Brandon Schock

Dr. Jamie Ridenhour

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Manolin: Independence, Hemingway, and the Narrator

 Manolin is directly referenced 98 times in *The Old Man and the Sea*, 96 times as “the boy” and 2 times by name. Santiago’s journey begins when he addresses Manolin by name before setting sale and ends when he addresses Manolin by name shortly after returning (Hemingway 27, 124). Manolin’s presence at the start and end of Santiago’s journey indicates the boy’s centrality to the plot of the novella, even when he is not physically present for most of the story. The text is sufficient for determining Manolin’s approximate age, personality, and attitude toward the relationships he has with adults in the novella, but a look at the author’s childhood supports the idea that Manolin might also be a stand-in for Ernest Hemingway or for one of his sons. The boy ultimately presents a theme of dependence in the work, and Manolin can be inferred as a possible source of *The Old Man in the Sea*’s narration.

 Discouragingly, Manolin has received little critical attention aside from the rather arbitrary matter of the boy’s age. During a conversation with Santiago about Dick Sisler, Manolin says, “The great Sisler’s father was never poor and he, the father, was playing in the Big Leagues when he was my age” (22). This line caused Jeffrey Herlihy to conclude that Manolin is likely 22 years of age, because that is how old George Sisler was when he first played professional baseball (Herlihy 26). The more likely answer, identified by Harold C. Hurley and others is that the quote could be rewritten as: “George Sisler was playing in the Big Leagues when Dick Sisler was my age” (Hurley 72). George is the father in the quote, and he was the man who was never poor. While George Sisler was playing in the Big Leagues, “he,” who is his son Dick Sisler, was the same age as Manolin. Hurley’s conclusion is that Manolin can be no more than 10 years old, and this matches up with the text. Santiago says that Manolin was 5 when they both went fishing together (Hemingway 12). The logical conclusion is that Manolin is no older than 10 and has been fishing with Santiago no more than 5 years, not that Manolin is 22 and has been fishing with Santiago for a total of 17 years.

 The text states succinctly how important Manolin’s relationship with Santiago is to both characters: “The old man had taught the boy to fish and the boy loved him” (10). The boy, even while fishing with a more successful fisherman, sees the old man coming in each day with an empty catch and is so provoked with sadness that he goes down to help him carry the lines, gaff, harpoon, and sail (9). Manolin says he would be willing to steal for Santiago, even if he does not actually do it (13). When Santiago returns in bad shape from his time at sea, the boy is reduced to crying and, when told by the proprietor to tell Santiago how sorry he is, the boy takes the remark personally and thanks him on his own behalf, as though the proprietor had said, “Tell your father that I hope he gets better” (123). The old man’s wellbeing is the boy’s wellbeing.

The notion that Manolin can be read as a stand-in for Hemingway himself is supported by a basic examination of the author’s childhood. Biographer Michael Reynolds suggests that the young Hemingway might have been influenced by village elders’ stories about the Civil War, and up to age 10, in Manolin’s age range, Hemingway would have sought out a variety of stories from older men in his life, similar to Manolin’s interest in Santiago’s storytelling (Reynolds 2).

 Missionaries would return to Oak Park and “give magic-lantern lectures on Africa, the Holy Land, and China” (4). Hemingway, even at a young age, imagined himself exploring the Hudson Bay and hunting in Africa, feeding off the adventures older men shared with him (15). It would not be a stretch to suggest that Manolin might be experiencing the same thrill when he listens to Santiago talk about his fishing ventures and his time in Africa. Reynolds writes that after Hemingway came back from the war, he found that his childhood Oak Park, “the safe haven of home,” had given way to modern life; Reynolds claims that Hemingway never wrote about this childhood world, where there was a “quiet moral order” and a “sense of absolute rightness” (15). If a convincing case can be made against Reynolds’ claim, it might come from a study of *The Old Man and the Sea*.

 Ernest’s brother, Leicester Hemingway, suggests that the most striking feature of their father was his love of nature, and this enthusiasm is shared between their father and Santiago manifests in their enthusiasm for hunting and respect for the lives of animals ( 20). Like Santiago, Hemingway’s father condemned the killing of animals for sport alone (32). Santiago and Hemingway’s father both reinforce interests in hunting, fishing, and sports by telling their “boy” stories and letting him go along on outdoor excursions (22). As Ernest Hemingway’s brother Leicester said, “Our father had a way of explaining even the simplest things so that they became fascinating” (23). In this same way, the simple and unobstructed speech of Santiago entices Manolin.

