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Narrative Minimalism and Symbolism in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*

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Abstract

The Old Man and the Sea (1952) is the magnum opus of Ernest Hemingway. This novella not only presents Hemingway's distinctive narrative style but also engages rich symbolism to convey deeper meanings. It serves as a testament to the power of storytelling, where every word and symbol contributes to a greater understanding of our shared experiences. This paper aims at investigating Hemingway's minimalist narrative techniques, particularly his use of simple, concise language, and rich symbolism embedded in the text. Through an analysis of both stylistic and thematic elements, this study aims to shed light on characters and themes present in the novella. To conduct the research, a qualitative approach was chosen. The data analysis was conducted through close reading. This involved a detailed examination of the text's language, structure, and characterization. Findings from this study confirmed that *The Old Man and the Sea* is a novella built on simple but powerful dialogue using concise language and rich symbols that enrich the story's meaning.

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INTRODUCTION

Two major approaches to literature are thematic and stylistic. The term 'style' refers to the linguistic characteristics of a particular text or a particular writer. Additionally, linguistic stylistics can be defined as a field of study and a method of textual interpretation in which much importance and primacy is given to the various forms, patterns, levels, and narrative techniques that compose linguistic structure. The goal of literary stylistics is to explain the relationship between the language and the artistic function of the literary text. Then again, the term 'thematic' means concerned with the subject or theme of something, or with themes and topics in general (Collins, 2003). Thematic focus refers to the central themes and ideas that a work of literature explores. It helps to identify common themes, ideas, and patterns of meaning that come up repeatedly. These two approaches assist like piecing together the puzzle.

Hemingway, as an artist, is a champion. His skillful use of writing techniques makes *The Old Man and the Sea* a masterpiece. He deliberately makes a connection between writing styles and themes. This is why "*The Old Man and the Sea* may

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be described as a composite expression of Hemingway's basic contrapuntal theme, and presents the narrative technique of the post–*Green Hills of Africa* fiction at its best" (Rao, 2008, p. 27). Besides, *The Old Man and the Sea* is genuinely an autobiographical representation. Craftsmanship, writing method, and luck generate a universal appeal for *The Old Man and the Sea*. Just like Santiago, Hemingway has not had luck, but he prefers skill to luck. It looks like the author's tribute to the author as craftsman. In consequence, he admirably establishes a relationship between journalism and literature in the novella.

Hemingway follows the principle of truth in his writings. He states that "A writer's job is to tell the truth. His standard of fidelity to the truth should be so high that his invention, out of his experience, should produce a truer account than anything factual can be. For facts can be observed badly; but when a good writer is creating something, he has time and scope to make it of an absolute truth" (Hemingway, 1955, p. xiv). Moreover, Hemingway tries to make a real old man, a real boy, a real sea and a real fish and real sharks (Sojka, 1985). Therefore, he writes *The Old Man and the Sea* that consistently defines his artistic aesthetic. His statement concerning *The Old Man and the Sea* is consistent with the goals of accuracy and truth.

To conclude, Ernest Hemingway has never been ignored because of his distinctive style. He has been the subject of praise and sometimes savage criticism. When Hemingway published his debut novel, he was a young man but he had perfected his style. As a result, he came to the attention of English-speaking readers and was recognized as a new force in English literature. Subsequently, he was cited for "the art of modern narration" in 1954.

Statement of the Problem

Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* is known for its simple language and deep meaning. Both readers and critics appreciate its straightforward writing style. Besides, the novella's narrative style, often characterized by concise language and sparse description, has always been the subject of scholarly discussion. However, there remains a gap to explore how Hemingway uses minimalist writing techniques along with symbols to tell the story. Some scholars have focused on the symbols in the story, such as the sea, the marlin, and the lions. Few have analyzed only Hemingway's 'Iceberg Theory'. This study aims to fill that gap by closely examining both Hemingway's minimalist narrative style and the symbolism in *The Old Man and the Sea*. The goal is to understand how these techniques work together to make the novella a powerful reflection of the human experience.

