

# Ernest Hemingway's Iceberg Narrative Method of *The Old Man and the Sea*

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**Abstract**—In most of his fictional works and in the line of his previous experience as a journalist and war reporter, Ernest Hemingway developed writing techniques peculiar to him to be followed by many predecessors after him. Among the well-known techniques are the one, in which he called “the iceberg theory.” The present paper concerns itself with analyzing this literary technique used by Hemingway in “The Old Man and the Sea.” This novella, written in 1952, and awarded Nobel Prize 1954 and Pulitzer Prize 1953, achieved a great success not only in the writer’s career but also in the world of fiction as well. Hemingway’s exceptional use of the iceberg technique renowned the novella among his masterpieces and himself as a world Avant-garde in the fictional sphere. This is due to using a simple economical language. Yet, this simple language is full of symbols, metaphors, similes, allusions, personifications, interior monologues, repetitions, soliloquies, etc. All these devices provide another cognitive approach to this story delivered in a much unsophisticated language. This unique style, though written in prose, once has their sentences broken down they may be read as poetic. The aim of this paper is to trace these elements in a novel approach to reading Hemingway’s this masterpiece.

**Keywords**—The old man, Hemingway, Cognitive reading, Style, Figurative language.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Reading within and beyond the texts to explore the language used by the authors is one of the delights of literary appreciation. This is partly because “in English language... we do not read only to achieve a source of information but also as a way to extend our knowledge of the language” (Abbasian & Azeez, 2021, pp. 101-105). A scholarly thorough reading of a literary piece of work may thus go beyond the texts at hand. The iceberg method is one of the techniques used by many novelists in both 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries.

As a journalist, Hemingway came to know that most of the reality might be hidden underneath the surface, just like the iceberg. As it is well-known, the iceberg may show <1% of its real size. The minority of this ice mount is shown on the water surface, whereas the majority lurks invisibly underneath the surface. So is the case with Hemingway; only this little percentage of the events which he writes is apparent to readers, and he leaves the rest for them to find out according to their appreciation and personal understanding and interpretation (Royeni, 2020, p. 29).

This means that Hemingway does not go through background details or deep analyses or explanations, rather through simple language delivered explicitly and leaving the rest implicit for us as readers to find out by ourselves. He does

so through using his lingual skill economically and by sifting the words and phrases that are finally put down on the paper.

The cognition of the story is basically dependent on the iceberg style used extensively by Hemingway in this story. Like his young American companions of “The Lost Generation,” Hemingway endeavored to pierce his unique way of writing through which he could convey his stories. He mostly did this by sifting his words, refining his style, reviewing, and working as a critic to his own writings by double-checking his style more than once. Hemingway used to depict his diction and put them into simple sentences so that to generate symbolic imageries in his fictional works (Rauf, 2021, p. 475). He did not consider formal and conventional forms of writing to make his stories readable by common readers (Chang, 2003).

The first paragraph of the story begins with using past simple tense delivered with a simple language in a way to prepare the reader for reading one of “bedtime stories” (Rauf, 2021, p. 473); the story begins with the speaker referring to a third-person, “He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream” (Hemingway, 2009, p. 1). This setting is somehow novel in style; it drags the reader’s attention to follow reading further (Xie, 2008, p. 156).

According to Rauf (2021, p. 474), “Hemingway uses lots of tropology in this story”. This tropology includes metaphors,

similes, personifications, as well as many other literary devices to maintain his iceberg method. Native readers may not face a significant problem in understanding these literary devices, but foreigner ones may face a lot of problems in figuring out their connotations (Rendy, 2013, p. 5).

## II. OVERVIEW

Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961) is one of the Lost Generation writers, a generation of American writers, critics, and poets who banished themselves in Europe in nineteen twenties after being disappointed by the aftermath of World War I (WWI). They exiled themselves in Paris. The group included F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, E.E. Cummings, Gertrude Stein, Dos Passos, and many others. Each one of these tried to get rid of the British and European literary trends and find new themes and styles that would best fit them as young American intelligentsia.

Fitzgerald had already been renowned for his best-seller of the 1920 “This Side of Paradise,” whereas Hemingway’s fame came in 1927 after publishing his “The Sun Also Rises.” Yet, Hemingway had had good experience in writing as a journalist before WWI. Eventually, he could manage a new writing technique for himself, in which he called the “iceberg theory.” In fact, it is this suggestive style that made him innovator in writing technique. This technique is quite apparent in “The Old Man and the Sea.” This is why this novella is considered among world classics.

After gaining success worldwide, many eminent critics pursued their critical analyses of Hemingway’s fictional work. In *20<sup>th</sup> Century Views*, more than 17 critics wrote on his work in addition to the editor, Weeks (1965, p. 1). However, the major chronicler and biographer of Hemingway is Carlos Baker in *Hemingway: The Writer as an Artist* (Baker, 1972, p. 28).

## III. DISCUSSION

Ernest Hemingway used the iceberg method. This theory means using explicit elements without going directly through the implicit themes lurking beneath the surface. He thought that the deeper meaning of a story must not be plain on the surface, but ought to gleam over implicitly (Trodd, 2007).

