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Conflicts in E. Hemingway's the Old Man and The Sea

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Abstract

A conflict is one of the major elements in literary narrative. There are different types of conflicts in literary texts. The paper discusses the conflict in Earnest Hemingway's novella named as 'The Old Man and The Sea'. The central conflict in this novella is man vs. nature. This conflict is representative of man's conflict with overpowering forces in society, and man's resilience against those forces. Santiago, the major character becomes an archetypal representation of the human condition and his story becomes everyone's story.

KEYWORDS: Conflict, protagonist, inner struggle, human existence, natural order, resolution.

Introduction:

The literary element conflict is an inherent incompatibility between the objectives of two or more characters or forces. The literary purpose of conflict is to create tension in the story, making readers more interested by leaving them uncertain which of the characters or forces will prevail. Conflict is most visible between two or more characters, usually a protagonist and an antagonist/enemy/villain, but can occur in many different forms. The majority of development and transformation in narrative occurs due to conflict. Conflict challenges a character's convictions and brings out their strengths and/or weaknesses, much as it does in real life. Note that conflict is not necessarily bad and often it is not obvious which side is right or wrong, just that it presents difficulties to the protagonist.

When a conflict is resolved and the reader discovers which force or character succeeds, it creates a sense of closure. Conflicts may resolve at any point in a story, particularly where more than one conflict exists, but stories do not always resolve every conflict. If a story ends without resolving the main or major conflict(s), it is said to have an "open" ending. Open endings, which can serve to ask the reader to consider the conflict more personally, may not satisfy them, but obvious conflict resolution may also leave readers disappointed in the story. A narrative is not limited to a single conflict. Conflict may be internal or external that is, it may occur within a character's mind or between a character and exterior forces, (or point(s) of view). A character may as easily find himself or herself in conflict with a natural force, such as an animal or a weather event, like a hurricane.

Literary texts contain following major types of conflicts:

- **Man versus man:** A situation in which two characters have opposing desires or interests. The typical scenario is a conflict between the protagonist and antagonist. This is an external conflict. Most thrillers and mysteries have this type of conflict, such as Dan Brown's *The Da Vinci Code* and Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*.
- **Man versus self:** This conflict develops from a protagonist's inner struggles, and may depend on a character trying to decide between good and evil or overcome

self-doubts. This conflict has both internal and external aspects, as obstacles outside the protagonist force the protagonist to deal with inner issues. William Shakespeare's Hamlet is an example.

- **Man versus machine:** A more contemporary type of conflict, this situation results from humans involved in a struggle with manmade machines. This is an external conflict. The Terminator series is an example of this type of conflict.
- **Man versus society:** In this type of conflict, a character must take on society itself, and not a single person. The character stands at odds with societal norms and realizes the necessity to work against these norms. This is an external conflict. Conflict examples are John Steinbeck's *The Pearl*, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, and *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger.
- **Man versus fate:** This situation results from a protagonist working against what has been foretold for that person. While this conflict was more prevalent in stories where gods could control fate, such as in ancient Greek dramas, there are still examples of this type of conflict in more contemporary literature. An example would be Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five*.
- **Man versus nature:** In this type of conflict, a character is tormented by natural forces such as storms or animals. This is also an external conflict. Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Moby Dick* by Herman Melville are examples of this type of conflict. Nature serves as the obstacle for characters. You could choose to write a particular scene around a natural calamity such as a typhoon or tsunami. There are many stories waiting to be explored because, in my opinion, an inspirational story such as the triumph of human spirit over adversity will never go out of fashion.

The central conflict of Hemingway's novella:

The central conflict of Hemingway's novella is man vs. nature. Santiago is at odds with nature because he makes his living by it, as a fisherman. However, the sea is not providing him with enough catch to survive on. He is able to catch the large marlin, but the sea will not allow him to have it, and he returns to shore with nothing but the skeleton.

Symbolically, however, the conflict is representative of man's conflict with overpowering forces in society, and man's resilience against those forces. Despite being beaten by the sea, Santiago goes to sleep dreaming of more adventures. He may have been physically beaten, but he is not emotionally beaten.

The sea voyage reveals Santiago's inner harmonic world. In it, a man's existence is understood as a part of nature on the same level as the animals around. Therefore, even if the man considers the animals his brothers, he kills them in name of the supposed natural order of the world. Being once born as a fisherman, his fate is given, as it is also literally expressed, and the man only plays his part. Apart from the predestination, next noticeable features are the old man's self-denial and suppression of his physical pains to win his fight over the fish. There is a dominance of courage and endurance in pain too. The man is handicapped – he is old, lonely in a small skiff on the vast ocean. The fish, no matter how big, is strong and in his own element. This imbalance is strengthened by images of man's physical sufferings: hand injury, cramps and backache, strange body position he has to stand in. In this context heroic proportions of Santiago "A pain does not matter to a man" (App. 1; 23), "Man can be destroyed but not defeated" (App. 1; 29), and other (App. 1; 14, 17, 18, 24, 26, 32)

Santiago's "heroic" features present the way he decides to stand the pain and does manage it. Man's character is put on display in acute situation – he is alone on the sea,

with only a thin supply of water and his hope. The poor period without a catch may symbolize the approaching end of life. Therefore, the fish could stand for the demonstration of life powers recovery. By the successful fishery Santiago could show that there is still a lot that he, an old man, can bring. As the old man can prove his success with a skeleton, he gains his respect again and his credit rises. The act of killing the marlin represents his rebellion against death.

