

**Beyond Conquest: Rethinking Heroism in Hemingway's
*The Old Man and the Sea***

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Abstract:

The environmental crises of the twenty-first century have renewed critical interest in literary representations of nature, making ecocriticism and Blue Humanities vital approaches to understanding the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world. Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* has been widely interpreted through existential, Christian, and psychological perspectives, yet its ecological dimensions remain insufficiently explored. This article argues that the novella redefines heroism as an ecological practice grounded in humility, reciprocity, and coexistence rather than domination. Drawing on ecocriticism, Blue Humanities, and Environmental Humanities, it examines Santiago's interactions with the sea, the marlin, birds, turtles, and sharks, showing that the ocean functions as an active ecological presence and not merely a passive setting. Hemingway presents the marine world as an interconnected community where human dignity arises through participation, respect, and ethical responsibility. In foregrounding ecological interdependence over conquest, *The Old Man and the Sea* anticipates contemporary environmental thought and offers a compelling vision of sustainable coexistence between humanity and the sea.

Keywords: Ernest Hemingway; *The Old Man and the Sea*; Ecocriticism; Blue Humanities; Environmental Humanities; Marine Ethics

Introduction

The accelerating environmental crises of the twenty-first century—climate change, biodiversity loss, marine degradation—have expanded the scope of literary environmental studies. Ecocriticism, once centred on landscapes and wilderness, now addresses ecological ethics, multispecies relationships, material agency, and

planetary sustainability (Glotfelty and Fromm; Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*; Clark). Blue Humanities has extended this discourse, positioning oceans as dynamic ecological spaces that shape history, culture, and identity instead of serving as passive settings (Mentz, *An Introduction to the Blue Humanities*; Jue; DeLoughrey). Together, these approaches offer a productive framework for re-examining literary texts that foreground the ecological significance of the sea.

Hemingway is particularly notable for depicting the relationship between humans and nature with precision. *The Old Man and the Sea* has traditionally been read through existential, Christian, and psychological lenses that privilege Santiago's individual struggle and treat nature as symbolic backdrop. Its representation of the marine world as an ecological community, whose rhythms shape human identity and ethical responsibility, has received comparatively little attention.

Published in 1952, the novella narrates the eighty-four-day ordeal of Santiago, an ageing Cuban fisherman whose encounter with a giant marlin becomes far more than a story of endurance. Hemingway constructs the Gulf Stream as a vibrant ecosystem inhabited by birds, turtles, flying fish, dolphins, sharks, and the marlin, each contributing to an intricate web of ecological relationships. Santiago's preference for the affectionate, feminine *la mar* over the more distanced *el mar* signals his sense of the ocean as a companion rather than an adversary (Hemingway 32). His survival depends less on conquering nature than on understanding its rhythms and accepting his place within its larger order.

Ecocriticism supplies an essential framework here. Glotfelty defines the field as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (xviii), and Buell argues that environmentally oriented literature grants the non-human world an active presence instead of reducing it to scenic background (*The Environmental Imagination* 7–27). Blue Humanities complements this view by shifting attention from terrestrial landscapes to oceans as dynamic ecological systems. Environmental Humanities adds further texture through its emphasis on relational existence across species boundaries: Haraway's "making kin," Alaimo's trans-corporeality, and Iovino and Oppermann's Material Ecocriticism, in which matter itself carries narrative agency.

This article addresses a gap in existing criticism. Studies of the novella often foreground Santiago's endurance and overlook the ecological relationships that redefine heroism as coexistence rather than conquest. Tracing Santiago's relationships with the sea and its inhabitants, this analysis shows how Hemingway anticipates several concerns of contemporary environmental thought, and how human dignity here emerges through ecological belonging rather than mastery over nature.

