



Hemingway's Language Style and Writing Techniques

in *The Old Man and the Sea*

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Abstract

Among many great American writers, Hemingway is famous for his objective and terse prose style. As all the novels Hemingway published in his life, *The Old Man and the Sea* typically reflects his unique writing style. The language is simple and natural on the surface, but actually deliberate and artificial. Hemingway's style is related to his experience as a journalist. The influence of his style is great all over the world. *The Old Man and the Sea* is full of facts, most of which comes from Hemingway own experience. In the forepart of the novel, they are used to show the quality of Santiago's life, and are narrated simply and naturally; while in the latter part of the novel, they are used from inside Santiago's own consciousness and form part of a whole scheme of the novel.

Keywords: Facts, Simplicity, Iceberg Theory

1. Introduction

The Old Man and the Sea is undoubtedly Hemingway's masterpiece. It is a simple story about a fisherman Santiago and his battle with a great marlin. For 84 days Santiago does not catch a single fish but he does not feel discouraged. He goes far out into the sea and hooks a giant marlin. A desperate struggle ensues in which Santiago manages to kill the fish and tie it to his boat, only to find that on the way home he has to fight a more desperate struggle with some dangerous giant sharks, which eat up the marlin, leaving only a skeleton. The old man brings it home and goes to bed to dream, almost dead with exhaustion. But his struggle wins him much respect. Among many great American writers, Hemingway is famous for his objective and terse prose style. As the last novel Hemingway published in his life, *The Old Man and the Sea* typically reflects his unique writing style. This paper aims to discuss the writing style and techniques in *The Old Man and the Sea* and focuses especially on the language style and one of the important techniques—the way to use facts in his novel.

2. Language Style

2.1 Analyses of the Language Style

Among all Hemingway's works, *The Old Man and the Sea* is the most typical one to his unique language style. Its language is simple and natural, and has the effect of directness, clarity and freshness. This is because Hemingway always manages to choose words concrete, specific, more commonly found, more Anglo-Saxon, casual and conversational. He seldom uses adjectives and abstract nouns, and avoids complicated syntax. 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. Where he does not use a simple and short sentence, he connects the various parts of the sentence in a straightforward and sequential way, often linked by "and". In his task of creating real people, Hemingway uses dialogue as an effective device. Here is an example chosen from *The Old Man and the Sea*:

"What do you have to eat?" the boy asked.

"No, I will eat at home; do you want me to make the fire?"

"No, I will make it later on, or I may eat the rice cold."

Here we can see that such interpolations as "he said" have frequently been omitted and the words are very colloquial. Thus the speech comes to the reader as if he were listening. Hemingway has captured the immediacy of dialogue skillfully and has made the economical speech connotative. But it is good to note that Hemingway's style is deliberate and artificial, and is never as natural as it seems to be. The reasons are as follows. Firstly, in some specific moments, in order to stand out by contrast and to describe an important turning point or climax, the style is made a little different: He

took all his pain and what was left of his long gone pride and he put it against the fish's agony and the fish came over on to his side and swam gently on his side, his bill almost touching the planking of the skiff, and started to pass the boat, long, deep, wide, silver and barred with purple and interminable in the water. The language in this one-sentence paragraph is different from other parts of the novel. Kenneth Graham has commented that the sentence builds up its parts in a carefully laborious sequence—"all his pain and what was left of his strength and his long gone pride". It emulates the movement of the exhausted marlin and the physical strain of the old man. And it mounts to a heavy crescendo in the very un-prosaic inversion of adjectives—"long, deep, wide"—ending in the virtually poetic cadence, "interminable in the water."

The dialogue, too, is combined with the realistic and the artificial. In *The Old Man and the Sea*, The language style is very peculiar from Hemingway's other writings. This is because the novel is an English version of the Spanish that Santiago and Mandolin would speak in real life. Since we are meant to realize that Santiago and Mandolin could not possibly speak like this, since English is not his tongue anyway, we are more likely to accept other artificialities of the dialogue. The speakers are distanced from readers to a certain degree. And while their language taking on a king of epic dignity; it does not lose its convincingness. Even slightly strange exchanges like the following become fairly acceptable. For example:

"You're my alarm clock," the boy said.

"Age is my alarm clock," the old man said. "Why does old man 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."

