

Growing Old at Sea: A Gerontological Reading of Isolation, Purpose, and Dignity in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*

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Abstract

This article examines gerontological theory to a close literary reading of Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* (1952), arguing that the novella constitutes one of the twentieth century's most psychologically precise fictional explorations of aging, social marginalization, and the will to purposeful living. Drawing on Erik Erikson's developmental framework of ego integrity versus despair, Rowe and Kahn's model of successful aging, and contemporary empirical research on loneliness and functional decline in older adults, we demonstrate that Santiago's character enacts a clinically coherent response to late-life isolation.

The analysis proceeds in five movements: Santiago's social exclusion and the stigma of perceived unproductivity; the preservation of purposeful identity through skilled labor; the role of intergenerational attachment (Manolin) as a buffer against existential despair; the psychophysiology of loneliness as registered in the text's somatic imagery and the novella's implicit challenge to ageist constructions of value and dignity. We conclude that *The Old Man and the Sea* anticipates central concerns of twenty-first-century aging studies and offers literary humanities a productive site for interdisciplinary dialogue with gerontology, psychology, and public health.

Keywords: *Gerontology, Aging Studies, Loneliness, Ernest Hemingway, The Old Man and the Sea, Ego Integrity, Social Isolation, Purposeful Living, Ageism, Interdisciplinary Humanities*



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1. Introduction

The Old Man and the Sea, awarded the Pulitzer Prize in 1953 and cited prominently in Hemingway's Nobel Prize citation the following year, has generated an enormous body of

scholarship. Critics have examined it through the lenses of existentialism, Christian allegory, ecocriticism, postcolonialism, and Hemingway's own biographical mythology. Surprisingly, the novella has received comparatively little

sustained attention from the perspective of aging studies or gerontology—despite the fact that its entire narrative architecture is organized around the experience of growing old in a community that no longer values you.

This omission is consequential. The global population of adults aged sixty-five and over is projected to reach 1.5 billion by 2050, and loneliness among older adults is now recognized by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a major public health priority (WHO 3). Empirical research consistently demonstrates that chronic loneliness in late life is associated with elevated risks of cognitive decline, cardiovascular disease, depression, and premature mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al. 14; Cacioppo and Cacioppo 302). Against this backdrop, literary representations of aging and isolation are not merely aesthetic objects—they are cultural documents that shape, and are shaped by, the social meanings we attach to old age.

This article argues that *The Old Man and the Sea* constitutes one of the twentieth century's most psychologically precise fictional explorations of late-life isolation and purposeful identity. Santiago, the aging Cuban fisherman who is its protagonist, embodies what gerontologists now recognize as the central challenge of successful aging: the maintenance of dignity, purpose, and relational connection in the face of social marginalization and physical decline. We read Hemingway's novella alongside foundational and contemporary gerontological theory, arguing that the text both illuminates and complicates the scientific literature on aging, and that aging studies, in turn, provides new tools for literary interpretation.

The paper proceeds in five analytical sections: Section 2 establishes the theoretical framework, drawing on Erikson, Rowe and Kahn, and contemporary loneliness research. Section 3 examines Santiago's social exclusion and the stigma of aging in his community. Section 4 analyzes the role of purposeful labor in

preserving psychological integrity. Section 5 addresses the Manolin relationship as intergenerational attachment and existential anchor. Section 6 examines the novella's somatic and psychophysiological register of loneliness. Section 7 discusses implications for literary gerontology and interdisciplinary scholarship.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Ego Integrity versus Despair: Erikson's Eighth Stage

Erik Erikson's eight-stage model of psychosocial development, first systematized in *Childhood and Society* (1950) and elaborated in subsequent work, posits that the final stage of the human life cycle is characterized by the tension between ego integrity and despair. In Erikson's foundational formulation, ego integrity is defined as:

the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions. (Erikson 268)

It is, in essence, the capacity to look back on one's life—its failures, its losses, its unrealized possibilities—and affirm its coherence and value. Despair, its counterpart, is the consciousness that time is too short for a new beginning, producing what Erikson describes as "a thousand little disgusts" and a fear of death unmitigated by meaning (Erikson 269).

