

# A Structural Study of Hemingway's *the Old Man and the Sea* Through Dual Oppositions

Asma Jasim Muhammad

University of Sulaimani, School of Languages Department of English, Sulaimani, Kurdistan, Iraq

## Email address:

Asma.muhammad11@yahoo.com

## To cite this article:

Asma Jasim Muhammad. A Structural Study of Hemingway's *the Old Man and the Sea* Through Dual Oppositions. *International Journal of Literature and Arts*. Vol. 3, No. 6, 2015, pp. 152-157. doi: 10.11648/j.ijla.20150306.15

---

**Abstract:** Dual oppositions are vital to the structuralist view which appreciated a wide usage in diverse arenas of life. One of the most crucial arenas is literary language as language is the most complicated means of passing on senses. Inside one manuscript, meaning is conveyed merely sensibly, and structuralists and semioticians search for a number of internal constructions requesting what the sorts are inside which meaning is uttered and the way they are arranged. The reader, because of this approach, can perceive definite dual pairs to discover the conceivable meaning of literary manuscripts. This finding of the dual oppositions is one of the dominant tactics of reading and interpretation. So, dual oppositions are signs to be unravelled. This approach offers not only a concept but also a method of practical criticism. Thus, meaning-finding approach can be followed in the course of evaluation of Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, to find the hidden meanings that can be probed examining the shallow structure.

**Keywords:** Meaning Making, the Old Man and the Sea, Dual Oppositions

---

## 1. Theoretical Background

Dual oppositions are basic to structuralist notion which appreciated a wide usage in different fields of life. One of the most significant approaches is language since language is the most complex means of passing on literary meanings because the existence of literature is bound to language.

Structuralists began as a clarification of phonology. Sounds, similar to those spoke to by the letter set's letters, are meaningless themselves. They obtain which means just when they are joint together in series of relationship. Structuralist hypothesis keeps up that what we recognize are not the sounds (phonemes) as such, but rather the unmistakable components which underlie these sounds, such qualifications as vowel/consonant, minimized high-vitality sound/diffuse low-vitality sound. These refinements are, basically, stable request information, "relations between relations". (Robey 47)

This preference for dichotomies, for the elucidation of semantic certainties in dual terms, is unmistakably clear in numerous viewpoints of Jakobson's work. What is typical of Jakobson's hypothesis is the parallel character of the unmistakable elements. The particular element is an inverse component. (Lepschy 96) It is portrayed by the vicinity or

nonattendance of a given quality. Jakobson focused on the significance of the phonological connections as a different class of important contrasts. Phonological connection is comprised of a progression of double restrictions characterized by a typical rule which can be imagined freely of every pair of contradicted terms.<sup>1</sup>

Inside of a solitary content, which meaning is communicated just reasonably, and structuralists and semioticians search for certain inner structures asking what the classes are inside which meaning is communicated and how they are sorted out. Moving past the level of sentences to bigger units of discourse and composing, structuralism recognizes the fundamental structures shared by the individual surface indications of a structure.

To the extent Saussure is concerned, meaning is rational. Saussure envisioned that his work could give a premise to a bigger investigation of phonology. Having comprehended dialect as a procedure of connotation in which words (signifiers) subjectively allude to things (signifieds) – the two in mix shaping a sign, Saussure envisioned the likelihood of

---

<sup>1</sup> There is a great deal of reverberations for the application of this binary character in literature. For example, there is Jacques Lacan's argument for understanding perception by means of recognizing the split subjectivity divided between "being" and the "social speaking self" (the split between moi / je).

concentrating on a wide range of sign structures (typical customs, military signs, for cases). He coined the term semiology to assign the study of signs (from the Greek *sēmeion*, signifying "sign" which would appear what constitutes signs, what laws administer them". (Lefkowitz 61-63) <sup>2</sup> The study of signs has formed primarily into the investigation of codes, of the way in which data is sorted out so groups accomplish accord about which means. In this way double restrictions are signs to be disentangled.

