in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*. (2015, March 4). Retrieved from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/296680367_Theme_of_Symbolism_in_Ernest_Hemingway's_The_Old_Man_and_the_Sea
- Burhans, C. S. (1960). "The Old Man and the Sea": Hemingway's Tragic Vision of Man. *American Literature*, 31(4), 446. doi:10.2307/2922437
- Coles Editorial Board. (2004). *The old man and the sea: Notes*. Toronto: Coles.
- Cotter, J. M. (1962). "The Old Man and the Sea": An "Open" Literary Experience. *The English Journal*, 51(7), 459. doi:10.2307/811309
- Descriptive Language in "The Old Man and the Sea" | Study.com. (2017, December 18). Retrieved from <https://study.com/academy/lesson/descriptive-language-in-the-old-man-and-the-sea.html>
- Gurko, L. (1955). The Heroic Impulse in "The Old Man and the Sea". *The English Journal*, 44(7), 377. doi:10.2307/808247
- Hemingway, E., Muller, F., Recorded Books, & LLC. (2011). *The old man and the sea*. Prince Frederick, MD: Recorded Books.
- Jungman, R. E., & Tabor, C. (2003). Henry James on Safari in Ernest Hemingway's *Green Hills of Africa*. *The Hemingway Review*, 22(2), 82-86. doi:10.1353/hem.2003.0012
- Lacan reinterpretation of Hemingway's "The Old Man and the Sea". (2017, January 25). Retrieved from <https://clairesiblog.wordpress.com/2016/11/22/lacan-reinterpretation-of-hemingways-the-old-man-and-the-sea/>
- Life Lessons from "The Old Man and the Sea" | The Art of Manliness. (2018, May 28). Retrieved from <https://www.artofmanliness.com/articles/lessons-in-manliness-from-the-old-man-and-the-sea/>
- Ryan Hediger. (2008). Hunting, Fishing, and the Cramp of Ethics in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Green Hills of Africa*, and *Under Kilimanjaro*. *The Hemingway Review*, 27(2), 35-59. doi:10.1353/hem.0.0011
- Wyatt, D. (2018.). Befriending: The Old Man and the Sea. *Hemingway, Style, And The Art Of Emotion*, 179-194. doi:10.1017/cbo9781316272084.012
- Yang, H., & Zhang, Z. (2014). Analysis of the power of the old fisherman Santiago in the old man and the sea. *Proceedings of the 2014 International Conference on Education, Management and Computing Technology*. doi:10.2991/icemct-14.2014.51