The Seascape as a Site of Materiality and Memory: Intimacy with the Elemental in *The Old Man and the Sea*

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Abstract: The scholarship on Ernest Hemingway's major writing endeavour, *The Old Man and the Sea*, has been reinvigorated in the recent decades with the development of ecocritical studies across the globe. While hailed by many scholars as a potential text for environmental criticism in the way it foregrounds nature and portrays an intricate nexus between humans and the nonhuman world, the short novel has also invited criticism from a section of critics for its traditional trope of man's victory over nature. However, reading *The Old Man and the Sea* through a lens of material ecocriticism, can offer an environmental ethics that celebrates the agency and materiality of the ocean, often overshadowed in the holistic discourse of nature and often neglected in land-based ecocriticism. The seascape portrayed in the novella inculcates this ethics in the protagonist Santiago, an old Cuban fisherman, through its overwhelmingly dynamic material and non-material presence. Santiago's human hubris slowly gives in to the power of the seascape, making him acknowledge the limitations of humans as a species. His growing intimacy with the elementality of the ocean can be read as a call to understanding seascape as a site of materiality and memory.

Keywords: Seascape, Materiality, Memory, Anthropocentrism, Blue Humanities

In the age of the Anthropocene, it could be a legit argument vis-à-vis who the real protagonist is in *The Old Man and the Sea*, which essentially explores the complex dynamics between an old Cuban seasoned fisherman, Santiago and the ever-flowing, lively Gulf Stream waters. In an era when environmental humanities and ethics are on the rise globally, this literary masterpiece by Nobel laureate Ernest Hemingway has rekindled interest among critics and environmental enthusiasts for its powerful portrayal of non-human beings and things. However, because of a dominant holistic

approach in environmentalism, oftentimes, individual entities presented in the texts may not be sufficiently foregrounded. In addition, the rise of Animal Studies has found a way in the novel to study the dynamics between humans and non-human animals. Therefore, there is still more scope to conduct scholarly research on one of the crucial elemental matters of the planet that is all around us—one of the pairs in the title—the sea itself. This paper intends to probe into the depiction of oceanic water and its effects on humans, solely focusing on its intrinsic value and agency. Drawing on references from material ecocriticism and vibrant materialism, it argues that this novel is so rich in portraying the agency and materiality of the seascape that it can inculcate in readers, as it does with Santiago, a certain environmental ethics marked by respect and reciprocity towards the non-human world. This paper, thus, intends to situate the novel in the broader framework of blue humanities and material ecocriticism in order to unleash its potential to disrupt the anthropocentric, land-based worldview.

The Old Man and the Sea is the tale of Santiago, an old, poor and solitary fisherman living on the coast of Cuba. His unwavering spirit, expressed through his "cheerful and undefeated" eyes, can be evident in the way he fights against all the odds both on land and the sea (Hemingway 1). Living alone in a basic shack, he has limited human contact. The only human company he enjoys is his disciple-cum-friend Manolin, a young boy who is loyal to him despite the local community considering Santiago as "salao, which is the worst form of unlucky" (1). Santiago must prove that he is not all wasted by voyaging into the unknown part of the ocean. As the plot develops, the landscape is replaced by the seascape, and the human characters are replaced by nonhuman animals ranging from birds to fishes. The novel, then, invites readers into such a powerful ecosystem that Santiago is found to have interacted with various elemental forces of nature such as water, air, the moon, the stars. Though it ends with Santiago's returning to the island—half-victorious and half-defeated—with the skeleton of a giant marlin, the major plot developments occur in close proximity with the natural seascape, especially with the Atlantic oceanic waters. This water-submerged tale, thus, is a

rich text to recognize and appreciate the elemental forces of nature imbued with unique dynamism and agency.