Paired restrictions are clear in dialect as well as they are key to human thought as a rule. This is clear in the characteristic request. Cases of parallel restrictions can be drawn as below:

Masculine / Feminine

Night / Day

Black / White

Open / Closed

High / Low

The first two binary oppositions are parts of the natural order while the rest accumulate cultural connotations. However, feminists have argued that the first is also cultural, since certain attributes pertaining these (masculine = strong; feminine = submissive etc.) are culturally determined and they are variable. A similar argument applies to the second pair since it takes on a wide range of cultural meanings (night = evil, demonic; day = good, apocalyptic etc.) and thereby the pair becomes a set of signs.

Types of binarism or dualism go back to the previous ages. Binarisms like God and Man, endless and fleeting, subject and object are among the essentials of the world-views. The idea of "privatives" is correlated in this appreciation. The world can be portrayed in terms of the nonattendance of specific qualities. Dimness is a nonappearance of light, a thing is icy when it needs warmth or still when it needs development, or, as sure women's activists characterizes lady as without certain male components.

This intrinsic binary quality of human consciousness was mainly exploited by Levi- Strauss in his application of structuralists views to social anthropology. <sup>3</sup> Levi-Strauss' selection of culturally important binary oppositions, the equivalents to vowel / consonant in phonology, often seem rather arbitrary but they fit with ethnographic data. Here are some of them:

1. Left hand versus right hand. Everyone is aware of the difference between his left hand and his right one, though he cannot state precisely what the difference is; one hand is, in fact, a complex topological transformation of the other. The hands are alike in being hands but different in

being left and right. This puts forward the useful basis for metaphor: left = sinister, evil, demonic, clumsy, mysterious as opposed to right = correct, good, apocalyptic. Structuralism caters us with clues as to why this should be so.

2. Raw versus cooked. Human beings characteristically eat part of their food cooked. Man has distinguished himself in the use of fire for cooking. Levi-Strauss argues that raw versus cooked is a universal metaphor for nature versus culture. The opposition wild versus tame is similar.

3. Spatial oppositions. Structuralists find significance in such binary pairs as earth / sky; earth / underground; this side of... / the other side of... land / sea; dry / wet; the city / the desert; ... In this respect, there are pairs of metaphoric connotations as the religious connotation of life / death which can be derived from this world / the other world and Man versus God <sup>4</sup>. Sister versus wife as the sister can never be a wife. Then we have the validity of this social dyad.

In his *Structuralist Poetics*, Jonathan Culler talks about the likelihood of finding the double matches in writings, and spotlights on the peruser's commitment in this connection (the peruser reaction way to deal with writing). (Selden 56) The peruser, because of this structuralist introduction, can recognize certain double combines with a specific end goal to unwind the conceivable importance of abstract messages; this helps us to remember Riffarterre's case that the artistic wonder is a rationalization in the middle of content and peruser. This revelation of the parallel resistances is one of the focal techniques of perusing and elucidation. Appearance and reality, paradise and earth, court and town, nation and city, body and soul, reason and feeling, high and low are few sets utilized in the interpretive procedures. Moreover, certain double restrictions are equipped for summing up an entire arrangement of related resistances inside of a content: natural and mechanical (D. H. Lawrence), organic nature and awesome nature (Shakespeare), and extravagant and judgment.

## 2. Practical

In *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway uses an effective metaphor to describe the kind of prose he writes. He explicates that...

*If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, he will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of the movement of an iceberg is due only to one eighth of it being above water. (qtd. in Burhans, Jr. 72)*

This metaphor is about the nature of Hemingway's works, particularly his play, *The Old Man and the Sea*. Despite its apparent simplicity, this short novel abounds in

<sup>2</sup> It is pertinent to refer to Saussure's distinction between the language system, la langue (the abstract rule-governed system) and the actual daily productive uses of language in speech and writing.

<sup>3</sup> Levi Strauss, the master exponent of this type of structuralist analysis, brings together in his works, particularly, *La Pensée Sauvage* (1962) and the three volumes of *Mythologiques* (1964-68), a variety of insights from different disciplines to explore ways in which man has ordered and interpreted the sensory evidence by his environment to transform Nature (the "raw") into culture (the "cooked").