Santiago is a figure poised precisely at this threshold. His eighty-four-day catching drought, his poverty, his social demotion within the fishing community—all of these would seem to push him toward despair. Yet the novella insists, quietly and persistently, on his integrity. Hemingway renders this state with characteristic concision: "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 9). Eriksonian theory allows us to name what Hemingway renders phenomenologically: Santiago is

achieving ego integrity under conditions designed by his community to produce despair.

2.2. Successful Aging: Rowe and Kahn's Model

John W. Rowe and Robert L. Kahn's influential model of successful aging, introduced in their 1987 Science article and expanded in their 1997 Gerontologist essay, identifies three components of positive aging: low probability of disease and disease-related disability; high cognitive and physical functional capacity; and active engagement with life, including productive activity and interpersonal relations (Rowe and Kahn 433–434). The model has been extensively critiqued for its emphasis on individual capacity and its relative neglect of structural factors—poverty, racism, ableism—that constrain the aging experience for many populations (Martinson and Berridge 156; Calasanti 10). Nevertheless, it remains a productive heuristic for reading Santiago, whose situation illuminates both the model's insights and its limitations.

Santiago scores poorly on the first component—he is old, arthritic, malnourished, and facing structural poverty—but richly on the second and third. His cognitive capacity is extraordinary: his navigation of the Gulf Stream by feel, star, and current; his tactical decisions during the three-day struggle with the marlin; his management of pain and fatigue through concentrated mental discipline—all of these bespeak what contemporary gerontologists call 'cognitive reserve,' the accumulated intellectual capital that buffers against age-related decline (Stern 1006).

2.3. Contemporary Loneliness Research

The empirical study of loneliness in older adults has expanded dramatically in the past two decades. John T. Cacioppo and Stephanie Cacioppo's neurobiological framework conceptualizes loneliness as a form of social pain, evolutionarily functional as a signal to restore social connection, but chronically

damaging when social reconnection is blocked (Cacioppo and Cacioppo 301–302). Chronic loneliness activates the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis, elevates cortisol, disrupts sleep architecture, accelerates cellular aging through telomere shortening, and is associated with a 26 percent increase in the risk of premature mortality (Holt-Lunstad et al. 14–15).

Rob Nixon's concept of 'slow violence'—gradual, attritional harm that unfolds invisibly across time—has been applied primarily to environmental destruction, but translates with uncomfortable precision to the experience of late-life social isolation (Nixon 2). Santiago's eighty-four days without a catch is, among other things, a narrative of this slow violence—an account of what it feels like to be incrementally erased from social visibility.

3. Social Exclusion and the Stigma of Aging

The novella opens in medias res of Santiago's social marginalization. Hemingway captures the community's ambivalence with precision: the other fishermen "made fun of the old man and he was not angry"; the younger ones "spoke of him as one of the best fishermen and said that he was most certainly the best" in the past tense (Hemingway 11). This grammatical past tense encodes what Margaret Morganroth Gullette, in *Aged by Culture* (2004), calls the 'decline narrative': the cultural script that automatically reads aging as diminishment, converting a person's history of competence into evidence of current inadequacy (Gullette 17).

Simone de Beauvoir's landmark study *The Coming of Age* (1970) provides a complementary framework. De Beauvoir argued that capitalist societies treat older adults as economic non-entities once their productive labor ceases:

Old age is something beyond my life, outside it, something of which I cannot have any full inward experience. (de Beauvoir 283)

The fishing village in the novella operates on precisely this logic. Santiago's value to the community is indexed to his catch; when the catch fails, his social standing collapses. Manolin's parents remove the boy from Santiago's boat not because Santiago has changed, but because the community's measure of him has shifted from person to productivity metric. As Hemingway writes: "The boy's parents had told him that the old man was now definitely and finally *salao*, which is the worst form of unlucky" (Hemingway 9).

Contemporary gerontological research substantiates this literary observation. Becca Levy's experimental studies demonstrate that age stereotypes have measurable physiological effects: older adults exposed to negative age stereotypes perform significantly worse on memory and cardiovascular stress tests, a phenomenon Levy terms 'stereotype embodiment' (Levy 333-334). The village's contemptuous attitude toward Santiago is not merely an interpersonal slight; it constitutes a form of structural health harm.