Ecocriticism, Blue Humanities, and Environmental Humanities: A Theoretical Framework

Ecocriticism reshapes literary studies by turning attention from human-centred interpretation toward the relationship between literature and the natural environment. Nature, in this view, is not passive backdrop but an active presence shaping human experience and ethical understanding. Garrard broadens Glotfelty's and Buell's foundational claims by identifying recurring ecological concerns—wilderness, animals, dwelling, environmental ethics—as central to literary representations of nature. Clark, Zapf, and Estok extend the field further still, toward planetary crises, cultural renewal, and the interrogation of anthropocentric attitudes.

A central principle of ecocriticism is the shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. Where anthropocentric thought interprets nature through its usefulness to humans, ecocentrism recognizes intrinsic value in the non-human world, positioning humans as participants within ecological systems of reciprocity and interdependence rather than as their masters. This shift offers a compelling framework for Hemingway's fiction, in which survival depends on observation, adaptation, and respect for environmental limits. Earlier criticism tends to treat the sea as a symbolic landscape against which Santiago's existential struggle unfolds. Read ecocritically, however, the marine environment becomes an active ecological presence that shapes his knowledge, his decisions, and his identity.

Blue Humanities addresses ecocriticism's traditionally terrestrial emphasis by foregrounding oceans as dynamic spaces that shape ecological consciousness, history, and culture. Mentz argues that the sea's fluidity resists stable human boundaries; Jue demonstrates that seawater is itself a medium through which ecological knowledge is produced; DeLoughrey situates marine environments within wider debates on the Anthropocene and environmental justice. Environmental Humanities enriches this perspective still further. Haraway's "making kin" advocates ethical relationships that extend beyond species boundaries. Alaimo's trans-corporeality highlights the material exchanges linking human bodies with ecological systems. Iovino and Oppermann's Material Ecocriticism proposes that matter itself possesses narrative agency.

Together, these three frameworks illuminate the ethical relationship between Santiago and the more-than-human world, foreground the agency of the sea, and highlight the interconnected material existence of human and non-human life. They position *The Old Man and the Sea* as a sophisticated ecological text, one that redefines heroism through humility, reciprocity, and coexistence.

The Sea as an Ethical Presence: Reimagining Human–Nature Relationships

Hemingway's most significant ecological achievement is his portrayal of the sea as an ethical presence rather than a passive setting. The Gulf Stream is not merely

a backdrop to Santiago's journey; it is a living ecosystem whose currents, weather, and marine life continually shape his choices and identity. Through his interactions with the sea, Hemingway challenges anthropocentric assumptions, presenting survival as a process of ecological participation grounded in respect, observation, and humility.

This ecological consciousness surfaces first in Santiago's language. The younger fishermen call the sea *el mar* and regard it as an adversary or a resource. Santiago calls it *la mar*, "which is what people call her in Spanish when they love her" (Hemingway 32). Where *el mar* implies ownership and conquest, *la mar* expresses intimacy, turning the sea into a living companion whose value reaches beyond its capacity to provide a livelihood.

That relationship rests, too, on knowledge built through sustained observation: reading currents, watching birds, studying clouds, anticipating weather. Santiago's expertise comes from decades of coexistence, not technological superiority, and this reflects Buell's claim that environmentally conscious literature grants agency to the non-human world (*The Environmental Imagination* 7–27). The sea governs his journey by determining the movement of fish and the terms of his struggle. He does not try to command these forces; he adapts to them with patience, and in doing so embodies an ecocentric worldview in which humans remain participants within larger ecological systems.

Blue Humanities strengthens this reading. The sea's fluidity resists control and compels negotiation rather than conquest, while seawater itself shapes perception and understanding (Mentz; Jue). Alaimo's trans-corporeality clarifies the physical dimension of this bond: salt water, sun, wind, and fishing line mark Santiago's body just as they mark the marine creatures around him, so that his flesh registers the same forces that shape theirs.

Santiago's talk to the sea and its creatures is not simply the habit of a lonely man; he addresses them as fellow participants in a shared ecosystem, an ethic of coexistence that Haraway's "making kin" helps to name. One brief episode makes this vivid: a tired warbler lands on his fishing line during its migration, and instead of shooing it off, Santiago gently urges it to rest before continuing on. An ordinary encounter becomes, in Hemingway's hands, an affirmation of shared vulnerability.