Research Objectives

The objectives of this research are:

1. To analyze Hemingway's minimalist narrative techniques in *The Old Man and the Sea*.
2. To identify key symbols in the novella and their meanings.
3. To examine how Hemingway's minimalist narration enhances the novella's structure.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the main writing techniques that Hemingway uses in *The Old Man and the Sea*?
2. What are the major symbols in the novella?
3. How do Hemingway's minimalist writing style and symbolism work together in the overall development of *The Old Man and the Sea*?

Significance of the Study

Many studies have dealt with Hemingway's writing style and symbols separately. But his techniques of narrative simplicity and symbolism collectively did not receive much attention of the researchers and scholars. By combining his minimalist style and use of symbols, the study offers a new perspective on one of the greatest works of modern literature. It shows how Hemingway's minimalist techniques and rich symbolism make the story more meaningful. It may help future writers to learn how to express deep ideas using few words. Furthermore, the study will be helpful to the researchers who want

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to conduct any research on Hemingway's literary craftsmanship and influence on storytelling.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Minimalism, a 20th century art movement, emerged as a reaction against Abstract Expressionism. It was initially seen in the field of architecture but later expanded to other disciplines. The iconic phrase 'Less is more', adopted by architect Mies van der Rohe, has become the catchword of minimalism. Inspired by Hemingway's style, Raymond Carver explores the impact of minimalist writing. Carver's short stories**,** such as 'Cathedral' and 'What We Talk About When We Talk About Love', are considered masterpieces of minimalist fiction. Both present ordinary people dealing with complex emotional struggles in an understated yet profound manner. Modern writers like Cormac McCarthy and Jhumpa Lahiri also use minimalist prose. *The Road*, for example, depicts a father and son's struggle to survive in a desolate, post-apocalyptic world using sparse and direct language.

Similarly, Ernest Hemingway's novella, *The Old Man and the Sea,* has received substantial critical analysis, regarding the author's distinctive narrative techniques, concise writing style, and the symbolic depth of the story. Therefore, this literature review aims to connect both narrative techniques and thematic aspects.

Rauf (2023) conducted research on "Ernest Hemingway's Iceberg Narrative Method of *The Old Man and the Sea".* The researcher analyzes Hemingway's use of the 'iceberg technique', a narrative style with simple language but rich in literary devices, in *The Old Man and the Sea.* Xie (2008) conducted another research on "Hemingway's Language Style and Writing Techniques in *The Old Man and the Sea*". The study examines Hemingway's use of simple, natural language and facts from his own experience to convey the narrative in *The Old Man and the Sea.* Rao (1980) in his book chapter "Dynamics of Narration: Later Novels", evaluated different stages and evolutions of Hemingway's narrative point of view. He discusses how the first-person point of view in Hemingway's early writings changes into the third person point of view in relation to *The Old Man and the Sea*.

From thematic point of view, Sandamali (2015) conducted research on "Symbolism in Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea".* The study explores the symbolic elements used in the novella and identifies various interpretations of these symbols. Parveen et al. (2022) worked on "Interior Monologue as a Stylistic Device in Constructing the Character of Santiago in Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea*". The study highlights and identifies textual features in the construction of the character of Santiago. Ramadani's (2022) study on "Symbolism in *The Old Man and the Sea* by Ernest Hemingway" identifies Santiago both as a symbolic representation of the Christ and human. The sharks that attack the marlin are interpreted as the evil forces in the world that threaten and destroy human achievements. The marlin itself is seen as symbolizing the distant, almost impossible goal that humans strive to achieve in life. Additionally, Santiago's struggle to capture represents the hardships and sufferings that one must endure to attain one's goals.

Thus, this study focuses on how Hemingway's minimalist narrative techniques and use of symbolism interact to provide a new reading experience.

METHODS

This study employs two literary theories, Narratology and Symbolism, to explore Hemingway's minimalist narrative techniques and symbolism. These frameworks provide a systematic approach to understanding Hemingway's storytelling.

