Geocriticism of *The Old Man and the Sea* *

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“The old man” and “the sea” are two essential parts of *The Old Man and the Sea*; however, most critics have given priority to “the old man” when interpreting the short novel. This essay thinks that the sea is not just a setting for action and attempts to explore the multiple meaning of the sea from the perspective of geocriticism. With theories of Westphal’s geocriticism and Tally’s literary cartography, it analyzes what the sea as geography does to the old man, how the sea is crucial to Hemingway’s writing and how Hemingway maps the sea. Geocriticism of the novella offers new insights in understanding literature.

**Keywords:** Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea*, geocriticism, the sea, mapping

**Introduction**

Hemingway once stated that “the ocean is worth writing about just as a man is” when talking about *The Old Man and the Sea* in an interview (Bloom, 2005, p. 337). *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952) is the most outstanding of Hemingway’s later works which was cited when he won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1954. It tells the story of an old fisherman’s long and lonely struggle with a fish on the sea. In the novella, the old man, Santiago, is an artistic angler, a tough guy, a code hero who presents loneliness, exemplifies “grace under pressure” and illustrates existentialism. Then what about “the sea”?

The sea is often regarded as a setting. According to *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, “the setting of a single episode or scene within such a work is the particular physical location in which it takes place” (Abrams, 2009, p. 568). Yes, it is a setting. It is where the old man’s heroic deeds take place. But it is more than that. This essay prefers to call it geography as Laura Gruber Godfrey does. Godfrey (2016) makes it clear that “[her] choice of the term ‘geography’ over the more conventional literary term ‘setting’ is deliberate. To discuss Hemingway’s constructions of place as settings implies that they play a secondary role… On the contrary, Hemingway’s places themselves are central to his writing” (p. 19).

The sea matters in many respects, most of which were overlooked in the past. It is necessary to foreground the sea. This essay proposes to do a geocriticism of the novella and explore more about the sea. Geocriticism is an interdisciplinary method of literary analysis and literary theory that analyzes the interplay of spatial practices in literary texts. The term and theory of geocriticism was first put forward by Bertrand Westphal. He constructed the

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theoretical system by explaining three characteristics of postmodern space: spatio-temporality, transgressivity and referentiality; and four elements of geocriticism: multifocalization, polysensoriality, stratographic vision and intertextuality. Robert T. Tally Jr. is another leading figure in the field of geocriticism though his use of the term is different than that of Westphal. Tally’s geocriticism is an interpretative and analytic approach to narrative maps produced through literary cartography. As two leading figures in the field of geocriticism, both Westphal and Tally have an inclusive attitude toward geocritical approaches. Therefore, a broadly conceived concept of geocriticism is adopted in the following analysis.

### The Sea Defines the Old Man

Foster (2014) argues that geography can define or even develop character. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, the sea defines the old man. First of all, the sea determines the vocation of the old man. The first sentence in the novel “He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish” (Hemingway, 2013, p. 1) tells readers the old man’s occupation. Fishing, as a livelihood and an industry, is woven into the cultural context of this geographical place in which the old man is born to be a fisherman. Even when he doubts “[p]erhaps I should not have been a fisherman”, “[b]ut that was the thing that I was born for” (Hemingway, 2013, p. 34). The old man is skilled in fishing. The art and craft of fishing compose the body of the narrative (Sojka, 1985, edited in *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations: The Old Man and the Sea*). For instance, the old man knows how to predicate the weather based on the current (Hemingway, 2013, p. 5). He is good at using the current to row a boat effortlessly. He is exact when putting the bait and sardines, so is he when keeping the line. Careful in observation, he uses birds to locate fish and stars to check his course. Even though he is not as strong as when he was young, he knows many tricks and has resolution (Hemingway, 2013, pp. 12-13). These techniques and strategies of the fishing craft accumulated over the years and perfected into his personal art (Sojka, 1985).

The sea also affects the characteristics of the old man including his appearance, loneliness, bravery, resolution, and his interaction with the sea. The “brown blotches of the benevolent skin cancer” on the cheeks of the old man is a result of the sunlight on the tropic sea. His eyes “were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated” (Hemingway, 2013, p. 1). The poor old man is already too lonely to see the photograph of his late wife, and yet the boundless ocean amplifies his loneliness. He fishes alone in a skiff and the flying fish are his “principal friends on the ocean” (Hemingway, 2013, p. 17). He is all alone and he “said his thoughts aloud many times since there was no one that they could annoy” (Hemingway, 2013, p. 25). The old man expresses his wish for the boy to be here for many times. The sight of two porpoises playing and making jokes and loving one another on the sea and the recollection of a pair of marlins undoubtedly adds to his loneliness. When he sees a small bird, a warbler, he talks to the bird. During the struggle with the big fish, he keeps talking to the fish. Alone at sea, he ends up talking to his hand. Looking across the sea, he knows how alone he is, and he knows no man is ever alone on the sea.