The sea itself remains both nurturing and indifferent throughout, giving food and livelihood while demanding endurance and respect in return. Santiago neither romanticizes this duality nor fears it; he accepts it as the basic condition of existence. His dignity comes from understanding the sea's rhythms rather than resisting them, an insight close to Clark's argument that ecological thinking requires recognizing the

limits of human agency within planetary systems. By making the Gulf Stream an ethical and ecological presence in its own right, Hemingway redefines heroism: Santiago's greatness lies not in conquering nature but in sustaining a relationship with it built on humility, reciprocity, and responsibility.

Brotherhood with the More-than-Human World

The novella goes further still, dissolving the conventional hierarchy between humans and the natural world. Santiago is not an isolated hero struggling against nature; he is a participant in a diverse marine community in which humans, birds, fish, turtles, and sharks share dependence on the sea. The result is an ecological ethic rooted in coexistence and mutual respect.

Ecocriticism holds that the non-human world carries intrinsic value rather than existing solely for human benefit—a claim close to Naess's Deep Ecology, which insists that all life has inherent worth regardless of its usefulness to humans. Hemingway's marine creatures are autonomous beings, and Santiago approaches them with admiration and empathy rather than a sense of superiority.

Birds occupy a particular place in his ecological understanding. He watches their movements because they signal the presence of fish, but his interest in them exceeds that practical use: he feels for the small migratory birds crossing the vast ocean, and when an exhausted warbler lands on his line, he lets it rest. Ethical concern in this novella is not confined to the human. Santiago calls the flying fish his "principal friends" (Hemingway 32), admires the endurance of turtles, and recognizes the intelligence of dolphins—creatures that function as living parts of the ecosystem, not as decoration.

Haraway's "making kin" offers a useful frame for this, since ethical community here extends beyond species lines. Santiago treats marine creatures as companions bound to him by the same natural forces that govern every organism, and this fellowship reaches its fullest expression in his bond with the giant marlin. Even before he sees the fish, he imagines it as a worthy companion rather than an adversary; as the struggle wears on, his admiration only deepens, until he tells it, "Fish, I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends" (Hemingway 60). The line captures the novella's central tension: Santiago must kill the marlin to survive, and yet necessity never erodes his respect for its life.

His repeated word for the fish—brother—dismantles the usual distinction between hunter and hunted, close to what Alaimo calls trans-corporeality: the material interconnectedness of all living beings. Material Ecocriticism sharpens the point further. Iovino and Oppermann argue that matter itself carries agency, and in this novella birds, fish, turtles, and the sea shape Santiago's decisions and guide the narrative rather than simply decorating it.

Hemingway resists sentimentalizing any of this. Santiago's affection for marine life does not erase the facts of predation and survival; every killing carries gratitude and reflection alongside it. The novella rejects both an exploitative view of nature and a romantic one that ignores ecological reality, proposing instead an ethic of responsible coexistence in which necessity is tempered by humility and respect. Heroism, on this reading, comes not from conquest but from recognizing kinship with the more-than-human world.

The Marlin: Ecological Equality and the Ethics of Survival

The encounter between Santiago and the marlin forms the ethical and ecological centre of the novella. It is more than a contest between fisherman and fish; it becomes a meditation on survival, dignity, and humanity's place among other living things. Hemingway never reduces the marlin to a trophy. It is an autonomous being whose strength and endurance command admiration, so the struggle plays out as mutual recognition rather than domination.

From the moment the marlin takes the bait, Santiago responds with awe rather than triumph: "He is wonderful and strange and who knows how old he is" (Hemingway 53). As the fight continues, that admiration hardens into identification. Watching the marlin endure, he declares, "I have never seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than you, brother" (Hemingway 102). Calling the fish *brother* dissolves the hierarchy between hunter and hunted, so that heroism belongs to life itself and not to humans alone. Naess's Deep Ecology helps explain the logic here: all beings carry intrinsic value independent of their use to humans, and Santiago never doubts the marlin's dignity even though his own survival requires killing it.

