



A Literary and Psychological Exploration of Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea: The Iceberg Beneath Perseverance

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استكشاف أدبي ونفسي لرواية همنغواي الشيخ والبحر: جبل الجليد خلف المثابرة

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Abstract:

This research probes the theme of perseverance in Hemingway's novella *The Old Man and the Sea* to uncover the psychological strategies developed by Santiago in maintaining his willpower. The research utilizes Modernist Literary principles of alienation and existential endurance to portray Santiago as a universal archetype of resilience in the face of life adversities. Santiago's psychological strategies, that enabled him to maintain his resolve despite physical limitations and misfortunes, including his reflection on nature, his symbolic associations and his subconscious conditioning are examined through Psychoanalytical Literary criticism lens. Thus, the research adapts Hemingway's Iceberg Theory to uncover the multilayered connotations of the emotional and philosophical depth of Santiago's journey concealed by Hemingway's minimalist prose.

Keywords: Hemingway's Iceberg Theory, Modernist Literature, Perseverance, and Psychoanalytical Literary Criticism.

الملخص:

يتناول هذا البحث موضوع المثابرة في رواية همنغواي "الشيخ والبحر" لسبر أغوار الاستراتيجيات النفسية التي طورها سانتياغو للحفاظ على قوته إرادته. يستخدم البحث مبادئ الأدب الحديث المتمثلة في العزلة والتحمل لإثبات الوجود لتصوير سانتياغو كنموذج عالمي يمثل القدرة على الصمود في مواجهة محن الحياة. ويستخدم البحث عدسة النقد الأدبي التحليلي النفسي لعرض الاستراتيجيات النفسية المتمثلة في تأمل الطبيعة، والارتباطات الرمزية، وتكيف العقل الباطن، التي استخدمها سانتياغو للحفاظ على عزيمته رغم ضعفه الجسدي وسوء حظه، كذلك يتبني البحث نظرية جبل الجليد لhemungway للكشف عن الدلالات المبطنة ذات العمق العاطفي والفلسفي لرحلة سانتياغو التي تخفيها كتابات همنغواي البسيطة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الأدب الحديث، المثابرة، النقد الأدبي التحليلي النفسي، نظرية جبل الجليد لhemungway.

Introduction:

The Old Man and the Sea is Ernest Hemingway's magnum opus. It was published in 1952 in *Life Magazine*. Its significance lies in what is hidden beneath the surface revealing Hemingway's principle of the iceberg- a technique of writing where detailed explanations of the multiple layers of meaning are

left for the readers' understanding and appreciation (Rauf, 2023). Thus, this research attempts to illustrate Hemingway's unique abilities of manipulating simple events and situations to convey humongous moral lessons; particularly, the situations depicted by Hemingway to reveal the strategies Santiago employed throughout his journey to strengthen his determination and perseverance.

Hemingway, in *The Old Man and the Sea*, portrays Santiago as an enduring figure to the strength of the human spirit, revealing his determination despite physical limitations and emotional challenges. The beauty of the novel is reflected in the struggle and determination of an old man, who has nothing but his skill, experience, pride and perseverance, to fight against the thorns of life, symbolized in his bad luck and decaying body, and against a community of some of the younger generations, who constantly mock his abilities. *The Old Man and the Sea* is a representation of the enduring struggle of humanity in general, and each individual in particular. Thus, this analysis draws upon Modernist Literary Theory, Psychoanalytical Literary Theory and the Theory of the Iceberg to infer deeper meanings of the simplicity of Hemingway's prose.

Literature Review:

This literature review provides a comprehensive recount of the scholarly discourse analyzing Hemingway's novella *The Old Man and the Sea*. The novella has been the focus of attention, with multiple articles and research papers interpreting its themes, characters, literary figures and its symbolic meanings and exploring the work's impact on literature.