<sup>4</sup> This and the rest of the references to the novel are taken from Earnest Hemingway, *The Old Man and the Sea* (Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974).

the inner literary and aesthetic meanings below the clear-cut surface descriptions. The whole meaning of the work can be achieved by detecting the main binary oppositions and their basic associations.

Hemingway's theme, uttered in the seemingly simple, yet actually intricately designed plot of Santiago's adventure with the marlin and sharks, is man's capacity to withstand and transcend hardships of time and circumstance. Hemingway depicts, in circumstantial detail, elements of tests of endurance (physical struggle, fatigue, solitude, old age and impending death) to which Santiago is subjected, and also his courageous response, summoning both physical energy and imaginative vision to counter the forces testing him.

The novel begins when Santiago is suffering from a cast-down state. This state of the protagonist is clear in the first paragraph. We are told that Santiago is old (with all the reverberations of old age: weakness, the need for help, lack of hope, impending death) and alone (solitude) and that he "had gone eighty-four days ... without taking a fish". (P. 5)<sup>4</sup> The first sentence of the novel starts the long series of the binary oppositions. Santiago, now, is without the help of the boy, Manolin, because the boy's parents forced him to go with a lucky boat, for Santiago is described as "salao which is the worst form of unlucky". (Ibid) His skiff is always empty (versus the needed fullness of the catch) and the "sail was patched with flour sacks and, furled, it looked like the flag of permanent defeat". (Ibid) (versus the needed victory which is going to be realized during and after Santiago's ordeal).

From the first paragraph, it is obvious that we have the absence of many required things: absence of power, luck, youth, company, catch, etc.; This absence has resulted into weakness, unluck, solitude, the dearth of catch – with its complication of physical nourishment. Santiago's ordeal and real test is to out-weigh this cast-down state in order to enjoy its opposite.

Full of resolution and hope, for hope is his basic conviction, even he considers it a sin not to hope, Santiago begins his voyage on the eighty-fifth day. During this voyage, we can detect the basic elements of Santiago's cast-down state, the elements that push him forward (not thwart him) in order to do something heroic. Immediately after the beginning of the voyage, Santiago realizes his dilemma of loneliness, old age, lack of strength and his defeat. The only remaining thing is his hope and resolution, for he describes himself as a "strange old man". (P. 10)

Amid the voyage, Santiago winds up in the lap of nature which is adored and appreciated by him, and far from the (city versus nature). Santiago favors to be here (in nature) instead of getting a charge out of the socially sorted out existence of the city – this is clear in Santiago's boat and hardware which are basic contrary to whatever remains of the anglers' modern gear. In this regular air, Santiago understands the common and inescapable continuum of seeking after and being sought after, chasing and being chased: The dolphin seeks after and gets the flying fish and is, thus, caught by the old man, who is sustained by the casualty angle with the goal

that he can get a greater fish. The victor is in his turn deceived by huge fish, sharks, while sharks in their turn are crushed by man advantageous for man (the reference to the shark production line and to the anglers' drinking shark liver oil for restorative purposes. To start with Santiago is victor over the marlin, then he endures the marlin's mutilation as the sharks strip away its tissue. Santiago understands this as the first shark undermines to transform his triumph into thrashing, everything executes everything else some way. (p.73)

The test of Santiago is incredible and it needs chivalrous components of extraordinary, youthful, solid and fearless identities. Santiago depends all alone assets to provide food for the lacking things amid the difficulty with the marlin and its subsequent impact. The fundamental power which pushes him forward is his will and determination. Presently he experiences the physical shortcoming during a period when the physical quality is required. He provides food for the lacking quality by his traps. There are four primary typical strengths which maintain Santiago amid the difficulty. These are the memory of past and eminent encounters, viz., the kid (Manolin), the lions, DiMaggio and the negro from Cienfuegos. Every one of these memories and references stand for the things that are absent from Santiago. Santiago wants to win through enjoying the favoured qualities of the references to his previous and glorious self:

Santiago at present: absence of the favoured qualities of youth, strength, sustenance.

versus

The favoured qualities of the past which are found in Manolin, the lions, DiMaggio, and the negro.