Their physical bond deepens this sense of equality. The line joining them means every movement of the fish causes pain in Santiago's hands and back, and every move he makes affects the marlin below—suffering runs both ways, illustrating trans-corporeality in practice. Buell's idea of non-human agency applies just as directly: the marlin is never a passive object but an active force, setting the pace and course of the encounter.

Hemingway sharpens this ethical tension further when Santiago concedes the marlin's right to survive: "You are killing me, fish... But you have a right to. Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than you, brother... I do not care who kills who" (Hemingway 102). The line erases any remaining hierarchy between them; each has an equal claim to life, and each earns the other's respect. Hemingway still avoids romanticizing the encounter—Santiago does not stop fighting because he admires the fish, and the marine world he inhabits remains governed by necessity and predation. Respect, here, is an obligation that accompanies survival rather than a substitute for it.

Once the marlin is secured, Santiago wonders briefly whether he has gone “too far out” (Hemingway 127)—a small moment that carries a larger ecological warning about the limits of human ambition, and one that anticipates the sharks soon to arrive. In the end, Hemingway redefines heroism through this sense of ecological equality: Santiago’s greatness lies not in defeating the marlin but in recognizing it as a fellow inhabitant of a shared world.

Sharks, Ecological Limits, and the Fragility of Human Achievement

The sharks’ arrival marks a turning point, converting what looked like triumph into a meditation on ecological limits and the impermanence of human achievement. They are not conventional villains. Rather, they embody the natural processes sustaining the marine ecosystem—predation and renewal, not obstacles inserted merely for suspense.

The first shark comes once the marlin’s blood spreads through the water, rising from the depths to pick up the scent and follow the course the skiff and fish had taken (Hemingway 110); its behaviour is biological necessity, not malice. Santiago still admires it, calling the mako “beautiful and noble and knows no fear of anything” (Hemingway 117)—the same respect he showed the marlin. Hemingway refuses to sort nature into moral categories of good and evil; predator and prey alike are members of one ecological community, and predation itself is a necessary process rather than a cruelty.

Santiago fights the sharks relentlessly, yet his resistance highlights human vulnerability more than dominance. After losing his harpoon to the first shark, he improvises weapons from an oar, a knife, and finally the tiller of his skiff, each confrontation costing him strength as the marlin is steadily consumed. What the sharks take apart is also an illusion: the illusion of ownership. They reclaim the fish through nature’s ordinary cycle, proof that possession in the marine world is always temporary and that human labour can never fully separate itself from the ecological processes surrounding it.

Santiago’s line—“Man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated” (Hemingway 114)—takes on added weight in this light. It affirms resilience against forces no one can master, rather than celebrating a triumph over nature. Santiago holds onto his dignity by refusing to give up courage or responsibility, so that heroism here means ethical perseverance, not domination. When he finally reaches the harbour, only the marlin’s skeleton remains—a fitting image for the ongoing cycle of life, death, and renewal that governs the marine world, and a reminder that permanence belongs to nature’s processes, not to human effort. Blue Humanities helps clarify this ending further: oceans resist any lasting human claim to permanence or control, operating instead through fluid ecological relationships rather than fixed boundaries (Mentz; DeLoughrey). Santiago, for his

part, never turns against the sea. He curses neither the sharks nor the natural order that cost him his catch, accepting instead that generosity and destruction belong to the same living system—a mature ecological outlook close to Clark's argument that ecological thought requires acknowledging the limits of human agency within planetary systems. The shark episodes complete Hemingway's redefinition of heroism: greatness, finally, lies in recognizing that human life is inseparable from the larger rhythms of the sea.

Hemingway's Ecological Vision in the Anthropocene

Although published in 1952, well before climate change and sustainability became central humanities concerns, the novella's ecological vision anticipates many questions now associated with the Anthropocene. Hemingway challenges assumptions of human supremacy by imagining nature as an interconnected community governed by reciprocity, ecological limits, and shared dependence. Santiago's relationship with the sea shows that survival depends less on mastery than on understanding one's place within the natural world.