One notable aspect of the literary studies available about Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, is the focus on portraying Santiago's character as a universal archetype of resilience and determination. As Sane (2025) highlights Santiago's intellectual, deep inner strength and his relentless struggle to overcome life's emotional and physical challenges. The study uses textual analysis to reveal how the protagonist's untiring resolve echoes every man's endurance in the face of life's adversities to maintain one's own dignity. Likewise, this research focuses on the portrayal of Santiago as a reflection of humanity's eternal struggle against life's adversities and hardships. The current research attempts to reveal the techniques that Santiago employed throughout his journey to maintain a high level of pain threshold despite his old age and physical limitations.

Multitude of studies have focused on analyzing the themes of perseverance and faith in overcoming life's adversities in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Thakur (2024) explains how Hemingway's illustration of the strength of Santiago's spirit is a reflection to his belief in his powers regardless of his old age and misfortune. Thakur is showcasing Santiago's capacity to carry on even when failure is foreseen; despite the fact that he is not deeply religious. Moreover, the article focuses on portraying life's unpredictability through the symbolism of the unforeseeable nature of the sea. While loyalty is portrayed through Santiago and Manolin's relationship and the boy's confidence in his mentor even in the most difficult times. Thakur's article is similar to this research in revealing Santiago's strength and willpower and the loyal relationship established between him and Manolin; however, this research is different in focusing on Hemingway's Iceberg writing principle of revealing the multilayered meanings left for the readers' interpretation among other literary theories of propping the emotional intensity of the work.

Scholars have examined Hemingway's Theory of the Iceberg extensively; particularly in *The Old Man and the Sea*. Dhamed and Kareem (2024) study utilizes the Iceberg principle to show how Santiago's misfortunes are representation of life's bigger challenges. The study demonstrates how Santiago's hard luck of not being able to catch a fish for almost three months serves as the catalyst for prioritizing psychological triumph over materialistic success. Furthermore, the study focuses on Santiago's persistence to transform his physical weakness to moral victory rather than a material victory through his resilience. The study illustrates how Santiago's worth lies in his enduring perseverance rather than the money-oriented mentality overwhelming the world, and how his character is established as a prevailing revolutionary archetype. Similarly, the current research focuses on interpreting the novella on the basis of the Iceberg theory to reveal how Santiago's actions, perseverance and self-control resulted in restoring his pride and resurrected his undefeated soul.

On the other hand, Ghimire (2023) discusses Hemingway's novella *The Old Man and the Sea* from an existentialist point of view. Existentialism is a philosophical movement that emerged in the 19th and 20th centuries and revolves around the idea that humans define themselves and their values through their actions and choices. (Rueter, 2025). The article focuses on how Santiago's commitment to being a fisherman regardless of his decaying body and continues misfortunes, relate to one of the existentialist principles of how human choices form Man's essence in life. The article shows how Santiago's journey is an embodiment to key existentialism concepts like the absurdity of his struggle with the biggest fish he has ever encountered after eighty-four days drought without catching a fish; additionally, the paradox of Santiago's relationship with nature being a close companion at certain points; and a fierce opponent at other times. Finally, the article portrays Santiago's character as an existentialist hero through his continuous struggle with the marlin and life adversities, despite the subsequent loss of the fish to the

sharks. Although the current research employs the Modernist, the Psychoanalytical and the Iceberg theories to analyze perseverance in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*; Existentialism may not be referenced, as the aforementioned frameworks constitute the methodological basis of this research.

Hemingway's Iceberg Principle in writing has received considerable literary attention. Rauf's (2023) study argues that Hemingway's economical use of the language in *The Old Man and the Sea* conceals layers of figurative and symbolic meanings. It delves into Hemingway's minimalist prose highlighting the profound emotional meanings conveyed by the straight forward writing style. The study suggests that interpreting the novella's simple, direct language requires the readers to engage within Santiago's thoughts and struggle to reach the embedded layers of meanings and symbolic references. Additionally, it proposes that Hemingway's sparse and poetic style in writing the novella enriches the story and invites the readers to reflect upon the complexity of the hidden emotional and philosophical connotations of the text. Rauf's study is closely related to this research in focusing on Hemingway's Iceberg Theory in analyzing *The Old Man and the Sea*. Both studies try to illuminate how only the essential elements are presented in the story line, while the deeper meanings are left for the readers' own appreciation. Nonetheless, this current research concentrates on interpreting the theme of perseverance through applying Hemingway's Iceberg principle.