The relationship between Santiago and Manolin is memorable and of a special kind. It has the meaning of a "symbolic doubling". (Baker 27) Beside this symbolic doubling, there is the dramatic function of Manolin. Manolin succeeds to heighten our sympathy with Santiago. Manolin provides Santiago with food (physical sustenance) and we watch the old man through the admiring and pitying eyes of the boy. After the ordeal with the sharks, Manolin brings the exhausted Santiago, beside food, ointment for his injured hands commiserating on the loss and planning for the future when they will work side by side again. This love of Manolin for Santiago is that of a disciple for master in the art of fishing. It is also the love of a son for an adopted father.

But from Santiago's point of view the relationship runs deeper. He has known Manolin for years, from the years of childhood up to the time when Manolin stands strong and lucky and confident on the edge of manhood. Like other aging men, Santiago finds something reassuring about the overlay of the past upon the present. Through the agency of Manolin he is able to recapture in his imagination a similar strength and confidence which distinguished his own young manhood as a fisherman, earning him the title of *el campeón*.

During the old man's difficulty, the two expressions, "I wish the kid arrived," and "I wish I had the boy," play over Santiago's psyche frequently enough to merit extraordinary

consideration. Santiago implies precisely the summon; the vicinity of the kid would be a help in a period of emergency. What's more, he summons by method for these expressions the quality and strength of his childhood that are missing from him now. Not long after he has snared the marlin and realizes that he must cling to the line for quite a while, Santiago says, "I wish I had the kid". Quickly his determination fixes. The minor notice of the kid is a sort of talisman, even he join the kid with salt in what adds up to be a representation: "I wish the boy were here and that I have some salt," (P. 76) on the grounds that the crude fish sickens him: he eats the fish to get solid and later on he says so anyone might hear, "I wish the boy was here" (P. 49) and quickly settles himself against the boards of the bow for another time of perseverance. So when there is no kid there is the absence of everything. In any case, the allegorical vicinity of the kid results into the physical quality of Santiago through determination and eating – again physical quality which leaves the unique sustenance of Manolin.

Manolin is needed also when Santiago feels the 'betrayal' of his left hand (the cramp). Santiago's left hand (versus his right one) is aligned with the destructive forces. While he wills to unknot the cramp, he thinks that "if the boy was here," (P. 73) a little massaging would loosen the muscles of the forearm and help him when the marlin breaches soon after that.

While the marlin leaps again and again, and while the old man and his line are both strained and stretched almost to the breaking point, Santiago triples the refrain: "If the boy was here he would wet the coils of the line ... If the boy were here. If the boy were here".

(P. 79) Once again the effect of such an invocation is nearly magical as if, by means of it, some of the strength of the youth flowed in to sustain the limited powers of old age. Always, just after he has said the words, Santiago manages to reach down into the well of his courage for one more dipperful:

Santiago: old age, debility, lack of power and hope...

Versus

Manolin: youth, ability, power, hope...

Santiago feels the absence of the qualities of Manolin. That is why he enjoys them by recalling the boy and the things associated with him.

Hemingway, early, establishes a clear symbolic connection between the boy and the lions: "When I was your age," Santiago says addressing Manolin, "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". (P. 17) Manolin's answer, "I know. You told me," (Ibid) indicates that this reference to such past experiences (youthful, charming, the opposite of Santiago's state during the ordeal) is a pleasant obsession in Santiago's mind, pleasant because it has its pleasant results in the present time (the time in which Santiago needs the attributes of such glorious and youthful experiences).

The night before the ordeal, after the boy has left him to sleep, Santiago dreams of the lions:

He was asleep in a short time and he dreamed of the lions of Africa when he was a boy and the long golden beaches and the white beaches, so white they hurt your eyes ... he smelled the smell of Africa that the land breeze brought at morning. (P. 19).