The ethical questions between human and non-human relationships have informed the recent ecocritical discourse of *The Old Man and Sea*. Glen Love deduces a conventional ecological phenomenon, arguing that the central problem of the novel is portraying the "natural world as the arena for human greatness but effecting thereby [the world's] further diminishment" (129). Using an eco-feminist lens, Susan Beegel speaks in favour of calling the sea as 'la mar,' and progressively discusses the novel's tendency to "abandon... the anthropocentric critical practice of relegating nature to the role of setting" (153). While certain critics have identified the "harmonious relationship" between man and nature, others shed light on human's desire to dominate the natural world (Zhang 1095). Zhiqiang Zhang argues that the novel testifies how in respecting nature, "human can live in harmony with the nonhuman" (1097). On the other hand, Shanyu Lin believes the novel exposes the consequences of "destroying and conquering nature," suggesting how human activities can result in the punishment from nature if they stand against the natural environment (621). She continues: "Santiago's anthropocentrism hoped that the great marlin would bring benefits to human beings, and this anthropocentrism results in its final defeat" (622). However, she also argues that Santiago is not presented as an archetype of nature-destroyer who desires to conquer nature like another fictional character Ahab in Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. Rather, Santiago, subverting the traditional anthropocentrism, is "challenging the authority of nature for the sake of livelihood" (Lin 623). On a similar note, Marta Tores Lucea considers the protagonist of the novel not as a prototypical man that we normally encounter in fiction but "a wise, courageous, persistent and balanced individual" (34). Labelling Santiago's wisdom "as a source of humility," she contends that what separates him from others is "the wide knowledge that he has of the local marine environment" (37). His recognition of a human's worth and power comes from a deeper understanding of the oceanic ecosystem.

However, this paper does not endorse the idea of gendering the sea or finding a utopian harmony in nature. It also maintains that the novel is just more than a simple ecological wisdom tale

of an apparent harmony or man's dignified survival; rather, it can be read as an attempt to understand the world that is full of non-human agency and materiality. In this regard, the paper aligns more with Alex Hollenberg's argument of labelling the novel as a "spacious text" (1). Hollenberg argues how nature moves from the backdrop "to occupy the narrative foreground" (1). Pointing at Hemingway's refusal to relegate nature to a passive background, he observes the novel's transformation from initial "imagining of space-as-human" (earlier in the novel, the sea is called as 'la mar') into a "recognition of space-as-space" (1). Considering the sea as secondary or valuable only in connection with humans may rob water off its agency and unique dynamism. Jane Bennett rightly asserts non-human matters as "thing-power" which are capable of changing the course of human actions and thoughts for their intrinsic vitality (2). She argues that considering the matter as dead, passive or instrumentalized may "feed human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption" (xi). What is required here is to consider the sea, in Susan Beegel's words, as "a protagonist on an equal footing with Santiago," which deserves to be studied and valued in its own terms and for its inherent, elemental values (153).

With the recent developments of material ecocriticism, vibrant materialism, and blue humanities, water cannot be simply perceived as an empty space to be exploited for livelihood, resources, and navigation. Since material ecocriticism examines "matter both in texts and as a text," the rich watery narrative functions as an apt platform which may help us recognize the "storied matter" of water (Iovino and Oppermann 1-2). Foregrounding the agency of matter, theorists Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann suggest that material ecocriticism not only analyses the representation of "matter's (or nature's) non-human agentic capacities" but also focuses on "matter's 'narrative' power of creating configurations of meanings and substances" (79). Following the ethos of material ecocriticism, the paper intends to explore the depiction of the centrality of water in the text along with what the seascape narrates to us as a text in terms of material significance. Foregrounding the vibrant materialities of water, the novel allows us into a spatial space that makes humans merely a spectator against an immeasurable, gigantic elemental force. In addition, this

material site not only reminds the protagonist of his personal memory but also connects him with collective memory in relation to water. Like material ecocriticism, vibrant materialism as propounded by Jane Bennett underlines "the material agency or effectivity of nonhuman or not-quite human things" (viii). The novel presents the seascape as a site that enacts performances of vibrant materialism which may highlight "a vitality intrinsic to materiality," releasing the representation of non-human matter "from its long history of attachment to automatism or mechanism" (Bennett 3). First and foremost, *The Old Man and the Sea* unfolds, predominantly, the power of one elemental force of nature—water. This is made possible by allowing the gulf waters to submerge, metaphorically speaking, the apparently human-driven plot. The actions, in major parts, take place on the seascape, making the sea as central as the human protagonist, Santiago.

