

Text of Desire—A Critical Reading of *The Old Man and the Sea*—

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Ernest Hemingway's *The Old Man and the Sea* has long enjoyed both critical and commercial success since its publication in 1952, but in the 1990's Gerry Brenner and Harold Bloom saw a parody and selfish idealization of the author himself in the characterization of the old man Santiago and overtly suggested that the novel did not deserve its success.

Though it may sound farfetched, the death of Gregory Hemingway has triggered another critical reading of *The Old Man and the Sea*. Gregory, Ernest Hemingway's third son, died in a cell of a women's detention center in 2001. It is a well-known fact that Gregory did not get along well with his father; the friction between them was serious and it came out in the father's stories and the son's autobiography. Gregory once criticized *The Old Man and the Sea* and said it "was as sickly a bucket of sentimental slop as was ever scrubbed off the bar-room floor." It can be easily inferred that for Gregory this book of his father's read as a story of a father-son relationship just like that of him and his father; Santiago/Hemingway goes far beyond the limits of ordinary life and brings back the skeleton of a big fish as a proof of his spiritual victory, of his "strangeness" or greatness which is essentially different from that of an ordinary fisherman/artist, in order to win his son's respect. Bickford Sylvester has convincingly argued that Manolin, who reveres and helps Santiago as if he were Santiago's actual son, is 22 years old; this adds support to the biographical reading of the story because Gregory was around that age when his father was writing *The Old Man and the Sea*.

Gregory's bitterness about the story could be a reaction against the message the story tells through the skeleton. If Santiago is really a "strange" old man and is different from those commercial fishermen of his village, he could at least have left the skeleton of the big fish where it belonged in the ocean and shared the literary revelation of spiritual victory with the readers. But the commercially useless skeleton brought back and left on the village beach becomes an obvious symbol and forces the readers to read its message. The skeleton looks like the tip of an iceberg, a metaphor for the author's literary theory of symbol and omission. But Hemingway seems not to have achieved simplicity but verbosity by this symbol in *The Old Man and the Sea*.