The Anthropocene has sharpened debate over humanity's impact on the planet—climate change, biodiversity loss, overfishing, marine pollution—exposing the limits of treating nature purely as a resource. Hemingway offers a different model. Santiago never treats the sea as property to exploit; it is a living environment deserving respect, and his lasting affection for *la mar* reflects an ethic of stewardship grounded in humility rather than ownership. This view aligns with Buell's claim that environmental literature grants the non-human world an active role in shaping ethical consciousness (*The Environmental Imagination* 7–27). Throughout the novella, the sea, the birds, the turtles, the flying fish, the marlin, and the sharks all carry agency, decentring the human perspective and putting ecological relationship, not individual achievement, at the foundation of life.

The novella also anticipates present-day concerns about biodiversity. Each organism holds a distinct yet interconnected place in the marine ecosystem: birds signal the presence of fish, flying fish sustain larger predators, turtles move through the ocean's currents, and sharks recycle marine life. The health of the whole depends on these relationships among its parts. Santiago succeeds not because he controls the sea but because he learns to read and adapt to its changing conditions, an idea close to Mentz's and Jue's accounts of oceans as dynamic, resistant environments.

Environmental Humanities deepens the point by stressing the interconnectedness of human and non-human existence, reinforcing Hemingway's vision of humanity as part of the natural world rather than set apart from it. When the sharks destroy the marlin, the novella exposes the limits of human ambition, unsettling assumptions of unlimited ownership and reminding readers that human achievement remains subject to ecological systems that continually regulate life and

renewal (Clark; DeLoughrey). Seen from the vantage of the Anthropocene, the novella offers an environmental philosophy in which dignity comes from humility, resilience from adaptation, and survival from respectful coexistence with the more-than-human world.

Conclusion

The Old Man and the Sea has traditionally been read through existential, Christian, psychological, and modernist frameworks that treat nature largely as a symbolic backdrop to Santiago's personal struggle. This study has argued that the novella also carries a coherent ecological vision, one made visible through the combined lenses of ecocriticism, Blue Humanities, and Environmental Humanities. Rather than staging a conflict between humanity and nature, Hemingway imagines a world sustained by reciprocity, ecological interdependence, and ethical coexistence.

The sea, this analysis has shown, is far more than a physical setting. Hemingway makes the Gulf Stream a living ecological presence whose currents, weather, and marine life continually shape Santiago's perceptions and actions. His affectionate use of *la mar* signals a relationship built on respect rather than ownership, and his intimate knowledge of the marine environment shows that survival depends on observation, adaptation, and cooperation with natural rhythms. Equally important are his relationships with the wider marine world: his compassion for birds, his admiration for turtles and flying fish, his respect for sharks, and his deep identification with the marlin together reject any assumption that humanity stands above other forms of life. Calling the marlin his "brother" captures the novella's ecological philosophy in a single word, turning the act of fishing from conquest into an encounter defined by reciprocity and ethical responsibility.

The marlin and shark episodes reinforce this vision by exposing the limits of human control. Santiago catches the marlin but cannot keep it from the ecological processes that govern marine life, and Hemingway treats this not as failure but as an occasion for heroism understood differently: the capacity to meet ecological reality with humility, resilience, and moral integrity. Read through Blue Humanities, the ocean itself emerges as a dynamic force with its own material agency, shaping human identity and ethical consciousness in turn (Mentz; Jue; DeLoughrey).

The novella's continuing relevance lies in its bearing on present environmental concerns. Amid climate change, biodiversity loss, marine pollution, and unsustainable resource use, Hemingway's ecological vision offers a genuine alternative to narratives of human domination, one grounded in the recognition that the more-than-human world carries value of its own. Bringing together ecocriticism, Blue Humanities, and Environmental Humanities, this study offers a fresh reading of Hemingway's final major work—one in which heroism becomes an ethical practice rooted in humility, coexistence, and ecological responsibility.

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