The transformation of Santiago from a somewhat proud, masculine man to a wiser, more sensible human is achieved with the mentorship of the sea that grounded and humbled him. Going beyond "the smell of the land," Santiago enters into a seascape away from man-made civilization and agency (Hemingway 12). His entry into ocean wilderness places him not in the position of a master or explorer anymore, but as an observer and admirer of nature. Susan Beegel in her "A Guide to the Marine Life in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*" categorically maps out Santiago's deep connection to the otherness of the ocean and its creatures. His going out too far in the ocean exposes him to the uncanny agency of the waters. She summarizes Santiago's masterful creation by the author: "A few strokes of his [Hemingway's] pen sufficed to limn a lifetime of intimacy with the sea and its creatures" (309). On a similar note, Ryan Hediger discusses in detail the style and aesthetics of the novel which evidently conveys Santiago's "keen, embodied awareness of the Cuban marine environment and its life, and that awareness is not only valuable in itself, but fundamentally informs his ethical considerations" (38). He maintains that Santiago's ethics has been presented as a "rigorous, ongoing process" which finally attains its maturity while confronting with the great marlin out in the seascape (38). Hediger's comment on Santiago is justified who is "simultaneously shown both as knowledgeable and as relatively insignificant, with a sense of insignificance actually

heightened by his knowledge" (48). This non-anthropocentric knowledge is achieved via a waterscape where land-based human's agency is challenged and found limited in comparison to sea-based eco-centric wisdom.

Santiago's changing perspective of the seascape is evident as the plot unfolds. He starts off as an explorer, proving his worth as a skilled fisherman. Feminizing the sea, he calls it "kind," "very beautiful," and "cruel" which "gave or withheld great favours" (Hemingway 10). Though the narrative begins with his attempt to defeat the marlin and to control natural force in order to prove his worth as an able man, his final act of leaving of the skeleton of the fish signals a realization in his character. He does not shy away from accepting the superiority of non-human agency while confronting the marlin: "Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than you, brother" (43). Foregrounding the elemental materiality of water progressively in the novel, Hemingway allows his protagonist to come to close proximity with the marine environment. The following passage powerfully captures not only Santiago's close observation but also water's inherent, complex dynamics:

> The water was a dark blue now, so dark that it was almost purple. As he looked down into it he saw the red sifting of the plankton in the dark water and the strange light the sun made now… nothing showed on the surface of the water but some patches of yellow, sun-bleached Sargasso weed and the purple, formalized, iridescent, gelatinous bladder of a Portuguese man-of-war floating dose beside the boat. (Heminway 15)

The novel is filled with several non-sentimental, non-anthropocentric, matter-of-fact passages which underline elemental mesh like this. The intimacy with the elemental makes him a wise man who is capable of thinking in a non-anthropocentric term. Disrupting strong anthropocentrism, he is able to give respect and love to the marlin for what it stands for: '"Fish,' he said, 'I love you and respect you very much'" (Hemingway 24). His long exposure to the sea and its material conditions opens an alternative window to understanding the world around. His nurtured eco-consciousness made him able to "see through and beyond what is immediately apprehended by the physical eye" (Strychacz

243). He is able to see the common pattern between human and non-human life forms. Talking to a small bird that made itself comfortable in the boat, we hear him utter something profound: '"Take a good rest, small bird,' he said. 'Then go in and take your chance like any man or bird or fish'" (Hemingway 25). This not only highlights his knowledge about the ecosystem but also his ethical attitude towards it.