Mocbil's (2023) research delves into the theme of perseverance through examining Santiago's journey into the sea and his struggle with the marlin. Mocbil uses a qualitative research methodology to reveal the metaphor of Man's endless attempts to overcome life's obstacles, altering physical limitations into psychological triumph. Moreover, the research explores Santiago's relationship with the sea and Manolin and how this relationship inspires his resilience and determination to reveal that victory lies in the unwavering attempts to reach one's goal regardless of the outcome. Mocbil's research relates to this research in the focus on analyzing Santiago's resilience through the novella's themes and symbols. However, this research distinguishes itself by highlighting the mental strategies employed by Santiago through utilizing the Psychoanalytical Literary Criticism principles and supports this approach through Friedman and Robbins (2022) review article that discusses how the prefrontal cortex controls behavioral responses and cognitive functions thus enabling persistence and developing perseverance.

Research Methodology:

This research employs a qualitative research method, relying on content analysis and focusing on the literary work itself to analyze the themes and the meanings within the context of Hemingway's novella *The Old Man and the Sea*. Close reading is conducted to highlight the key passages related to the theme of perseverance and the scenes portraying Santiago's determination are described and investigated to reveal the multilayered connotations of perseverance; thus, approaching the work descriptively and analytically. The primary source in this research is the text of the novella and the extracted passages that are analyzed to shed light on the protagonist's resolve. While the secondary sources include the broader academic body of works including books, research papers and articles from online sources reviewing and analyzing Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*.

The theoretical framework of this research integrates the Literary Modernist Theory, along with Psychoanalytical Literary Criticism and the Iceberg Theory. Hemingway is considered as a leading figure in Modernist Literature; a period that extends from late 19th to the mid-20th century (White et al., 2025). The research reflects Santiago's internal struggle and his perseverance against life's adversities which are among the vital concerns of Modernist Literature. Thus, the analysis focuses on the mental strategies employed by the protagonist to strengthen his willpower which draws on the Psychoanalytical Literary Criticism principles; where concepts of the Psychoanalytic Theory developed by Sigmund Freud are applied to literary works to gain better understanding of the human mind portrayed in literature (Moll, 2024).

Moreover, the Iceberg Theory, which is a technique used by many of the 20th and 21st century writers and characterized by using the language economically, is utilized in this research. Hemingway describes this theory in his nonfiction work *Death in the Afternoon* (1932), where he writes: "if a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them." (Hemingway, 1932, p.192). This theory is used in this research to explain and reveal the emotional content of the incidents and the symbolic meaning of the situations depicted by Hemingway through his simplified language in the narrative; that are left for the readers' own appreciation (Rauf, 2023).

Analysis:

Perseverance, like all other themes of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, is not explicitly stated nor directly pointed at. However, it is one of the most dominant themes and an obvious one to spot out from the beginning. This aligns with Hemingway's writing principle of the Iceberg, which reveals less than one percent of its true size. He crafts his writing in an economical yet eloquent style, leaving deep

meanings for the readers' own appreciation and inviting for an interpretation through inference rather than exposition (Rauf, 2023). Moreover, deeply embedding the theme of perseverance throughout the novella is a hallmark of Modernist literature that often avoids direct and detailed descriptions (Mambrol, 2020).

