

## **CUBA, THE SEA AND HEMINGWAY**

Toma Sava

Assist., PhD, "Aurel Vlaicu" University of Arad, CUBA, THE SEA AND HEMINGWAY

*Abstract: The article proposes a comparative analysis of the main thematic variations between Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Islands in the Stream*. It addresses the field related critical views pertaining to the role of creation, experience and the sea in the context of the two common denominators for the aforementioned works: Cuba and the sea.*

*Key words: autobiography, the sea, art, masochism, cultural representation*

Literary historiography asserts that *The Old Man and the Sea* and *Islands in the Stream* were originally meant to be part of a trilogy dedicated to the sea (Baker, 1972). Yet, whatever the auctorial intention might have been, there are notable differences pertaining to how Hemingway discusses two of the shared themes (i.e. the sea and Cuba) throughout the aforementioned writings. The aim of this paper is to offer a few theoretical observations addressing the main critical views on the subject.

### **Cuba**

Cuba appears to be a place of abandon, for both Thomas Hudson and Santiago have, in a certain sense, given up. The former is portrayed in the first lines of the second chapter as:

After they were all gone he lay on the fiber matting on the floor and listened to the wind. It was blowing a gale from the northwest and he spread blankets on the floor, piled pillows to brace against the stuffed chairback he placed against the leg of the living room table, and wearing a long, peaked cap to shade his eyes, read his mail in the good light from the big reading lamp that stood on the table. His cat lay on his chest and he pulled a light blanket over them both and opened and read the letters and drank from a glass of whisky and water that he replaced on the

floor between sips. His hand found the glass when he wanted it (Hemingway, 2014: 1424). *Islands in the Stream*. Ch 2. Cuba

while the latter:

He no longer dreamed of storms, nor of women, nor of great occurrences, nor of great fish, nor fights, nor contests of strength, nor of his wife. He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach (Hemingway, 2014: 1234). *The Old Man and the Sea*

Yet, the main character of *The old Man and the Sea* is a classic Hemingway hero type. Santiago is one of those characters who can be perfectly inscribed in the long line of heroes who “represent some notion of a code, some notion of honor, that makes a man a man, and that distinguishes him from people who merely follow their random impulse and who are, by consequence, 'messy'” (Glasser, 1966:5). More to the point, Santiago role is to primarily serve the author’s vision on what Llosa calls Hemingway’s anthropological motto, one in which a particular type of bravery prevails regardless of costs: „here too there is the spartan suggestion that, by confronting their own trials with Santiago's courage and dignity, men can attain, in spite of defeat, moral stature and a justification for their existence [...] A sad but not a pessimistic story, it shows that under the direst trials and tribulations, a man's behavior may transform defeat into triumph and add meaning to his life” (Llosa: 2000: 44).

What this translates into is the advancement of the author’s creed that there is no absolute failure possible in the construct of the human condition: “The old man fights gallantly against the sharks until he is sore and exhausted. But still he fights. He says to himself, "I'll fight them until I die." He fights the sharks even after he knows the fight is useless and the sharks come in larger packs. He fights with his oar and finally he fights with his tiller. During the long fight, the old man says, "But man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated” (Tillinghast, 1983: 38); fact that transpires throughout the author’s entire work, also because: “Ernest Hemingway carried with him always an inheritance from the community where he grew up, a faith in the efficacy and staying power of certain moral values. Strongest among these was the axiom that you had to earn your happiness” (Donaldson, 1971: 420).

Nonetheless, there are important differences between the two protagonists who, are still inscribed within the narrative structure particular to Hemingway’s style; the author, when he

“cannot find external aid in coping with the apparent structureless, chaotic universe, then, of necessity, he relies upon his own resources to find structure, order or meaning in a world that denies such qualities possible” (Buzzelli, 1972:6).

So what type of character is Thomas Hudson then if we consider him in the second chapter of the novel? The locus of the action is of utmost importance here since Cuba as a setting is a pervasive and non-accidental setting for Hemingway.

We cannot speak of an accidental choice of location mainly since, in general, “the manuscripts show that Hemingway was not only a great natural writer, possessed of verve and linguistic flow, but also a fine editor of his own fiction” (Oldsey, 1980, 213), and, more to the point, “there is evidence that most of Hemingway's successful fiction has undergone not only serious and major revision, but long periods of pre-writing” (Wagner, 1972: 533).

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If we accept the thesis that “the idea of tragedy lies at the center of Hemingway's oeuvre but that this idea is worked out narratively in different novelistic forms throughout his career” (Thorne, 1980: 520), further enquiry is needed.

In Santiago's case, Cuba is just a general setting for the action. Autobiographical notes abound about the actual occurrence which triggered the inspiration for the short story. Yet, Cuba serves an entirely different role in *Islands in the Stream*. I argue that the seclusion adopted by Hudson on the island of Cuba is a suspended moment of the narrative which under the guise of a loss of creational space enacts the reconsideration of the role of women in the flow of the narrative. The dialogue between Hudson and Honest Lil is an instant of reconceptualization of the position of women in the process of creation, because it is in fact this very conversation with a female character that triggers Hudson's symbolic reenactment of his traumas. There is an element of masochism at this particular point in the narrative; the conversation between Thomas Hudson and the prostitute functioning as plot generating machine. It is driven by a pleasure principle inherent in Hudson that could be best deconstructed through Freud's essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

Freud, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, argues that persistence of human trauma is the result of the constant battle in the human unconscious between one's libido and narcissism. Thus, it is on the surface level an unpleasant, sorrowful experience, but on a more deep level, it stands for a pleasure full, narcissistic performance. It is a battle of seeking gratification (led by the sexual instinct) and returning to death (led by the death instinct). One that suffers a traumatic event is caught up in the dialogue between these two instincts and the result is a constant compulsion to repeat. This repetition is the manifestation of the human psyche in the performance reenactment of the traumatic experience with the aim to overcome that particular trauma. But the act of repetition provides the patient with pleasure, even though the pleasure experienced is more subversive in the sense that symbolically takes the form of frustration or hatred, in the case of Thomas Hudson, masochism.