Santiago's learning takes place beyond human-controlled domain—in unfathomable, unknowable dark waters. Hemingway's use of vast space constantly challenges both Santiago and readers 'ability to know, comprehend and communicate with the sea. I agree with Hollenberg in saying that Santiago's confrontation with spaciousness has helped him recognize the limits of understanding the non-human others in terms of its elementalities. Hollenberg argues how the novel eventually recognizes the sea as "a space"—a shift from its initial anthropomorphism (1). Drawing on Hemingway's use of vast space and simple passages, he posits that whenever "space irrupts into the foreground," it produces "moments of self-consciousness" in Santiago (3). This site of learning is informed by myriad, constantly evolving elemental forces that make an ocean what it is. Its size, shape, color, course, and current are beyond human cognition. Reminding us of the intrinsic agency and metamorphic power of the fundamental elements such as waters, critics Oppermann and Iovino rightly assert: "All are generative, always, becoming, always in flux, going through inevitable stages of metamorphosis" (310). The novel consistently refers to water's agentic materiality and its complex connection with other matters: "iridescent bubbles," "the myriad flecks of the plankton," "the great deep prisms," and so on (Hemingway 15-17). Santiago cannot also overlook a magnificent island of Sargasso weed "that heaved and swung in the light sea as though the ocean were making love with something under a yellow blanket" (33). These complex dynamics of water can challenge our informed knowledge about the sea at any point in time. Santiago's awe in the exuberance and magnitude of the sea, even if he is knowledgeable about the marine environment, is a testimony of water's overpowering agency over humans. Santiago happily accepts his smaller role in this dynamics, letting go of his previous heroic status symbol when on the land he defeated the black man

in a wrestling and earned the prestigious title "El Campeon" (Hemingway 32). His humbled state is evident in the way he interacts with the marlin, calling it a true friend and a worthy opponent. Drawing on post-humanist scholarship and rhetorical criticism, Stephens and Cools opine that Santiago finds an "amazing grace" by learning "to live within limits—those of nature and his own" (78). They focus on how his human hubris takes a backseat when the water submerged, giant marlin forces him to come to terms with a greater force. He slowly learns to "recognize and respect the marlin's agency" which can "dwarf" that of humans (45, 83). They maintain that Santiago achieved a "humbled state of grace" which is a "mature man's submission to a natural order in which humans cannot presume dominance" (92). Hollenberg argues on a similar note discussing how Santiago's confrontation with the sea increasingly "broadens his sense of responsibility to the world and thus reveals to him the possibility of imagining himself in other ways- neither as conqueror, nor victim, but as an ecological participant" (40). When someone like Santiago, who already maintains a heroic nobility in him, is humbled by nature's greater grace, it is implied that humanist pride and heroism cannot be the epicenter of human thought process.

The vast non-human space broadens Santiago's imagination, making him connect to his past. To Santiago, the seascape does not serve only as a place of learning but also as a site of memory. Oppermann and Iovino believe that fundamental elements such as water "bind the fate and presence of humans and other Earthlings in their interlocked journey of matter and imagination" (310). Pointing at water's crucial presence in environmental imagination, they argue how this inevitable presence "signifies reflections and images, and … undeniably evokes 'reverie'" (311). Santiago's connection with the sea is partly because of his ancestor's long exposure to the sea as fishermen. The novel signals Santiago's birth in the Canary Islands, and his consequent immigration to North America. Hemingway clarifies it in a letter to Lillian Ross, "The Old Man was born a catholic in the island of Lanza Rota [sic] in the Canary Islands" (*Selected Letters* 807). Critic Jeffrey Herlihy, in his quest of Santiago's national, cultural, and linguistic identity, suggests that before emigrating to Cuba, Santiago made a number of journeys from the Canary Islands to the African coast, and as "an old