Using the iceberg technique, Hemingway relies on literary devices extensively; he sets a simple language in the story. In the first paragraph, for example, Hemingway compares the skiff’s sail to a flag a defeated army (Hemingway, 2009, p. 1).

After two paragraphs, we find another simile which gives us an opposite image when the comparison is made between Santiago’s eyes and the blue color of the sea (Hemingway, 2009, p. 2). The conceit continues to further touch at the central point which is Santiago’s youth and determination; the comparison is between the first image of a beaten army and the unbeaten eyes. The suggestion has a twofold function: on the one hand, it does not recount the sea color as much as Santiago’s young spirit, vigor, and resolution in contrast to that of the sea. On the other hand, it displays the contrast of the sail’s image as a defeated army and Santiago’s undefeated steadfastness.

Iceberg technique which is greatly manifested in this story, reflects Hemingway’s diligence to rewrite the used language and suggest many images by manipulating them in a numbers of key words artistically so that the delivered lurking symbols vibrate so fundamentally that the story’s brevity, outwardly easy-going events, provide the story with simplicity in appearance but with unfathomable meanings that readers must find for themselves (Faulkner, 1983, p. 62).

Hemingway’s multiple use of personification as metaphor is remarkable in our novella. The fishermen’s dispute whether the sea is male or female is a good example. Where most of the young fishermen consider the sea male, Santiago believes it to be female and a creative one that is life giver and life taker; and that it is mild, soft, and elegant. He compares the sea to a woman’s delicacy and when it gets riotous and angry, it will be due to the moon’s influence on “her” just as it does with “women” (Hemingway, 2009, pp. 19-20).

Critics often raise the question whether Santiago has a society or not. From the initial pages of the novel, we, as readers, observe that he does not have any social obligations toward the village, and he never speaks with his fellow villagers; his contact is usually done through Manolin. This is because the old man considers nature and particularly the sea as his sole community.

Santiago normally speaks to the dolphins, birds, Man of War (the bird), his hunted marlin, and other sea creatures as friends. He also speaks or curses the Portuguese-Man of War and the sharks as enemies. If we apply a discourse analysis here, we may consider this as creating a balance between the good and bad forces in nature the same way, we experience in normal societies (Hemingway, 2009, p. 20).

On the other hand, Santiago curses the Portuguese man-of-war. This is a kind of sea creature of blended bluish colors that attract the victims, but it has tiny venomous filaments that exterminate the fish and people as well. When Santiago sees it he shouts “‘*agua mala*’ the man said, “you whore” (Hemingway, 2009, p. 24). Here, both personification and metaphor are used together through these vulgar words. As a matter of fact, this usage is very noteworthy in revealing the theme of Santiago’s real society.

Hemingway uses other devices to serve his iceberg method. Among these devices, there is allusion which is used recurrently throughout the story. For instance, the writer manifests religious belief in luck (Hemingway, 2009, pp. 3-9). These recurrent allusions are given in a vague manner, but they are still a kind of religious belief through simple Catholic, Cuban villagers. The repetition of these symbols is the qualitative structural and symbolic structures that refer to a sort of doctrine (Hemingway, 2009, p. 39).

Santiago experiences two kinds of conversation in this story. One is between Manolin and, himself, takes place on land. The style of this conversation is ironical in the sense that both characters do not mean what they say; whereas the other is true but within Santiago’s interior monologue on the sea. The purpose behind using monologue is that the narrative is delivered in the third person in which case it hardens the writer’s exploration of Santiago’s inner feelings. The extensive use this device facilitates, the readers’ ability

understand Santiago's latent feelings, attitudes, and nostalgias. The story can be divided into two levels of reading: the land story and the sea story, the former emphasizes the old man's inability, longing, and the insinuation of luck, whereas the second story concentrates on his determination and skill despite his old age (Kenneth, 1991. p.34).

There are more than one instance where irony used in this story especially the personal talks between Santiago and the boy. Each character pretends or claims something and he and the other know that the claim is untrue yet they both let it go without any question. So is the case when the old man claims that he already has food and they both know it is not true; or when Santiago questions whether Manoli stole the food or not, the boy claims that he would, but he bought it. These ironic talks are meant to disclose Santiago's poorness and pride compared to the boy's valiance and modesty.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

Hemingway employs iceberg method in "The Old Man and the Sea" to enable the reader to find out the hidden meanings and themes of his story by his extensive use of literary devices such as similes, metaphors, symbols, allegories, and personifications. All these literary devices serve his iceberg narrative method. He coins this name and method to give his readers enough space to find the deep meanings by themselves to share the personal joy of reaching the intended target.

It is quite normal that readers' comprehension and interests vary from one person to another. They may interpret the allegories differently, decode the symbols individually, and eventually share Hemingway's experience in ambivalent ways. This is the main reason that makes this piece of work remarkable in the American literature.

#### V. SUGGESTIONS

Literary critics and academic scholars may find many other themes and techniques used by Hemingway in this

novella. On the one hand, it has many other themes to research on. On the other hand, various other methods are used in Santiago's story with the sea. Therefore, the scholars only need to dip and explore these themes and techniques to add further flavor to the study of this story.

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