Narratology deals especially with the identification of structural elements in narratives and their diverse modes of combination, recurrent narrative devices, and the analysis of the kinds of discourse by which a narrative gets told. It treats a narrative as a purely formal construction. It does not seek to produce new meanings but aims to describe the structures that enable such works to

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have the meanings they do (Abrams & Harpham, 2014). Focusing on Gérard Genette's theories of narratology, this study examines Hemingway's minimalist narrative structure, the act of narrating, and temporal ordering of events. This approach facilitates a detailed breakdown of Hemingway's storytelling, including his writing style, point of view, and sentence structure.

According to Charles Chadwick (1971), 'symbolism', like the words 'romanticism' and 'classicism', can have an extremely wide meaning. It can be used to describe any mode of expression which, instead of referring to anything directly, refers to it indirectly through the medium of something else. In this sense, symbolism explores how objects, characters, and events represent deeper meanings beyond their literal interpretation. Hemingway, in particular, is well-known for subtly embedding symbolism within his narratives. Since *The Old Man and the Sea* heavily relies on symbols, the study applies Roland Barthes' semiotic theory and Northrop Frye's approach to literary symbolism. These theories help to analyze the deeper meanings expressed in Hemingway's use of symbols.

This study was grounded in a qualitative approach. It employed a descriptive-analytical method to explore Hemingway's minimalist narrative strategies, particularly his application of the iceberg theory, journalistic writing style, concise linguistic structure, and use of dialogue. Furthermore, the symbolic elements of the novella were examined to understand their significance in enriching the novella's themes.

The primary data source for this study was the novella itself, supported by relevant secondary sources that examined Hemingway's writing style, narrative techniques, and symbolic motifs.

The methodology was primarily based on textual analysis. The data analysis was conducted through close reading, a central method in literary studies, of *The Old Man and the Sea*. This involved a detailed examination of the text's language, structure, and characterization. Close reading facilitated a deeper understanding of the narrative's stylistic features, such as the use of direct dialogue, internal monologue, and the economy of language. The goal was to identify how these stylistic elements mirrored the thematic concerns of the story.

Additionally, the findings from the textual analysis were triangulated with critical perspectives from academic books, journal articles, and authorial commentaries to ensure depth and validity in the interpretation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Minimalist Narrative Techniques

Iceberg Theory

According to Robert Stephens (1968), *The Old Man and the Sea* is the best example of the iceberg relationship between Hemingway's fiction and non-fiction. Just like other works, Ernest Hemingway applies a simple and concise writing style in *The Old Man and the Sea.* The unique style of writing can engage readers into a deeper level of thought and emotion. Simple wordplay, concise syntactic structure, and minimalist approach of describing events advocate Hemingway's distinctive style, known as iceberg theory or the theory of omission. This concise language expression technique can convey deeper thoughts and emotions to readers (Cheng, 2013).

Iceberg theory is a distinctive writing style that emphasizes minimalism in storytelling, wherein details are intentionally kept to a bare minimum. This technique compels readers to engage deeply with the text, encourages them to look beyond the surface narrative to uncover the underlying themes and emotions. Hemingway believes that the deeper meaning of a story must not be plain on the surface, but ought to gleam over implicitly (Trodd, 2007).

In his first non-fiction book, *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway mentions, "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, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things

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because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing" (Hemingway, 1932, p. 192).

Hemingway suggests that the writing readers see on the page is only a small part of the story—like the tip of an iceberg. The larger part, which holds the deeper meaning and emotions, lies hidden beneath the surface. This hidden part is not immediately visible but can be understood if the writing skillfully hints at what is underneath. In an interview with George Plimpton, Hemingway stated his pride in what he considered to be the aesthetic economy of the novel:

> *"The Old Man and the Sea* could have been over a thousand pages long and had every character in the village in it and all the processes of the way they made their living, were born, educated, bore children, etc. That is done excellently and well by other writers. In writing you are limited by what has already been done satisfactorily. So, I have tried to learn to do something else. First, I have tried to eliminate everything unnecessary to conveying experience to the reader so that after he or she has read something it will become part of his or her experience and seem actually to have happened. This is very hard to do and I've worked at it very hard. Anyway, to skip how it is done, I had unbelievable luck this time and could convey the experience completely and have it be one that no one had ever conveyed. The luck was that I had a good man and a good boy and lately writers have forgotten there still are such things. Then the ocean is worth writing about just as a man is. So, I was lucky there. I've seen the marlin mate and know about that. So, I leave that out. I've seen a school (or pod) or more than fifty sperm whales in that same stretch of water and once harpooned one nearly sixty feet in length and lost him. So, I left that out. But the knowledge is what makes the underwater part of the iceberg" (Bloom, 2008, pp. 1-2).