This dream of the scene of Africa in which he had seen the lions has its magical power on Santiago. The old man, through the dream, can recapture in the present time things (symbolically present in the lion imagery) that are absent. It is noteworthy that Santiago dreams of the lions that play "like young cats in the dusk and he loved them as he loved the boy". (P. 20) Here we have the associations of the lion imagery versus Santiago.

Santiago longs to be filled up with all the associations of the lion imagery. That is why the dream of the lions has the strengthening power which tightens his resolution and hope – things he needs in order to go on. Whenever he feels the sapping resolution in him he longs for the things that fill him with the lacking attributes. Santiago is always supported by the memory of his youth. In this respect, The Old Man and the Sea can be seen as parable of youth and old age.

Amidst the experience of Santiago's battle with the marlin and afterward against the sharks, the old man considers over and over DiMaaggio, the baseball player, pondering regardless of whether DiMaggio would affirm of the path in which he has angled and persevered. The DiMaggio of Santiago's dreams is, as a matter of first importance, a man with a difficult affliction, a bone goad; he is, as it were, a man who performs well against the debilitation of torment and it is this that has the effect, and Santiago discovers this force in himself and, when lacking, in other men. He, in light of the fact that now is experiencing the sapping components of perseverance, bungles in his internal identity for valor and force. What's more, DiMaggio, typically, remains for the truant or sapping force. All things considered, for Santiago, torment turns out to be truly the method for recognizing reality from illusion:

He had only to look at his hands and feel his back against the stern to know that this [ the ordeal with the marlin and the sharks ] had truly happened and was not a dream. (P. 88; added square brackets)

Sometimes, the unreality is so important for Santiago, for through the dreams and reveries or the special reference to the past and glorious experiences, Santiago can attain endurance: Absence of references to past: lack of hope, power. Versus Presence of such references: realization of hope, power.

Among these references, there is also the reference to the incidence of hand-wrestling with the negro from Cienfuegos that won Santiago the title of El Campion. Because the potentialities of that title are absent, that is why Santiago wants to boost himself through the past experiences.

Santiago needs all the things which help him to conquer the state of being unlucky. So the symbolic references and thinking of the boy, lions, DiMaggio and the negro regain in the old man his older self – the state he needs:

Absence of symbolic references = defeat

Versus versus

Presence of such references = victory

Santiago feels defeat in the present time and because of the presence of certain seeds of hope and resolution, "strange old man," Santiago can attain victory.

The quick triumph is getting the marlin. The marlin comes during an era when Santiago experiences the shortage of triumph. It stands typically for the brighter side as far as Santiago can tell (the dull side: the absence of triumph versus the brilliant side: the acknowledgment of triumph). It speaks to all the past wonderfulness of Santiago, for all the positive qualities that Santiago yearns for, the characteristics of fearlessness, force, perseverance, respectability (of its battle), experience, excellence: Santiago at present: absence of the good qualities versus the marlin: image of such qualities that is the reason Santiago adores the marlin as his sibling, yet he feels the need to slaughter it. The old man and the marlin, as siblings in this world, are inseparably joined by the need of slaughtering and being murdered. Since Santiago needs to slaughter the fish, the marlin incomprehensibly turns into his enemy: "It is great that we don't need to attempt to execute the sun or the moon or the stars. It is sufficient to live on the ocean and kill our actual siblings." (P.66) Even, here and there, the marlin is related to Christ, for the qualities Santiago values most are found in the marlin and these connections the marlin with Christ. They are the qualities which reclaim life from negligibility and worthlessness and they are the qualities that Santiago wishes to affirm in himself. Incomprehensibly, the main means he needs to affirm them in himself is by practicing them contrary to the fish. He should, typically, kill the ruler of life keeping in mind the end goal to accomplish a profound personality with him. Therefore, we have, in this story, the devastation of life and the recovery of life, assertion and coverlet. (Wells 60)