man he dreams from time to time about the lions he saw from the decks" (26). He shares his childhood stories with Manolin many a times regarding his visit to the African coast as a native of the Canary Islands where he witnessed the lions playing carefree: "When I was your age I was before the mast on a square-rigged ship that ran to Africa and I have seen lions on the beaches in the evening" (Hemingway 8). His sense of isolation from the community is evident in the novel which can be an outcome of his being (feeling of) an outsider. However, what is also significant here is to remember the history of mass migration for a better living or religious freedom from Europe to America through the Atlantic. The reference to African sea shore also reminds us of the inhuman slave trade which stands as a stark contrast to carefree, playful lions on the African beach. The sea route has been not only a gateway to fishing and trade since time immemorial but also a repository for history such as mass migration and slave trade from Africa to North America. Santiago's desire to be as free and authentic as lions seems to be born out of his realization of humanity's violation of natural order and creation of a hierarchical world order.

Santiago considers himself as a born fisherman who learns both from his collective memory and personal experience, refusing not to see the sea around us. His desire to go into the unknown dark waters also reminds us of our bond with water even before we were born. The connection between memory and water goes a long way with our memory in a mother's watery womb. Rachel Carson, in *The Sea Around Us*, elucidates in a chapter titled "Mother Sea" how all life forms evolve from the sea and how the growth of the human embryo echoes this evolutionary memory. Carson hypothesizes that man's desire to return to "mother sea" stems from his evolutionary memory and yearning for a space that, "in the deepest part of his subconscious mind, … never wholly forgotten" (8). Initially overwhelmed, Santiago finally feels at home in the watery womblike space, in Hemingway's words "the great well" (10). Since it is not possible to re-enter oceanic space, Carson argues, humans have used "the skill and ingenuity and reasoning powers of his mind" to re-enter the watery world mentally and imaginatively (8). However, she also reminds us that humans can only return to the mother sea only on her own terms (8). Carson's argument justly applies to Santiago who, though breathes on

land, finds his soul stirring and alive on the sea. A long sea voyage, away from the civilized race of human, dominated by water, sky, stars, makes one realize his true space on earth: "as never on land, he knows the truth that his world is a water world, a planet dominated by its covering mantle of ocean" (Carson 9). Life on the oceanic waters, gradually, makes Santiago realize that not only the fish, birds, and other living organism are the inhabitants of the planet but also the wind, the stars, the moon, and the sun have their unique roles in the ecosystem. When Manolin says at the end of the novel that he has a lot to learn from Santiago, it can be assumed that he (Santiago) will pass down this valuable piece of knowledge about the sea to him (Manolin). Santiago's belief that the sea is something "that gave or withheld great favors" and his experience on the sea for the last eighty-seven days, truly, are a testimony to water's inexplicable power over human knowledge and memory (Hemingway 11).

The seascape as a mentor of life and a mirror of memory provides Santiago, a modern-day seafarer, with valuable insight about life and death, and about human and non-human others which could not have been possible without his intimacy with the elemental force of nature. Hemingway's depiction of water, devoid of sentimentality and strong anthropomorphism, is powerful in its vivid, yet straightforward genuineness. This authenticity along with foregrounding of water to the point of elevating it as a plot-forwarding protagonist make *The Old Man and the Sea* as an apt eco-materialist fiction. Reading this masterpiece keeping in mind the recent "material turn" in ecocriticism may truly enrich our understanding of water and its relationship with humans in the age of Anthropocene. A world teeming with water pollution, water commodification, water crisis, and last but not the least, transborder water politics is in need of a proper water ethic that respects its agency, individuality, and autonomy. A close proximity with water as a great elemental force of nature, not as a resource or an empty space, is required to appreciate water's crucial role in the evolutionary history of human civilization as is found in the novel. It will not be an overstatement to say that the water wisdom embedded in the novel is capable of producing more Santiagos in the time to come who may be as ecologically attuned and respectful towards the seascape and the non-human world, in general.

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