The repetitive chains of Hudson's trauma are set free through the conversation with Honest Lil. At the requests of the woman, Hudson emerges into a process of storytelling which brings forth images of his traumatic past where sexual pleasure is always confronted with painful afterthoughts. In this view, the creativity and vocation of the artist is being transposed into the realm of storytelling, of a narration that goes beyond the pleasure principle and where through self-inflected masochistic story telling Hudson tries to work through his traumas. It is a narration directed by the death drive, by the longing to reach a state of quiescence. Masochism in this context is linked to narcissism, because the subject performing the narration, the recount of its past traumas is commodifying, re-appropriating itself so as to be able to open new possibilities for the other, for new open ended narratives. The setting of the novel at this point sustains the interim position which Hudson occupies. *Cuba*, the second part of the three bodies of the novel is a space of recollection and plotting. It is the environment that serves the character the possibility to revisit its past encounters with others which have marked its subjectivity. The confessions to Honest Lil embody exactly these instances.

The encounter between Hudson and his ex-wife in this very part of the novel underline to a greater extent the death driven plot of Hudson's character. If the paintings in the beginning had the role of creating a bridge between the present situation of Hudson and his past, now they fulfill the role of melancholy before death. After Hudson and his ex-wife make love, and he informs her of the death of their son, he chooses to offer her any of the paintings she wants and all of the letters from their son. Hudson's interim position in Cuba signifies his masochistic re-articulation

of his past traumas with the aim to work through and possibly overcome their causes, but as Peter Brooks points out “all narrative may be in essence obituary in that [...] the retrospective knowledge that it seeks, the knowledge that comes after, stands on the far side of the end, in human terms on the far side of death” (Brooks: 1984, 95).

### **The Sea**

So what about the water surrounding the locus of the action? Again, in *The Old Man and the Sea*, water (i.e. the sea) is just another necessary thematic construct to afford action and to produce statement. The difference between the two writings is nuanced: “To Santiago, the Stream is *la mer* or the irrational female embodying beauty whose “wild or wicked” actions derive from the moon which “affects her as it does a woman”. Similarly, Thomas Hudson recognizes the essential beauty inherent in the Stream, even though at times he calls her puta” (Buzzelli, 1972: 47). More to the point, “the old fisherman [...] lives pagan-like in a personified world: the sea is a woman (*la mar*); the marlin, the porpoises, and the stars are his “brothers”” (Johnston, 1970: 389).

But, although “it is entirely wrong to regard Santiago's individual experience as valuable only as a lesson in the folly of isolated activity” (Bickford, 1966: 132), he also takes his lesson from the sea to and into a live community whereas Hudson into a house that “was built on the highest part of the narrow tongue of land between the harbor and the open sea. It had lasted through three hurricanes and it was built solid as a ship” (Hemingway, 2014: 1280); hence a place of isolation and also survival.

Yet, Thomas Hudson and Santiago both *kill* a giant marlin; Santiago ends up regretting the kill and accepting the destruction of the great fish as a punishment for reaching beyond the *depth* afforded to men: “in winning his struggle with the marlin and in killing him, the old man sets in motion the sequence of events which take from him the great fish whom he has come to love and with whom he identifies himself completely” (Burhans, 1960: 449). On the other hand, when Th. Hudson's son fights the fish and ends up losing it (albeit in the more concrete sense of the word) the main character decides that “I'm going to paint it truer than a photograph” (Hemingway, 2014: 1383) – in the grand scheme of the novel an utterance derived from Hudson's need to oppose a faith over which he has no control (Buzzelli, 1972) - and thus producing the complete

opposite to Santiago's position. There are no great lessons to be learned and no direct consequences in this instance: one hero is active, the other reflexive.

Hence, we have two different types of *Cuba* and two *seas*: a neutral yet animate setting for the hero to fulfil his destiny (*The Old Man and the Sea*) and one far more complex (*Islands in the Stream*). This move from simple towards complex becomes even more apparent when the setting of the two writings, originally meant to be part of the same narrative, is analyzed contrastively.

Of course, it is also of importance *who*<sup>1</sup> wrote the novel, since besides the public image of the author (cultivated and imposed alike, just as in the case of the other great American of the outdoors, Walt Whitman), a research into autobiographical factors could probably forward conclusive responses. However, the purpose of this article was to articulate the existence of nuanced differences between the two major shared themes. It becomes obvious that the works referred to offer depictions of *Cuba* and *the Sea* that, although belong to the same vision on *tragedy*, are structurally different.

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<sup>1</sup> In other words "there is at least one other Hemingway as well - the battered, prematurely old man who returned from World War n for his last fifteen years, struggling to impose harmony on his domestic, psychological, and artistic life, producing, to be sure, *The Old Man and the Sea* and the almost-finished *A Moveable Feast*, while wrestling with extraordinary physical disabilities and intractable personal demons under the near constant glare of kleig lights, cameras, and instant public exposure"(Rovit, 1999: 614).

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