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A story of killing. A story of respect. (Non)anthropocentric reading of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*[*]

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Abstract

Ernest Hemingway certainly earned the reputation of an avid hunter and a passionate bullfighting enthusiast. However, his views on the human relationship with the nonhuman world are not as straightforward as they might initially appear. *The Old Man and the Sea*, which earned Hemingway the Nobel Prize in 1954, exemplifies this complexity. This article offers an ecocritical reading of *The Old Man and the Sea*, with a focus on the anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric perspectives. It seeks to characterize the human-animal relationship and to examine the figure of a human presented in the narrative. Additionally, the article provides a biographical perspective on Hemingway, exploring his evolving ecological attitudes.

Keywords

Ernest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, ecocriticism, anthropocentrism, non-anthropocentrism

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Opowieść o zabijaniu. Opowieść o szacunku. (Nie)antropocentryczna interpretacja noweli *Stary człowiek i morze* Ernesta Hemingwaya

Abstrakt

Ernest Hemingway bez wątpienia zasłużył sobie na miano zapalonego myśliwego oraz pasjonata korridy. Jednak jego poglądy dotyczące relacji człowieka ze światem pozaludzkim nie są tak jednoznaczne, jak mogłoby się początkowo wydawać. Nowela *Stary człowiek i morze*, za którą w 1954 roku Hemingway otrzymał Nagrodę Nobla, jest najlepszym przykładem tej złożoności. Niniejszy artykuł stanowi ekokrytyczną interpretację utworu *Stary człowiek i morze* ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem perspektywy antropocentrycznej i nieantropocentrycznej. Celem analizy jest scharakteryzowanie relacji człowieka i zwierzęcia oraz omówienie sposobu przedstawienia postaci ludzkiej w narracji. Ponadto artykuł zawiera biograficzne spojrzenie na Hemingwaya, analizując jego ewoluujące poglądy ekologiczne.

Słowa kluczowe

Ernest Hemingway, *Stary człowiek i morze*, ekokrytyka, antropocentryzm

1. Introduction

Ernest Hemingway undeniably earned the title of an avid hunter. The numerous hunting expeditions he eagerly embarked on and the bullfights he passionately watched are irrefutable evidence of his penchant for killing animals. This "hobby", morally questionable in today's context, also became one of the pillars of his literature. His works, both fictional and non-fictional, are replete with motifs of fishing, hunting and bullfighting.

However, a deeper examination of the author's personal life and a thorough analysis of his texts prove that his anthropocentric stance may not be as one-dimensional as it might

initially appear. Hemingway always exhibited a very complex attitude towards nature. To some, his views in this regard may even seem self-contradictory. Moreover, according to researchers, Hemingway's attitude towards animals underwent a significant change towards the end of his career, a shift that is reflected in his later works.

It is important to note that, regardless of Hemingway's ecological philosophy – whether it is purely anthropocentric or not – the animal world is not only ever-present in his works but often plays a significant role there. One might even venture to assert that without animals humans in Hemingway's prose are incomplete and cannot fully understand the world or themselves. Ultimately, Francis Macomber needed a buffalo to prove his masculinity to his wife and for Harry it took hyenas to realize the inevitable end of his pursuit of greatness.

The present article constitutes an ecocritical analysis of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* with particular emphasis on the philosophy of anthropocentrism, and its exact opposite – non-anthropocentrism. Apart from the textual analysis, it also incorporates a brief overview of Hemingway's personal view on the nonhuman world.

First and foremost, the study aims to characterize the human-animal relationship depicted in the novella. I will conduct a close reading of *The Old Man and the Sea* in order to determine how Hemingway portrays the human being; I will try to interpret Santiago's attitude towards the nonhuman world, assessing his actions and beliefs. Finally, I will also reflect on whether Santiago's stance can be seen as equivalent to the ecological resonance of the entire text.