4. Purposeful Labor and the Preservation of Identity

Against the community's decline narrative, Santiago positions an alternative self-understanding grounded in skilled practice. The three-day battle with the marlin is a demonstration of expertise: Santiago reads the fish's depth from the angle of the line; he manages the tension through minute adjustments of his body; he rations his physical strength with the precision of an experienced craftsman (Hemingway 47-60). When the great marlin finally surfaces, Hemingway renders Santiago's tactical concentration: "He is a great fish and I must convince him, he thought. I must never let him learn his strength nor what he could do if he made his run" (Hemingway 63).

Viktor Frankl's logotherapy, articulated in *Man's Search for Meaning* (1946), posits that the primary human motivation is the will to

meaning. Frankl identifies three pathways: through what we give to the world (creative values), through what we receive from the world (experiential values), and through the stance we take toward unavoidable suffering (attitudinal values) (Frankl 115). Santiago's fishing vocation serves all three functions simultaneously.

This reading is corroborated by empirical research on 'purpose in life' (PIL) as a protective factor in late-life psychological health. Patrick Hill and Nicholas Turiano's longitudinal study found that higher PIL was associated with reduced mortality risk across a fourteen-year follow-up period, even after controlling for demographic factors, health behaviors, and psychological well-being (Hill and Turiano 1482).

Crucially, Santiago's purposefulness is not denial of his aging body. He acknowledges his cramps, his scarred hands, his need to rest. Confronting a painful cramp, he addresses himself with dark humor: "Go on, have your cramp, do it" (Hemingway 62). This honest self-appraisal exemplifies what Paul Baltes and Margret Baltes termed 'selective optimization with compensation' (SOC): the adaptive strategy through which older adults maintain high levels of performance by selecting priority domains, optimizing resources within those domains, and compensating for losses through alternative means (Baltes and Baltes 6-7).

5. Manolin and Intergenerational Attachment

If Santiago's purposeful labor is one bulwark against despair, his relationship with Manolin is another—and, in some ways, the more psychologically complex. Manolin is not merely Santiago's assistant or admirer; he is the old man's primary attachment figure, in the Bowlbian sense: the person whose presence regulates Santiago's affect, whose absence generates anxiety, and toward whom Santiago directs his most tender and honest

communication (Bowlby 39; Antonucci et al. 257).

John Bowlby's attachment theory has been productively extended to adult and late-life relationships. Toni Antonucci and colleagues' 'convoy model' posits that individuals move through life surrounded by a convoy of social relationships that provide support, protection, and identity confirmation (Antonucci et al. 253). For Santiago, Manolin is essentially the last surviving member of his convoy. The boy brings him food, affirms his competence—"There are many good fishermen and some great ones. But there is only you" (Hemingway 24)—and is willing to listen to Santiago's memories and aspirations without condescension.

Research on intergenerational programs consistently demonstrates that structured contact between older adults and young people reduces loneliness, increases purpose, and improves self-reported health outcomes (Generations United; Springate et al. 4). Santiago's relationship with Manolin is an informal, organic version of this dynamic: the boy gives the old man a reason to come home and a future orientation—"We will fish together now" (Hemingway 125).

The novel's emotional climax is not the catching of the marlin but Santiago's return to shore and Manolin's response. Upon finding Santiago broken and asleep, "the boy saw that the old man was breathing and then he saw the old man's hands and he started to cry" (Hemingway 124). In gerontological terms, this is the activation of a caregiving system within an attachment bond: Manolin's response is not pity but genuine distress at the threat to a beloved figure. For Santiago, this response is evidence that he has not been forgotten, that his suffering has been witnessed.

6. The Psychophysiology of Loneliness in the Novella's Somatic Imagery

Hemingway's celebrated minimalism renders Santiago's loneliness almost entirely

through somatic imagery: the body in pain, the body at labor, the body's needs unmet. This narrative strategy resonates with contemporary neurobiological accounts of loneliness as a primarily physiological phenomenon. Cacioppo and Cacioppo's research demonstrates that chronic loneliness dysregulates the autonomic nervous system, increasing sympathetic arousal and reducing parasympathetic activity (Cacioppo and Cacioppo 302).