The sea cultivates his his bravey and endurance as well as his compassion for nature. Santiago, though old, still dares to go far into the sea alone in a skiff. Lack strength and weapons, yet he has confidence and courage to struggle with the marlin and fight against the sharks. He believes that “man is not made for defeat. A man can be destroyed but not defeated” (Hemingway, 2013, p. 76). As a fisherman, what distinguishes this old man from
others is his love and compassion for the sea. He feels sorry for the small birds, wondering why such delicate birds are made when the ocean can be so cruel (Hemingway, 2013, p. 17), and then he shows a rare understanding of the cruelty of the ocean: “if she did wild or wicked things, it was because she could not help them. The moon affects her as it does a woman” (Hemingway, 2013, p. 18). He even respects and admires the marlin which is more noble than human. In his eyes, the marlin is not an enemy and it is unjust to kill the marlin in all his greatness and glory. Santiago kills fish out of vocational obligations not personal hatred.

**Being at Sea**

The sea defines the old man in many aspects. As a fisherman, the old man feels lost after eighty-four days without catching a fish. On the eighty-fifth day, he goes far out into the sea to try his luck. Too far out, the old man is “at sea”, both literally and figuratively. Being lost, the old man feels the anxiety to orient himself and his sense of being lost is intensified by the vastness of the sea. The expression being at sea means being lost is not coincident. On the one hand, when the old man is far out at sea, with no land visible, he tries to orient himself with the help of the glow from Havana, the sun, the moon and the stars. On the other hand, having lived in failure for a long time, the old man tries his best to hook the marlin and fight against the sharks.

Bloom (2005) thinks that Santiago “is too clearly an idealization of Hemingway himself” and that “it is so difficult to disentangle Santiago and Hemingway” (p. 338). Though Bloom’s criticism is in a negative way, it does imply that Santiago is Hemingway himself to some extent. Hemingway was also lost during that period of time. “Hemingway struggled with his fiction projects following the war, and the novel that he eventually published, *Across the River and Into the Trees* (1950), is generally considered his weakest” (MacGowan, 2011, p. 94). He needed to orient himself in the field of literature. In a sense, both Santiago and Hemingway are mapping their place, and the novel *The Old Man and the Sea* is a map or literary cartography to help both the character and the author to make sense of their respective position and the world. Here mapping needs to be understood figuratively, but the map is already a figure since it provides figural representation of the spaces and places it depicts (Tally, 2019).

In *Topophrenia* (2019), Tally argues that people are always mapping even when they don’t realize it, as people cannot help but try to orient themselves by imagining their position in relation to that of others. This constant and uneasy place-mindedness is called topophrenia by Tally. Placemindedness leads to a need to “map” or cartographic imperative. Cartographic imperative and the crisis of representation stimulate the desire for narrative and give birth to literary cartography which refers to writers’ writing or narrative.

Hemingway always had a sense of placemindedness. His writing documents the intimate connections between the old man and the sea. There is complex employment of geography as a way of writing. The sea is also symbolization of the rhythm of the narrative. In the short novel, the action is continuous and is remarkably free from any subordinate plot or action. The focus on the protagonist, the intensity of action and emotional tension make the division of the novel into chapters not only unnecessary, but virtually impossible (Rao, 1980, edited in *Bloom’s Modern Critical Interpretations: The Old Man and the Sea*). Hemingway’s placemindedness has roots in his life. He loves his hometown Michigan in his boyhood but his attitude to his contemporary U.S. was generally dismissive in which “unspoiled country has been despoiled, suburbanized, polluted by the effects of urban living, covered over by the signs of a commercial and faceless mass culture” (Messent, 2010, p. 245,
edited in *A Companion to Twentieth-Century United States Fiction*). Peter Messent (2010) concludes two ways for Hemingway to express his relationship to America in his writing: the first is back to his boyhood past, and the second is away from America and toward France, Spain, Italy, Cuba, and Africa. Hemingway’s sense of being lost during that time and his constant placemindedness contributed to the literary cartography of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

**Mapping the Sea**

Westphal’s geocriticism provides an approach to interpret Hemingway’s literary cartography. He advocates a geocentric method. By multifocalization, he suggests that geocriticism should involve a certain number and variety of narrations. Basically, multifocalization requires a wide variety of viewpoints to overcome the restricted view of one single person. Even though *The Old Man and the Sea* is just one short novel, it involves different perspectives concerning the sea. The old man always thinks of the sea as la mar, as feminine and as something that gives or withholds great favours; some of the younger fishermen speak of the sea as el mar which is masculine, as a contestant or a place or even an enemy (Hemingway, 2013, pp. 17-18).