2. Anthropocentrism

Anthropocentrism can be defined as "the almost all-pervading assumption that it is only in relation to human beings that anything else has value" (Clark 2011: 2). In other words, it presupposes a clear hierarchy in which equality does not exist, and

where the nonhuman world is subordinated to human needs and interests. Non-anthropocentrism, on the other hand, may be described as "the view that it isn't the case that the nonhuman world has value only because, and insofar as, it directly or indirectly serves human interests" (McShane 2007: 170). Both these perspectives leave significant room for interpretation and can be applied with varying degrees of strictness. While some thinkers adopt them in an uncompromising, philosophical sense, others approach them with more flexibility, acknowledging the complexity of the human-nonhuman relationship.

I will not delve too deeply into these philosophical positions, as it seems one could go so far as to claim that every stance or action may ultimately be considered anthropocentric. After all, a comprehensive understanding of the world, even when directed towards the nonhuman, is necessarily mediated through human perception and the linguistic capacity that enables us to articulate and frame meaning. As Clark notes, "The term anthropocentrism may perhaps seem too sweeping. After all, even 'biocentrism' is a stance taken by human beings and is hence 'anthropocentric' in a weak sense" (Clark 2011: 3). For the purpose of this literary analysis, I will therefore treat these perspectives in broader terms, focusing on the ideas and tensions which emerge from their juxtaposition.

3. Hemingway – a hunter or an animal lover?

There is no doubt that Hemingway shared a profound connection with the nonhuman world, as extensively discussed by Mark P. Ott (2013) and Susan F. Beegel (2013). His exceptionally strong bond with nature, established already in childhood, played a very important role in his life and, naturally, found reflection in his literary work. Nature occupies a central and often symbolic role in many of his texts, serving not only as a backdrop but also as an active force shaping the characters' experiences and moral outlook.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that Hemingway's attitude towards animals was very complex and contradictory in its essence. Love wrote about "a paradoxical symbiosis with the natural world" which is visible both in Hemingway's life and art (1987: 201). In the case of Hemingway, therefore, we encounter a certain ambivalence of views, or "dualism", as described by Murphy (1999, qtd. in Hediger 2008: 37). Hemingway both loved and killed animals, he respected them and at the same time he sought to prove his strength and masculinity at their expense. His stance is indeed quite ambiguous from the ecological point of view. It is difficult to classify and assess the philosophy of an animal-lover, whose "body count against the earth, both in fiction and in life, is startlingly high" (Love 2003: 122)

As Hediger recalls, in one of the interviews Hemingway himself admitted that he did not like to kill animals (Lyons 1986: 71, qtd. in Hediger 2013: 217). Referring to the writer's childhood, Baker insisted that Hemingway "loved all animals, especially wild ones. He talked to his play things and personified each one" (1969:5, qtd. in Hediger 2013: 217). And it should be emphasized that even in later life his love for animals never waned. According to Hediger, Hemingway "felt genuine, if paradoxical, concern for the welfare even of the animals he hunted, and his love for companion animals was always strong and pronounced" (2013: 221).

Despite his love, respect, and admiration for the beauty of the nonhuman world, there is no doubt that Hemingway did kill animals. It is, however, important to remember that he lived in a period of relatively low environmental awareness, in a time when hunting and fishing were widely popular and deeply embedded in American culture. Kevin Maier (2013) presenting a broader context of American hunting culture in relation to Hemingway, notes that during the years in which Hemingway grew up and developed as a writer, hunters were often regarded as hegemonic figures, even as a kind of national heroes. Such a cultural narrative inevitably shaped Hemingway's own views on this matter.

It is important to note that towards the end of his life, Hemingway's attitude towards hunting and the animal world underwent a significant change. Glen Love, for example, claimed that "certainly up to the final stages of his career, Hemingway's was essentially not an Indian but a mountain-man mentality in its relationship to the wild" (1987: 209). People close to Hemingway confirmed that in his later years he gave up hunting in favour of observing wildlife (Hediger 2008, Hediger 2013). He no longer wanted to interfere with the animal world; instead, he preferred simply to exist within it and to commune with nature, which, as Hediger (2008) notes, found its reflection in his later works.