The simple sentences and the repeated rhythms hit at the profundities that the surface of the language tries to ignore. Its simplicity is highly suggestive and connotative, and often reflects the strong undercurrent of emotion. Indeed, the more closely the reader watches, the less rough and simple the characters appear. In *Death in the Afternoon*, Hemingway uses an effective metaphor to describe his writing style. If a writer of the 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 iceberg is due to only 1/8 of it being above water. Among all the works of Hemingway, the saga of Santiago is thought as the most typical one to this Iceberg Theory. The author seldom expresses his own feelings directly, nor does he make any comments or explanations. On the contrary, he tries to narrate and describe things objectively and blend his own feelings harmoniously to the natural narration and description. This gives readers a picture of compression, from which, the 1/8 of iceberg above water, they can learn the implied meaning and feelings of the author, 7/8 of the iceberg under water. When Hemingway said of this story, "I tried to make a real old man, a real sea and real sharks," he then went on to say, "But if I made them good and true enough they would mean many things." So this novel has a great conveyed by a compressed action. The core of the novel's action is fishing. To the hero, fishing is not simply of contest in life. It contains profound philosophic meaning. In addition, two details, the baseball match and the hand wrestling with the Negro, like fishing, symbolize the contest in life. They compensate and enrich the inner meaning of the main plot of fishing. So the simplicity of the novel is highly suggestive. So Hemingway has formed narrative and dialogue, which though natural and simple on the surface, is actually deliberated and artificial. It combines elements that are realistic with elements that are stylized and heightened.

2.2 The Forming of the Language Style

How Hemingway has formed such a writing style? The reason is related to his own experiences. "His use of short sentences and paragraphs and vigorous and positive language, and the deliberate avoidance of gorgeous adjectives are some of the traces of his early journalistic practices." After leaving school, he went to the Kansas City Star, which was one of the best newspapers in America at that time. He served as its eager and energetic reporter. As a journalist, Hemingway trained himself in the economy of expression. He once said that, during his working in Star, he had to learn to use simple sentences, which is very useful to him; and that the experience of working as a journalist would not do harm to a young writer, instead it is very helpful if he could cast it off timely. He laid stress on "speaking" with facts and objected groundless concoction in writing. His descriptions of details are full of factuality, and are as precise as news reports.

2.3 The Influence of the Language Style

The influence of Hemingway's language style is great. In the latter part of his life, Hemingway was known as "Papa Hemingway". It refers mainly to his contribution to the development of a new writing style in America—the colloquial style. A critic named Storm Jameson discussing "The Craft of the Novelist" in the January 1934 issue of *The English Review*, she advanced an explanation of Hemingway's popularity: It is this simplicity, this appeal to our crudest interests, which explains Hemingway's success...In English at least his success has been largely with the intellectuals. They have praised his simplicity, his directness...And Hemingway's influence as a stylist was "neatly expressed in the praise of the Noble Prize Committee about 'his powerful style—forming mastery of the art' of writing modern fiction."

3. The Writing Techniques—the Way to Use Facts

3.1 *The Facts Are Selected*

Apart from the language style, which *The Old Man and the Sea* is famous for, the writing techniques in this novel are also worth paying close attention to. A very important one is the way to use facts. The main events of the story seem to be based on a real incident, which is described by Hemingway in an article about fishing in the Gulf Stream in *Esquire* for April 1936. So the novel is full of facts, such as the habit of fish, the technique of the novel lies in the way to use these facts.

Firstly the facts are selected. “Hemingway’s old man, boy, sea, fish, and sharks are not so much built up in our minds, detail by detail, facts by facts, as drive into our mind by the force and the sympathy with which the author himself shares in their imaginary existence.” Like any realist, he relies on selection. When the giant marlin finally surfaces, his tail “was higher than a big scythe blade and very pale lavender above the dark blue water.” Sargasso weed is bleached and yellow by day; Tuna are silver when they jump out of the water, but blue-backed and fold-sides when swimming. Hemingway never describes them excessively, but chooses some effective ones. He uses them with a sense of how colors shift and change in their relationship. Without selection, there can be no intensity, and compression.

3.2 *The Facts Are Used as a Device to Make the Fictional World Accepted*

Secondly, the facts are used as a device to make the fictional world accepted. The novel is not simple a manual for us to study the technique to catch a fish or how to survive in a boat. The author tries to implicate people’s imagination in what is happening by appealing to our love practical knowledge. This shows “the facts are fundamentally a device, a technique of reassuring our sense of everyday values.” So they can help to make us accept more readily what the author has invented and made more dramatic than in everyday life. Still take the use of color as example: “The clouds over the land now rose like mountains and the coast was only a long green line with the gray-blue hills behind it. The water was a dark blue now, so dark that it was almost purple. As he looked down into it he saw the red sifting of the plankton in the dark water and the strange light the sun made now.” These facts show readers the process of fishing, which mostly comes from the author’s own experience. From these facts, which are vivid, precise and terse, readers can learn a lot about how to catch a fish and can also feel as if they themselves were catching a fish. Then they will have the sense that what the author describes is real and believable. Therefore, as Kenneth Graham has said many facts in the novel about fishing and about the sea have a double function: They satisfy people’s sense of the real world. And this is what underlies Hemingway’s famous statement that his intention was always to convey to the reader “the way it was.”

4. Conclusion

Hemingway’s language in *The Old Man and the Sea* is simple and natural on the surface, but actually deliberate and artificial. “The language is rarely emotional. Rather, it controls emotions: it holds them in.” It is unique. Now “Hemingway style” is widely used to refer to the kind of prose writing which is characterized by simplicity, directness, clarity, freshness and naturalness.

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