In the first line the narrator begins by describing the protagonist of the novel 'Santiago' as "an old man" who "...had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish." (Hemingway, 1952, p. 6). Eighty-four days are almost three months, and who could stand three consecutive months of complete and utter failure of not being able to succeed at their job, except a character defined by its perseverance and determination. What is more astonishing is that it is not the first time this old man is going through a rough patch of difficult encounters as indicated by the boy 'Manolin': "But remember how you went eighty-seven days without fish..." (Hemingway, 1952, p. 10). Only to show the old man's continuous efforts to overcome whatever life throws at him and the phase of bad luck he is going through, clarifying that he has been previously in such a position yet managed to triumph and probably will do it again. Thus, Santiago's endurance mirrors the Modernist preoccupation with human resilience in an indifferent world.

Another dimension of Santiago's perseverance is exhibited when he was mocked and ridiculed by the younger fishermen; nonetheless, Manolin and the older fishermen's respect helped Santiago to endure this social struggle. Such incidents are not confined to the fishermen society; rather it reflects universal issues of generational clashes and sidelining the elderly across communities worldwide. Thus, shedding light on such incidents projects the social problems faced by ordinary people in their everyday endeavors, and reflects another Modernist concern regarding alienation from the society and the erosion of traditional values of respect towards the elderly. Accordingly, this representation of Santiago as a figure maintaining his pride despite social marginalization aligns with Sane's (2025) portrayal of Santiago as universal archetype of resilience.

As the story line develops, Santiago informs Manolin that he will try his luck by going "Far out" into the sea the next day: "Where are you going?" the boy asked. "Far out to come in when the wind shifts. I want to be out before it is light." (Hemingway, 1952, p.14). This moment underscores how much is Santiago persistent and unwilling to surrender to his misfortune and give up trying, instead he is willing to try something very difficult, in fact dangerous and physically demanding for someone in his age. This decision to sail alone into the deep blue in order to prove what he is capable of reflects his resilience and his desire to show his worth. Similarly, Mocbil (2023) suggests that Santiago's journey into the sea symbolizes his endurance and determination to reach his goal regardless of the outcome.

Hemingway unveils Santiago's perseverance by using his principle of the Iceberg through making several references to the great DiMaggio. Although at first sight these two, Santiago and the great DiMaggio, share nothing in common as the latter is a very famous player revered on a nationwide scale in America and the former is just an old poor fisherman. However, DiMaggio was an iconic symbol of dedication and perseverance even through the injuries and bad luck that accompanied him in his baseball career, a story which bares much resemblance to Santiago's own tragic story of being unlucky and how age has its toll on his body, yet dedicated to the job he is doing.

Once Santiago sails far away, and one of the baits is hooked by a fish, he immediately realizes that the fish is not an average sized one, rather a huge Marlin. He admits that he never caught nor struggled with one that big alone. In spite of his difficult circumstances, he remains optimistic and never let fear crawl into his heart or mind. He has faith in his skills and the "tricks" he learned and developed along the time he spent fishing (Hemingway, 1952, p.25). Throughout his struggle with the marlin, Santiago develops psychological strategies to help him continue with his fight against the marlin, since the physical pain was not an issue to worry about according to Santiago and asserted further by the famous quote "a man can be destroyed but not defeated." (Hemingway, 1952, p.114).

One of the strategies Santiago uses is pondering upon the creatures of the sea as well as the birds hovering in the sky reaching a conclusion; that not only the human race is struggling with life but all creatures. All that can be done is accepting whatever life throws at them whether roses or their thorns. The difference between individuals lies in how each faces these struggles, regardless of the outcome, believing in the inevitability of death and certainty that everything must come to an end. Santiago through his experience knows that everybody is born and everybody dies and what really matters is the life spent during these two milestones. Thus, Santiago's reflection upon nature in general is a psychological mechanism to cope with and accept life adversities.