4. Ecocritical analysis of *The Old Man and the Sea*

4.1. The human figure in *The Old Man and the Sea*

An ecocritical reading of *The Old Man and the Sea* should perhaps, as Jones (2018) suggests, be undertaken with the awareness that we are dealing with a story about a fish rather than a story about a fisherman. Yet the human figure that Hemingway constructs cannot be dismissed entirely, for his presence functions as a medium through which the encounter between species becomes legible. After all, a truly non-anthropocentric reading does not seek to erase the human altogether, but rather to decentre his position.

One possible interpretation of Santiago presents him as an individualist, a solitary unit separate from nature, and a tragic hero trying to prove his strength at the expense of nature. He can be seen as a man who stands against nature and whose primary aim is to conquer the natural world. Such anthropocentric reading of the protagonist, where only human interests and feelings are valuable and remain in the center, seems to align with Love's interpretation of the story, who argued that *The Old Man and the Sea* "takes us more deeply than any of Hemingway's other works into the conflict between tragic individualism and the magnificence of nature" (2003: 128). Yan

(2011), in turn, drew attention to Santiago's "profound anti-ecological consciousness", emphasizing his distinctly anthropocentric perspective, which she identified in Santiago's cruelty, heroism, and "neglecting the intrinsic value of nature" (Yan 2011: 171).

Such interpretation, while compelling, does not fully capture the complexity of Hemingway's vision of the human condition. It may be that *The Old Man and the Sea* portrays not a man opposed to nature, but a human being inseparably connected to it – psychologically, spiritually, and even physically. Santiago is a man in conflict primarily with himself, struggling with his weaknesses, wounded pride, feelings of helplessness, and at times, a sense of destruction. As Van Noy and Woods (2018) argue, "Hemingway presents a view of nature not as person against or in conflict with the natural world but as person immersed fully in it." They further note that "It is more accurate to say that [...] Santiago struggle[s] more against [himself] than with nature".

Santiago can be understood as a man in process: confused, conflicted with himself, and continuously attempting to discern what is good and what is wrong. Throughout the narrative, doubts and regrets accompany his actions, reflecting a deeply introspective journey. From this perspective, Santiago embodies not only a human being deeply engaged with his own struggles but also a consciousness that is not fully anthropocentric.

It seems that the protagonist starts to recognize the interdependence between himself and the natural world at the moment when he sets out to sea. On land, Santiago's purpose appears unambiguous – he wants to catch a fish. Yet once he enters the vast, non-human seascape and begins to observe the creatures inhabiting it and interact with them, the validity of this goal gradually comes into question. This shift in perception marks the beginning of a process of self-realisation, in which he progressively comes to see nature not merely as a resource to be used, but as a participant in his moral and existential journey.

4.2. The human-animal relationship – equality and respect

In Hemingway's depiction of the relationship between man and nature, one cannot fail to notice an attempt to convey a sense of equality between the two. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Santiago repeatedly addresses animals using the word "brother": "down we sail like brothers" (Hemingway 1982: 85), "I have killed this fish which is my brother" (Hemingway 1982: 81). The term "friend" also appears several times: "He was very fond of flying fish as they were his principal friends on the ocean" (Hemingway 1982: 22).

Interestingly, Santiago applies these designations not only to the creatures he encounters by chance during his voyage but also to the marlin he ultimately manages to catch. He does not distinguish between animals he finds pleasant or helpful and those which challenge or harm him. Even the sharks that destroy his hard-won prize are not depicted as purely evil but rather as natural participants in the same struggle for survival. In this sense, Santiago establishes no hierarchy among living beings; he places all creatures, including himself, on an equal plane within the natural order.