Santiago does recognize himself with the marlin, as well as with the mako shark and the turtle with its displaying so as to endure heart; these animals rise above annihilation serious life right now of death. Santiago enjoys the qualities showed by these animals and he aches for

the vicinity of these qualities in himself, for their nonappearance is lethal for him in his battle with the marlin and the sharks; as though Santiago, himself, demonstrates the serious life at the minutes when he confronts the inalienable passing. Along these lines he adjusts himself to these animals contrary to the restricting strengths, viz., the shark for its unselfish assault of the marlin:

But you enjoyed killing the dentuso he thought. He lives on the live fish as you do. He is not a scavenger or just a moving appetite as some sharks are. He is beautiful and noble and knows no fear of anything. (P. 95)

The other kinds of shark, other than the mako shark, stand symbolically for the destroying forces of nature. They are the overwhelming natural odds against which Santiago pits himself. They are, also, the elements that strip Santiago of his material gain, the marlin (loss versus gain). That is why the sharks are connected with the negative forces

against which Santiago and his party stand in opposition:

Santiago, the marlin, the mako shark, and the turtles

Versus

The other kinds of shark.

The sharks make the opposition (loss versus gain) very clear. The story of Santiago is the acquisition and the loss of the marlin and the possible reverberations of this dichotomy. We may find that we are gradually brought up to a degree of quiet tension we are able to accept. The rhythm of the story appears to be built on such a stress-yield alternation. This is the constant wave-like operation of bracing and relaxation as in the systolic – diastolic movement of the human heart. (Baker, 1957: 31)

### 3. Conclusion

Beside emphasizing endurance as a value in this short novel, Hemingway emphasizes the value of victory or rather the "undefeated" (defeat = loss versus undefeat = victory = gain). The fundamental qualities of the old man – his humility, his simple reverence for the processes of life, and his capacity for suffering – serve to transform his defeat into a triumph as the divinity of Christ. This is clear in the final Christian symbolism of Santiago's cruciform posture. Santiago's suffering is symbolic of crucifixion. Hence Santiago's defeat is transformed into life (his future plans with the boy). Consequently we have the validity of Santiago's statement "man is destroyed but not defeated" which carries within itself its own focal and central opposition.

---

### References

- [1] Baker, Carlos. "The Boy and the Lions." In *Twentieth Century Views of The Old Man and the Sea*. Ed. Catherine T. Jones. New York: Oxford University Press, 1957.
- [2] Burhans, Clinton S.Jr. "The Old Man and the Sea: Hemingway's Tragic Vision of Man." In *Twentieth Century Views of The Old Man and the Sea*. Ed. Catherine T. Jones. New York: Oxford University Press, 1957.
- [3] Hayen, Todd, M. A. D. I. I. Track, and Barbara Shore. *The Old Man and the Sea*. (2007).
- [4] Hediger, Ryan. "Hunting, fishing, and the cramp of ethics in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*, Green Hills of Africa, and Under Kilimanjaro." *The Hemingway Review* 27.2 (2008): 35-59.
- [5] Hemingway, Earnest. *The Old Man and the Sea*. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1974.
- [6] Lefkowitz, Lori Hope. "Creating the World: Structuralism and Semiotics." In *Contemporary Literary Theory*. Ed. G. Douglas Atkins and Laura Marrow. Massachusetts: Macmillan, 1987.
- [7] Lepschy, Giulio C.. *A Survey of Structural Linguistics*. London: Faber and Faber, 1972.
- [8] Morgan, Edwin. *The Old Man And The Sea*. *Critical Quarterly* 4.4 (1962): 321-321.

- [9] Robey, David (ed.). *Structuralism: An Introduction*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973.
- [10] Selden, Raman (ed.). *Practicing Theory and Reading Literature: An Introduction*. New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989.
- [11] Sylvester, Bickford. "The Cuban Context of *The Old Man and the Sea*." *The Cambridge Companion to Ernest Hemingway* (1996): 243-268.
- [12] Wells, Arvin R.. "A Ritual of Transfiguration: The Old Man and the Sea." In *Twentieth Century views of The Old Man and the Sea*. Ed. Catherine T. Jones. New York: Oxford University Press, 1957.