Another strategy used by Santiago to aid him in resisting fatigue and despair, is thinking of the boy Manolin. Thakur (2024) identifies Santiago's loyalty to the boy as a key source of strength. Santiago does not want to disappoint Manolin nor fail him, because he knows how much the boy loves and respects him and the way he looks up to him. By fighting the marlin and later the sharks he wants to set a role model for Manolin, an example for him to follow in his footsteps and pass his experience,

knowledge and wisdom to a successor who will carry forward his legacy, thus will continue to live in his memory and through the inheritance he has left to the boy. He wanted to make Manolin proud, happy and enjoying what the old man has achieved.

All the scenes that picture Santiago praying to God are indication of Santiago's unshaken faith, even through his difficult fight with the marlin and the sharks. He uses this unruffled belief to sharpen his willpower, as everybody resorts to God and prayers whenever they are in need for help and support. Furthermore, he employs the glorious memories of being nicknamed "Santiago El Campeon" after defeating "the negro from Cienfuegos" (Hemingway, 1952, pp.77,78), to remind him of his strength when he was younger. This may have reminded Santiago of his decaying body; however, he acknowledges the gains of experience and wisdom which compensate for the physical strength lost due to aging. This is evident in his success in making the marlin tired, achieved not physically but through his endurance and perseverance relying on his skills and experience. He even uses his subconscious mind to refuel his spirit when dreaming about the lions, which are symbols of strength and pride. By deliberately thinking and contemplating every night before falling asleep about his days in Africa where he encountered the lions; Santiago, unconsciously, conditioning his mind to summon the dreams he desires.

Santiago also realizes that life is full of distractions when a "...bird made the stern of the boat and rested there ..." (Hemingway, 1952, p.60), he starts talking to the bird, once the marlin makes a sudden surge, pulls the line and cuts Santiago's hand. Instead of giving up and surrendering to the physical pain, he reprimands himself and says: "how I will pay attention to my work." (Hemingway, 1952, p.62), only to show how much he is determined to continue with his struggle. It is a clear representation of how he has the capacity to control his behavior and focus strictly on his work. Such an ability is only gained by continuous practice and perseverance to develop one's own willpower and endurance.

Santiago's meditation and reflecting on nature, his thoughts of Manolin, his faith and prayers, the deliberate subconscious conditioning through the dreams of the lions and the symbolic association of DiMaggio, are all illustrations of the strategies that allow Santiago to maintain his willpower, manage his despair and bolster his perseverance. This lens aligns with the Psychoanalytical Literary Criticism tools based on Freudian principles of resilience and unconscious motivation (Moll, 2024).

Moreover, these strategies reflect the role of the prefrontal cortex- the brain region located behind the forehead and responsible for functions like decision making and behavioral responses. As Friedman and Robbins (2022) research confirms that human behavior, willpower and self-control are regulated by this region, which operates in a similar manner to a muscle. Thus, it can be strengthened to achieve self-control through perseverance and continuous efforts of resisting temptation, enduring hardship, and constant endeavors of tackling life's challenges. Accordingly, Santiago's ability to strive through his physical and psychological pain is a cultivated capacity which helped him achieve self-restraint becoming the embodiment of resilience.

Furthermore, these tactics that Santiago adapted to develop his perseverance and sustain his willpower mirror the Self-directed Learning principles of taking initiative, goal-setting and nurturing internal values and motivation rather than relying on external reward. As Al-Ashtar (2023) highlights that Self-directed Learning foster autonomy and resilience; traits that Santiago embraced through his solitary struggle despite failure. According to Al-Ashtar's (2023) study, self-directed learners enhance their independence and reach self-regulation through developing their own internalized learning strategies; paralleling Santiago's mental strategies to regulate his behavior and achieve self-control.

When the battle reached its climax both Santiago and the marlin were tired and struggling. What made the difference was Santiago's perseverance and his endless attempts to finish what he has started successfully. Even when the wound in his hand was cut deeper, he continued with his fight until the end. Similarly, when Santiago realized that the sharks mutilated the marlin and there isn't much left of its flesh; nonetheless, he remained steady in his fight against the sharks. Thus, the important thing is not to succeed but to keep fighting even if the loss is foreseen, because at the end victory will be embodied in the honor of the fight and the struggle itself.