As Baker observes, the bond which connects Santiago with the animal world is rendered with striking authenticity. "His [Santiago's] grateful sense of brotherhood with the creatures of the water and the air is", writes Baker, "though full of love, essentially realistic and unsentimental" (Baker 1956: 302). It may be concluded that Hemingway's portrayal of Santiago's relationship with nature transcends simple sentimentality. Santiago's sense of kinship with animals is not idealized or romanticized; rather, it reflects a deep awareness of the natural world's inherent balance which encompasses both beauty and brutality. This "realistic and unsentimental" brotherhood suggests that true harmony with nature arises not from dominance or sentiment, but from recognition of one's place within its cyclical, often harsh order.

The notion of equality can also be discerned in the way Santiago compares himself to the sea creatures he encounters. Reflecting on the marlin he caught, Santiago admits, "I am only better than him through trickery and he meant me no harm" (Hemingway 1982: 85). This statement reveals Santiago's awareness that his victory is not a result of moral or natural superiority, but rather of human cunning and the use of tools. His recognition that he triumphs only through trickery underscores a sense of humility and self-criticism, suggesting that the distinction between man and animal may be less profound than it seems.

A similar sentiment appears when Santiago reflects on the shark: "The dentuso is cruel and able and strong and intelligent. But I was more intelligent than he was. Perhaps not, he thought. Perhaps I was only better armed" (Hemingway 1982: 89). Here again, Santiago questions his presumed superiority, acknowledging that his advantage lies not in essence but in circumstance.

It is also worth noting that after the protagonist hooks the marlin, he utters the words, "I wish I could see him only once to know what I have against me" (Hemingway 1982: 38). This statement may at first seem like a pragmatic desire to assess the situation and thus to secure victory. However, the tone of his words suggests something deeper – Santiago does not display dominance over the marlin, on the contrary, even as he pulls the fish on his line, he acknowledges its strength and dignity. He perceives the fish not merely as prey, but as a worthy opponent.

Santiago is acutely aware of how deeply similar humans and animals are – physically, behaviorally, and emotionally. He pays attention not only to their strength and instinct but also to the capacity to feel and to think. This awareness is central to his worldview and profoundly shapes his relationship with the sea and its creatures. As he reflects, "I have such a heart too and my feet and hands are like theirs" (Hemingway 1982: 29–30),

acknowledging the physical resemblance between himself and the turtles he encounters.

Yet what matters even more is his recognition of animals' emotional depth. When he observes the porpoises, he notes, "They play and make jokes and love one another. They are our brothers like the flying fish" (Hemingway 1982: 39–40). For Santiago, animals are not mere elements of nature but sentient beings capable of affection, fear, and companionship. This perception becomes especially poignant when he wonders about the marlin's feelings: "Could it have been hunger that made him desperate, or was he frightened by something in the night? Maybe he suddenly felt fear. But he was such a calm, strong fish and he seemed so fearless and so confident. It is strange" (Hemingway 1982: 71). One may say that Hemingway presents Santiago as a man who recognizes no emotional boundary between humans and animals, viewing both as equally capable of feeling and suffering.

Equally important is the respect Santiago shows towards the marlin. He does not speak to it as a mere object of pursuit, but as to an equal and worthy opponent. "I shouldn't have gone out so far, fish", he said. "Neither for you nor for me. I'm sorry, fish" (Hemingway 1982: 95). His words convey regret and empathy, revealing his awareness of the moral cost of his victory. Notably, Hemingway consistently refers to the marlin using the pronouns "he" and "him", as in "But he was that big and at the end of this circle he came to the surface only thirty yards away and the man saw his tail out of water" (Hemingway 1982: 77). This linguistic choice further humanizes the fish and reinforces the sense of mutual recognition between the fisherman and his prey. In portraying the marlin with such dignity and emotional presence, Hemingway illustrates Santiago's belief that all living beings – humans or animals – are bound by the same struggle for survival and deserve equal respect.