Santiago's nights on the boat—his broken sleep, his hallucinatory dreamscapes of lions on African beaches, his inability to sustain continuous rest—read as a precise rendering of the sleep disruption characteristic of chronic social isolation (Hemingway 81-83). Hemingway describes one such night with characteristic economy: "He did not dream of the lions but instead of a vast school of porpoises that stretched for eight or ten miles and it was in the time of their mating" (Hemingway 81).

The lions that Santiago dreams of repeatedly are consistent with the 'life review' process that Robert Butler first described in 1963 as a normative psychological activity of late life, in which memories are unconsciously reviewed and reintegrated in the service of ego integrity (Butler 66). As Hemingway writes: "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 25).

The novella's most visceral somatic image—Santiago's hands, rope-burned, cramped, bleeding, and yet still working—concentrates multiple gerontological themes simultaneously. That Santiago continues to work with hands that fail him enacts what Baltes called 'the orchestration of mind and life': the deliberate, active management of aging through the deployment of all available resources, including a will that outlasts the body that serves it (Baltes 580).

7. Implications for Literary Gerontology and Interdisciplinary Scholarship

The reading developed in this article contributes to the emerging field of 'literary gerontology,' which Anne Wyatt-Brown and Janice Rossen defined as the systematic study of representations of aging in literary texts, and their implications for gerontological theory and policy (Wyatt-Brown and Rossen 3). The field has grown substantially, with scholars such as Kathleen Woodward, Teresa Mangum, and Mike Hepworth demonstrating that literary analysis and gerontological science can productively illuminate each other (Woodward 9; Hepworth 15).

This analysis of *The Old Man and the Sea* contributes to this tradition in three specific ways. First, it demonstrates that canonical texts can encode sophisticated psychological observations about aging that predate formal scientific articulation—Hemingway's rendering of sleep disruption, life review dreaming, and the physiology of purposeful effort anticipates research frameworks that would not be formalized for decades. Second, it illustrates the value of gerontological theory as a hermeneutic tool: concepts like ego integrity, selective optimization with compensation, and stereotype embodiment provide new analytical vocabulary for literary features previously described only in general humanistic terms. Third, it identifies a productive tension between the novella's individualist ethos and the structural critique implicit in contemporary gerontology: dignity should not require heroism; it should be guaranteed by social structures that recognize the value of older adults independent of their economic productivity.

The Old Man and the Sea, read through a gerontological lens, could serve as a powerful resource in bibliotherapy and life-review programs: its combination of existential seriousness, emotional accessibility, and narratively enacted dignity makes it uniquely

suited to supporting older readers in their own processes of meaning-making (Palgi et al. 47).

8. Conclusion

The Old Man and the Sea is, among its many other things, a gerontological text of unusual precision and depth. Santiago's experience of social exclusion, purposeful labor, intergenerational attachment, somatic loneliness, and nocturnal life review maps onto central concerns of contemporary aging studies with a fidelity that is neither accidental nor merely coincidental. Hemingway wrote from deep personal observation and from a cultural moment in which the aging fisherman of Cojimar, Cuba, was a recognizable social type: the skilled elder rendered invisible by a community organized around youthful productivity.

What the gerontological framework adds to literary analysis is not a reduction of the text's complexity to a clinical case study, but a richer vocabulary for articulating what Hemingway achieves. To say that Santiago enacts Eriksonian ego integrity is not to diminish him but to situate his specific dignity within a larger human pattern; to identify his relationship with Manolin as an attachment dynamic is not to psychologize their tenderness but to explain why it functions, in the economy of the novella, as a lifeline.

In the closing pages of the novella, a tourist mistakes the skeleton of Santiago's great marlin for a shark. The exchange encodes, in miniature, the novella's central concern: the failure of a culture to recognize what it sees, to read the evidence of a life for what it is. "He was still sleeping on his face," Hemingway writes, "and the boy was sitting by him watching him" (Hemingway 127). That watching—that insistence on bearing witness to a life against the current of diminishment—is not only a literary achievement but a model: of what aging with dignity requires, and what it deserves.

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