By using this technique, Hemingway allows readers to discover the deeper layers of the story without directly stating them. Thus, *The Old Man and the Sea* can be seen as an illustration of 'iceberg principle'. Hemingway's knowledge about sea, fishing, and the circumstances is like the underwater part of the iceberg. And what he puts down as the text is the outer surface of an iceberg. Describing everything he knew would require countless pages. Instead, he presents only the surface details in his writing through which reader can go through the depth of it.

Journalistic Writing Approach

Hemingway's most of the fictional works along with *The Old Man and the Sea* are characterized by the use of his journalistic style of writing. His early experience as a journalist leads him to write with this type of style. After completing school life, he started his career as a reporter at The Kansas City Star, one of the prominent newspapers in America at that time. As an energetic reporter, he trained himself in the economy of expression. He once said that, during his working in The Star, he had to learn to use simple sentences, which is very useful to him. In an interview with George Plimpton, he claimed that newspaper work would not do harm to a young writer and could help him if he gets out of it in time (Bekar, 1961). However, he himself never entirely quit from this and never stopped writing for press. Consequently, Hemingway continues to establish connections between journalism and fiction, imagined and experienced realities.

Hemingway's novels or short stories are written in plain, straight, unembellished prose. Possibly, the style flourished because of his early journalistic experience. In *The Old Man and the Sea,* Hemingway's use of direct and spare language resembles the journalistic approach of writing. Apart from the linguistic style, Hemingway also connects the real world to the fictional imagination. For example, Hemingway introduces DiMaggio in the text who is real life hero. The great DiMaggio struggles with a bone spur in his ankle, yet continues to play baseball well. The old man looks at DiMaggio as his role model. He thinks if DiMaggio can play with a bone spur, he must work with his cramp and continue to fight with the fish. The great DiMaggio symbolizes the old man and his struggle to catch the big fish, yet poses as a role model for Santiago. This is what the old man thinks:

> "Do you believe the great DiMaggio would stay with a fish as long as I will stay with this one? I am sure he would and more since he

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> young and strong. Also, his father was a fisherman. But would the bone spur hurt him too much?" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 75).

Thus, Hemingway's experience in the field of journalism helps him to connect real life character to the fictional world and make inspiration for the fictional characters.

Concise Linguistic Structure

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, the use of shorter word form and sentence pattern represents Hemingway's minimalist approach of narrating. Brevity in morphological pattern makes the story lucid and easy to follow. It allows readers to immerse themselves in Santiago's journey without being distracted by complex language. The straightforward diction reflects the simplicity in terms of narrating the plot though their inner gravity of meaning is profound.

Apart from the use of shorter word pattern, Hemingway also deliberately uses simple and concise syntactic structure to enhance the clarity and impact on his iconic way of storytelling. As the old man's thought is depicted as "Every day is a new day. It is better to be lucky. But I would rather be exact. Then when luck comes you are ready" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 36). Here each of the sentences consists on only six words except the final one. There are a lot of long sentences too but these are patterned in a very lucid way often using the conjunction 'and'. As a result, the long sentences seem not though at all to unpack for the reader. The following quotes can be the example of the long yet lucid sentences: "The sun was two hours higher now and it did not hurt his eyes so much to look into the east. There were only three boats in sight now and they showed very low and far inshore" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 36). Hemingway's strength lies in his short sentences and very specific details. His short sentences are powerfully loaded with the tension, which he sees in life (Xie, 2008).