4.3. Santiago's inner conflict and regret

Despite the deep respect Santiago feels for the marlin, he cannot escape the necessity – or perhaps the burden – of killing it. On one level, this act may be dictated by a simple instinct for survival; throughout the novel, we witness an old, impoverished fisherman hardened by life, struggling to make ends meet. However, when we consider the broader context Hemingway presents, it becomes clear that Santiago's motivation goes beyond mere necessity. The protagonist, ridiculed by other fishermen, is driven by pride and by a profound desire to prove his own strength and endurance. This tension gives rise to a deep internal conflict which intensifies as the narrative unfolds.

Towards the end of the novella, Santiago's reflections reveal growing doubt, regret and remorse, as he questions the moral legitimacy of his actions. We read: "Then he began to pity the great fish that he had hooked" (Hemingway 1982: 40), or "I wish it were a dream and that I had never hooked him. I'm sorry about it, fish. It makes everything wrong" (Hemingway 1982: 94). Hemingway thus portrays not only a physical struggle between man and nature but also – or perhaps most of all – a moral and spiritual internal battle through which Santiago seeks to understand what it truly means to live in harmony with the world around him. It seems that Santiago does not "represent the indisputable tragic hero, strongly affirming the spirit of man in conflict with natural laws", as Love (2003: 127) argues, but a man in conflict with his own morality.

Santiago's inner conflict does not end with the marlin's death; rather, it transforms into profound regret. He does not perceive his act as a triumph or a cause for celebration. There is no joy, no prideful satisfaction, only sorrow and a sense of moral responsibility. What seems crucial, Santiago even reflects that killing the marlin might be a sin – "You loved him when he was alive and you loved him after. If you love him, it is not a sin to kill him. Or is it more?" (Hemingway 1982: 90-91). Santiago's doubt introduces a moral dimension that transcends the

physical act of killing. His remorse reflects a deeply spiritual awareness; he understands that by killing the marlin, he has violated a sacred bond between man and nature.

4.4. The resonance of the story

It is important to distinguish between everything that Santiago represents and embodies and the broader resonance of Hemingway's text. While Santiago's beliefs and actions may occupy a space somewhere between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric perspectives, the novella as a whole conveys a distinctly non-anthropocentric message.

In the end, Santiago returns with only the skeleton of the marlin, and this apparent futility of his efforts underscores the limitations of human agency in the natural world. His struggle, ultimately in vain, illustrates that defiance of nature does not yield triumph; rather, it becomes a source of moral dilemma and profound guilt.

It seems that Santiago's experience leads him towards a form of humility, and the narrative allows readers to observe this shift. Concluding the novella with a scene in which Santiago dreams of watching lions may be an attempt to convey Hemingway's evolving perspective on the relationship between humans and nature. In this vision, nature is not merely an adversary to be conquered, but a realm in which humans can participate with respect and admiration. Hemingway constructs a vision in which reverence triumphs over domination, and anthropocentric motives give way to harmony.

5. Conclusions

The Old Man and the Sea is by no means a celebration of killing but, as Hediger aptly notes, "a critique of triumphalist hunting" (2008: 45). Admittedly, the text resists simple classification, revealing both anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric elements. Yet, its overall resonance leans towards a vision which

questions human supremacy and the glorification of conquest. Hemingway's narrative is not about victory over nature, but about a man engaged in an internal moral struggle. Santiago, though he kills, does not triumph – his victory turns into failure, and his strength into remorse.

Through the act of hunting the marlin, a process of self-realization unfolds: man comes to understand that he does not stand above nature but exists within it. The animals he encounters are not his enemies but participants in the same rhythm of life. One might even conclude that Santiago, much like Hemingway himself, gradually comes to realize that human relationships with the nonhuman world should not be defined by domination or hierarchy, but by interdependence founded on equality.

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