It is often suggested in interpretations that the marlin demonstrates the fulfillment of the life wish or the aim of life. The finale brings the decisive moment of the story. The finale of the novella is presented by the shark episode. Soon after successful catch the anxiety about possible loss appears as indication of next story development. Later, the fears transformed into the image of sharks come on the scene. Reader now follows a man who actively and inventively defends his catch from sharks by all accessible tools on the board. Santiago's attitude towards his fish changes during the fight against sharks. So far, either on land or at the sea, the fish demonstrated the highest possible value Santiago could and wanted to reach. After having it, he praised its beauty, dignity, size and quality. He felt fascinated and amazed. "I never have I seen a greater or, or more beautiful, or more noble thing than you, brother." (App. 1; 26) The admiration of the fish is repeated (App. 1; 13, 17, 20, 21, 25, 27). But after the first shark attack the fish loses its attractiveness. From now on, the man feels as if hurt himself and does not want to look at the fish (App. 1; 29, 31, 32). The final destruction is stated later "He could not talk to the fish anymore because the fish had been ruined too badly. ... "Half fish ... Fish that you were." (App. 1; 32). Whatever value the fish represented, it was irreplaceably lost. It may be supposed that it is lost forever, as the fish was presented unique. (App. 1; 17, 34). In comparison to the man's effort in all fights, it may seem strange how quickly he psychologically recovers from his life episode. While the physical pains remains, man turns his interest in baseball results and news. This attitude may stem from his approach to life, as expressed above "Every day is a new day." (App. 1; 8). "The thousand times that he had proved it meant nothing. Now he was proving it again. Each time was a new time and he never thought about the past when he was doing it." (App. 1; 18). The change of Santiago's interest also presupposes mental turn away from the loss as a psychological defense mechanism. The omniscient feeling of the natural order can support the explanation for Santiago's almost indifferent attitude his life loss. The nature has its constant order and the survival of the fittest belongs there in first place. The old man knows that well. In one moment, he is the predator and marlin his prey. Later he happens to be the prey for sharks, who steal his fish, because they were simply stronger. The old man does feel sad and angry but accepts the loss. He follows the natural order with the awareness of being only its part. The man returns during the night, alone with only a skeleton attached to his skiff. The presence of the skeleton confirms the reality of the previous attempt at the sea. The remains of the fish induce mood of uselessness, of the presence of death. The man is not concerned about it anymore, for him the fish had lost all its value. The skeleton represents only a trace of what it used to be and what does not exist anymore. The end is ambiguous. It expressed man's belief that a new chance will be given to him, as he plans his next fishery (App. 1; 35), supported with his utterances that "every day is a new day" (App. 1; 8). On the other hand, the boy cries and suggests fatal ending. In the story, the old man leaves his skeleton in the sea as garbage, and as written in exact words: "Up the road, in his shack, the old man was sleeping again. He was still 28 sleeping on his face and the boy was sitting by him watching him. The old man was dreaming about the lions.

Thus the novella demonstrate various conflicts like man vs. Nature, Old Man vs. The Sea, man vs. self, age vs. youth, man vs. Nature, the boy vs. his parents and old man vs. other fishermen.

The novella also clearly fits into the category of allegory a story with a surface meaning and one or more under-the-surface meanings; a narrative form so ancient and natural to the human mind as to be universal; a form found in pagan mythology, in both Testaments of the Bible, and in Classical to PostModern literature. Likewise, the characters become much more than themselves or even types they become archetypes. From this perspective, Santiago is mentor, spiritual father, old man, or old age; and Manolin is pupil, son, boy, or youth. Santiago is the great fisherman and Manolin his apprentice both dedicated to fishing as a way of life that they were born to and a calling that is spiritually enriching and part of the organic whole of the natural world. Santiago, as the greatest of such fishermen and the embodiment of their philosophy, becomes a solitary human representative to the natural world. He accepts the inevitability of the natural order, in which all creatures are both predator and prey, but recognizes that all creatures also nourish one another. He accepts the natural cycle of human existence as part of that natural order, but finds within himself the imagination and inspiration to endure his greatest struggle and achieve the intangibles that can redeem his individual life so that even when destroyed he can remain undefeated.

Conclusion:

According to his own code of behavior, accepting the natural order and cycle of life, struggling and enduring and redeeming his individual existence through his life's work, and then passing on to the next generation everything he values, Santiago becomes an everyman (an archetypal representation of the human condition). His story becomes everyone's story and, as such, becomes genuinely uplifting. As the tourists who mistake the marlin for a shark still comprehend from its skeleton something of the great fish's grandeur, readers of different ages and levels of understanding can find something inspirational in this story perhaps even more if they dip into its waters more than once.

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