Point of View

In the early stages of Hemingway's career, he uses first person point of view that changes to third person point of view within a certain period. This transformation reflects Hemingway's artistic maturation, since he moves from a more subjective, individualistic perspective to a broader and all-encompassing narrative voice. In his early works such as *The Sun Also Rises* and *A Farewell to Arms*, Hemingway uses the first-person point of view. However, after his African safari and subsequent experimentation with form, Hemingway recognizes the limitations of this approach (Rao, 2008). Hemingway answered one of John Atkins questions, on this subject, as follows:

> "When I wrote the first two novels. I had not learned to write in the third-person. The first-person gives you great intimacy in attempting to give a complete sense, of experience to the reader. It is limited, however, and in the third-person the novelist can work in other people's heads and in other people's country. His range is greatly extended and so are his obligations. I prepared myself for writing in the third-person by the discipline of writing *Death in the Afternoon*, the short stories and especially the long short stories of 'The Short Happy Life of Francis Macomber' and 'The Snows of Kilimanjaro'" (Atkins, 1952).

As Hemingway's writing style and narrative approach evolves, he employs third-person omniscient point of view in *The Old Man and the Sea*. It allows him greater narrative flexibility as well as enables him to explore the thoughts, feelings, and actions of multiple characters. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, third-person perspective enhances the novella's thematic depth by maintaining a close focus on Santiago. Hemingway's skillful use of third person point of view allows the readers to understand character's internal thoughts and conflicts. Thus, this novella is genuinely an example of Hemingway's mature use of third person narration that balances introspection with an expansive view of human experience.

Use of Dialogue

Hemingway's ear for dialogue is keen and he has often been described as a master of dialogue. His unique style of using dialogue in the novella is by no means a spontaneous one and effective.

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Hence, *The Old Man and the Sea* is fundamentally built on powerful dialogue, which serves as a primary structural element of the narrative. This approach helps to convey the story's themes and character dynamics effectively. The dialogue throughout the novella takes place between the old man and the boy, or the old man with himself, or directing his speech to the fish, sea, boat, and God (Amro, 2019).

The use of simple, colloquial language in the dialogue between Santiago and the boy, Manolin, enhances the accessibility to the characters' interactions and reflects the purity of their relationship. This style is consistent with Hemingway's broader literary techniques, including his 'iceberg theory' as discussed earlier. Their conversation is brief, without any artificial language.

> "You're my alarm clock," the boy said.
> "Age is my alarm clock," the old man said. "Why do old men wake so early? Is it to have one longer day?"
> "I don't know," the boy said. "All I know is that young boys sleep late and hard."
> "I can remember it," the old man said. "I'll waken you in time."
> "I do not like for him to waken me. It is as though I were inferior."
> "I know."
> "Sleep well old man." (Hemingway, 1952, p. 26).

Hemingway deliberately uses such straightforward language in conversation in the novella. His choice is to use plain, unembellished language that reflects the authenticity of their relationship. The use of very simple and everyday language is capable to reveal Santiago's philosophical insights. When the boy says "You are my alarm clock", it seems very short and understandable sentence. However, it serves the faith, and bond of their relationship. Again, the old man says, "Age is my alarm clock". This simple and concise metaphor contains a heavy insight about the cycle of life. Throughout the dialogue between the two, Manolin shows his concern for the old man that makes the old man's struggle more empathetic.

Santiago's engaging dialogues with himself and various natural elements suggest his inner struggles. For instance, during his solitary battle with the fish, he says aloud, "Fish, I love you and respect you very much. But I will kill you dead before this day ends" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 60). Therefore, Santiago's monologues serve a dual purpose: they reveal his inner thoughts and provide the reader with insights into his moral and philosophical struggles. Hemingway's mastery of this type of narration allows readers to be close to the character's psyche.

The Use of Symbols in *The Old Man and the Sea*

According to Abrams and Harpham (2014), the term 'symbol' is applied only to a word or phrase that signifies an object or event which in its turn signifies something, or suggests a range of reference, beyond itself. It represents and expresses ideas or states of mind, using the power of words and images.