When Santiago reached the shore of Havana, after long three days and nights spent at the sea, knowing that he lost the marlin to the sharks and nothing left of it but its skeleton, he did what he always does: "he unstepped the mast and furled the sail and tied it. Then he shouldered the mast and started to climb ... He had to sit down five times before he reached his shack." (Hemingway, 1952, p.134). Even at this point, he continued his struggle on his own, simply to show that it is not the end, rather it is an unceasing battle of life. Going through his usual routine, Santiago is implying that he will not give up his fight rather he will continue with his endeavor if not the next day, it will be the day after. Santiago's silent actions carry deep emotional weight and exemplify Hemingway's Iceberg Theory; thus; inviting the readers to uncover the narrative's submerged implications.

At a certain point near the end, Santiago began to question the decision he took to sail too far into the sea; however, if he had not gone too far, he would not have encountered the biggest fish he had ever seen nor would have been able to catch it and prove his abilities to himself, to Manolin and to those who doubted him of the younger fishermen. Despite his old age and poverty, his perseverance triumphed at the end. Santiago's determination and endurance to overcome physical and psychological pain defined his character as a symbol of determination. He tried to set an example, that the real triumph may not be tangible all the time but it may be an abstract representation of a higher value; that is, life's ultimate struggle of perseverance against weakness of the human soul. Thus, Santiago's symbolic triumph despite his material loss echoes one of the Literary Modernism core principles of searching for meaning beyond success, where meaning is often found in the struggle itself not the materialistic achievement (White et al., 2025).

Conclusion:

Although Santiago's skill and experience were very important factors for his battle, at the end it was a battle of willpower and endurance and that is what sets the old man apart from everybody else. Sometimes weakness and doubt might crawl into the mind and soul of each human being; however, what is important is not to surrender to these thoughts but to fight with one's all strength as if no fight has ever been fought. Indeed, most failures in life are due to the lack of a strong willpower and the absence of perseverance. On many occasions people find themselves fighting to accomplish something, while other times struggling to resist temptations desired. In both situations resilience is tested. Thus, willpower is the ability to control one's behavior. Accordingly, willpower is not a talent or a gift bestowed on some people while others do not possess, rather it is a common trait to all humans and can be nourished.

Throughout his life, Santiago managed to develop his willpower by perseverance and determination. Santiago does not view pain as an obstacle that can prevent him from achieving his goal; rather he can surpass the physical pain through his endurance. He even managed to overcome his emotional agony with the strategies of fueling his willpower with memories of his glorious past, thoughts of the boy who looks up to him, even using his dreams of lions to remind him of his strength. Controlling one's willpower takes time and perseverance; however, it is what sets the difference between those who are self-controlled and the rest. It is up to each individual to make it evident in their behavior to trace Santiago's footsteps and develop their willpower like he did. Building up such abilities and tactics will certainly improve the quality of life of each individual, thus results in leading a successful career.

Hemingway succeeded in conveying the message of ultimate endurance and perseverance in life, portrayed through the character of Santiago and his relentless efforts to fight off physical and emotional pain and deprivation, as well as misfortunes of life. Illustrating at the end that life goes on regardless of the turmoil and turbulences undergone, and what really matters is the legacy left behind after departing this life. The experience, the wisdom, the knowledge gained will be of no good if it is buried in a grave; however, if passed to others, the giver will be forever in the memory of those left behind.

Through applying the Literary Modernist Theory, Santiago's endeavors are crowned by his endurance and perseverance rather than a materialistic triumph. The Psychoanalytical Literary Criticism lens, reveals the strategies Santiago employed to sustain his willpower and resist despair. Additionally, Hemingway's Theory of the Iceberg illuminates Santiago's perseverance- not only as a theme through exposition but as the underpinning of psychological and symbolic implications, transforming a simple fishing journey into a profound reflection on human endurance.

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