Another method of geocritical analysis of places is polysensoriality. The experience of an environment comes from all five senses which are hearing, sight, smell, touch and taste (Westphal, 2011). In the novella, Hemingway employs all five senses when representing the sea. There is vivid description of the scenery of the sea with many colors and objects: the clouds over the land, the coast which “was only a long green line with the grey-blue hills behind it”, the dark blue water that is “so dark that it was almost purple”, “the red sifting of the plankton”, “the strange light the sun made in the water”, and “some patches of yellow, sun-bleached Sargasso weed (Hemingway, 2013, p. 22). Besides, there are the sounds of people talking on other boats, of the dip and push of oars and of the living creatures. There is also the smell of the land and the ocean. Then there is the taste of the marlin which “was firm and juicy, like meat” and the blood smell of marlin which attracts sharks (Hemingway, 2013, pp. 78-79). There is also the touch of the sea water as the old man soaks his hands in the salt water many times.

Another aspect of geocriticism is stratigraphic vision. According to a stratigraphic logic, this present time of space includes a past that flows (Westphal, 2011). In the novella, Hemingway represents the sea not only of the present time but also of the past mainly through the old man’s memories and monologue at sea. Fishing alone far out at sea, the old man expresses his wish for a radio to bring him baseball. When struggling at sea, the old man thinks of the great DiMaggio, a famous baseball star, to give himself encouragement. It is not a coincidence, but a reflection of the cultural context of the area. During the post-war period, the United States fought against Communism through many strategies, among which popular culture is one powerful weapon. At sea, he dreamed “of the long yellow beach and he saw the first of the lions…and he was happy” (Hemingway, 2013, p. 59). When Santiago was young, he was on a ship that went to Africa and he saw the lions on the long yellow beach (Hemingway, 2013, p. 11). This beach is safe for people like Santiago because it was tamed by slave masters. This area of sea is where slaves were transported. The seemingly natural scene on the beach hides its unnatural secrets of slave trade. When at sea, Santiago also turns to religion for help: “‘I am not religious,’ he said. ‘But I will say ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys that I should catch this fish, and I promise to make a pilgrimage to the Virgin de Cobre if I catch him.’”(Hemingway, 2013, p. 45). Here is the influence of Spanish religion and culture.
The sea witnessed the interaction among Europe, Africa and America. Thus through Santiago’s monologue and memory, Hemingway represents the historical and cultural context of the sea and the spatio-temporality of space is also revealed.

This sea space represented in the novella is not totally real nor fictional but real-and-imagined. According to the writer’s experience of the sea, Hemingway produces a representation of the spatial referent. Conversely, the fictional text (*The Old Man and the Sea*) of the given space influences people’s perception of the spatial reality. In the post-modern condition subject to the principle of transgressivity, the perception of objectivity integrates the subjective and even the fictional (Westphal, 2011). This is intertextuality between space and text.

**Conclusion**

Bloom (2005) judges that “The Old Man and the Sea unfortunately is too long” (p. 337). This essay thinks that Hemingway wrote the novella not only to tell an old fisherman’s story but also to map the sea. Tally (2020) argues that the sea is a crucial space for literary cartography. Since the sea is vast with not much to see except water, “oceanic spaces present unique problems for the literary cartographer” (Tally, 2020, p.15). However, Hemingway challenged to map the sea in and with *The Old Man and the Sea*. In an interview following his receipt of the Nobel Prize, Hemingway told how he had always tried to understand the sea and its influence on the daily life of those who use it. He stressed that he tried to put the presence of the sea into writing, especially the sea on the north coast of Cuba and its interactions with settlement and culture (Melling, 2006). Through *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway tried his best to map the sea. This narrative helps to shape the sea people perceive and experience. The novella is not “too long” at least from this perspective.

Whether seemingly subjective narratives or seemingly objective maps are not perfectly mimetic representations of the depicted places or spaces, but people can provide alternative visions through persistent mapping. The old man who was thought salao (the worst form of unlucky) would be destroyed but not defeated.

Hemingway, in the downturn of his writing career, created *The Old Man and the Sea*. We readers living in a postmodern society full of anxiety, alienation and displacement can read this map to navigate our own lives.

**References**