A great work of art quite frequently serves a symbolic function and *The Old Man and the Sea* is no different. However, Hemingway denies every time and he never considers the novella to be a metaphor for something else. In his letter to Bernard Berenson, he remarks, "There isn't any symbolism. The sea is the sea. The old man is an old man. The boy is a boy and the fish is a fish. The sharks are all sharks no better and no worse. All the symbolism that people say is shit" (Baker, 1981, p. 780).

The Mast: 'The Cross' is the greatest symbol of human suffering. The mast symbolizes the Cross that Jesus Christ was forced to drag. The crucifixion imagery links Santiago with Christ.

Santiago: Santiago symbolizes the Jesus Christ in *The Old Man and the Sea.* Hemingway mentions, "Face down, his arm out straight and the palm of his hand up" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 134).

This physical position of the old man represents suffering and god's grace just like Jesus Christ. Santiago also represents human beings who do not like to accept defeat in their lives. He is a man of experience and has self-confidence. Therefore, the old man is the representation of the optimistic people. Santiago speaks, "But who

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knows? Maybe today. Every day is a new day" (Hemingway, 1952, pp. 35-36).

Manolin: Manolin, the young boy, loves and respects Santiago. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Manolin symbolizes the youth and hope of Santiago for future. Moreover, Manolin is an outward manifestation of the boy in Santiago. Santiago expresses the wish that he had the boy with him at six different times during his ordeal. His wish for the boy is associated with the boy in him too, a romantic yearning for his youthful strength (Rao, 2008).

The great DiMaggio: Joe DiMaggio, the famous Yankee outfielder, is the role model of Santiago and his personal hero. DiMaggio symbolizes the strength. He represents humans' abilities to perform difficult tasks with excellence in spite of physical drawbacks. The image of the baseball hero playing in pain gives Santiago renewed power and hope that he has for Manolin.

> "But I must have confidence and I must be worthy of the great DiMaggio who does all things perfectly even with the pain of the bone spur in his heel" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 75).

The Sea: Sea is used as a symbol of the Universe. Both sea and universe provide various creatures, from the tiny to the giant ones. However, the sea stands for life, vast battleground for man, in which he has to struggle and face many kinds of tests and problems.

The Marlin: The marlin is a symbol of Christianity. Santiago hooks the fish yet it does not panic or dive to the depth since it represents several heroic qualities and Christian virtues such as courage, kindness, endurance, and determination.

Harpoon: Harpoon symbolizes power of fishermen in the sea. Skillful usage of harpoon can kill big fish like the marlin successfully. Thus, the loss of harpoon symbolizes the loss of power and strength of Santiago amidst the sea.

The Sun: Sun symbolizes happiness in the novella. The sun informs the fisherman that the weather will be good. Good weather will help to sail safely and comfortably.

The Bird: Bird is used as a symbol of help. Bird helps Santiago to go to the right direction in the middle of the sea. By examining the bird, the old man can catch his big fish. The old man says, "The bird is a great help" (Hemingway, 1952, p. 42).

Santiago's Eyes: Santiago is an old man yet his eyes remain in the same color without any change. Therefore, his eyes symbolize the unchanged determination to catch the great fish of life.

The Lions: Lions commonly represent power and strength. But the lions in Santiago's dreams symbolize his lost youth and decreasing strength. He dreams and hopes to get his strength back to rise anew.

CONCLUSION

This paper examines *The Old Man and the Sea* in depth and shows Hemingway's unique minimalist style from the aspects of narrative perspective, narrative structure, and narrative language. The art of omission, concise linguistic structure, journalistic style of writing, and rich connotations stimulate readers to think actively. Consequently, in *The Old Man and the Sea*, Hemingway masterfully blends minimalist narrative techniques with rich symbolism to create a powerful exploration of human struggle and strength. Using concise language and rich symbols, Hemingway shows his literary artistry and invites readers to dig deeper into Santiago's journey, revealing the complexities of life, the inevitability of suffering, and the enduring spirit of humanity. Therefore, this study not only highlights the richness of the text but also encourages reflection on our own struggles and aspirations in the face of adversity.

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