 Two other possible inspirations for Santiago are Hemingway’s grandfather and great-uncle. His grandfather entertained the young Hemingway with stories about traveling for long journeys in a covered wagon and about being in the infantry, and Great-uncle Tyley Hancock taught him how to fly-fish and inspired an early interest in traveling the world (33). Santiago shares the interests and attitudes of the three men Hemingway looked up to most, just as Manolin lives and acts in a world parallel to that of the young Hemingway. Ernest Hemingway was no stranger to manual labor, and just as Manolin complained when the other fisherman did not let him carry the gear, Hemingway, whose “daily chores had mushroomed into a full work schedule” by his teen years, might also have grumbled about not being given responsibility. Leicester explains that as a boy Hemingway read stories in the newspaper about sports, violence, and action—Hemingway relives these experiences as Manolin throughout the text (34).

In *The Old Man and the Sea*, Manolin often interrupts Santiago’s speaking to change the subject. Manolin first does this when he stops Santiago from talking more about the faith they have in each other and in their luck and suddenly offers the old man a beer (11). Later he changes the conversation when Santiago starts thinking too much about the past by bringing up instead the future fishing excursion. When Santiago begins to talk about how Manolin is already a man, the boy abruptly asks how old he was when he first went fishing with Santiago, despite how shortly after he vividly recalls the sights, sounds, and smells of a time he clearly remembers (12). As if to confirm that he only asked the question in order to change subject, Manolin even states, “I remember everything from when we first went together” (13).

Further on, Santiago says, “If you were my boy I’d take you out to gamble;” Manolin changes the topic of what it would be like if he were actually Santiago’s son to the topic of him bringing the old man sardines (13). This remark, along with the memory of their first time fishing together and how the old man let him have the responsibility of carrying their gear, also illustrates how Santiago became a father-figure for Manolin, although the role appears to be reversing. Manolin is aware of how weak the old man is when it comes to emotional pains, so he has conditioned himself to change the subject every time painful topics start to surface in Santiago’s speech. Whether it is their faith in each other, memories of the past, how the boy is growing up into a man, or how the boy is not actually the old man’s son—Manolin continuously interrupts Santiago in order to protect the old man from emotional pain. Once Santiago is alone in the sea, he lets his emotions pour out, because Manolin is not there to stop him.

 Santiago talks to himself while at sea, and he even acknowledges that he probably started this habit when the boy left (39). The old man’s insecurities about talking too much prevent him from speaking often while Manolin fishes with him, but when the boy is absent, he feels the need to talk to ease his own worries. While attempting to catch his big fish, Santiago faces the dangerous reality: he has allowed himself to become dependent on Manolin and the boy’s habit of protecting him both physically and emotionally.

 The boy is usually with him, reminding him of the times of good luck in the past, “catching his sardines, feeding him and serving him coffee, indulging the old man in his fictions, and flattering him”— ultimately nurturing the old man as though he were a child, encouraging a relationship that goes “beyond mentoring, and even mutual respect, to a form of dependence” (Stephens & Cools 78-81). This dependence might have started as early as when Manolin was five years old and they first went fishing together. Santiago may have been “too simple to wonder when he had attained humility,” but the reality is that the humility likely originated through his relationship with the young boy (Hemingway 13).

A major reason, or perhaps *the* major reason, Santiago strives to catch the massive fish is to prove to Manolin that he is a “strange old man” (66). The entire story can be viewed as one giant attempt on Santiago’s part to prove himself in Manolin’s eyes. In order to keep himself alive, Santiago now has to remind himself to eat and sleep, just as the boy normally would do for him (77). The old man has to cope at sea with not having Manolin around to help him out, so he even goes so far as to tell himself off in place of the boy, saying, “Get to work, old man” (95).

After killing the fish, the old man thinks to himself: “everything kills everything else in some way. Fishing kills me exactly as it keeps me alive. The boy keeps me alive, he thought. I must not deceive myself too much” (106). Then the thought is dropped. The clever implication is that just as fishing kills him and keeps him alive, so too the boy keeps him alive but also in other ways kills him. Manolin keeps him alive by literally taking care of him and also protecting him from emotional pain, but in doing so, Santiago loses his independence.

While fishing by himself, Santiago asks for the boy on six different occasions. The first time his wish is practical: he thinks about how it would be helpful to have Manolin around to be an extra hand on deck to cope with this big catch (45). His request is more personal the second time. Santiago starts with the practical concern about his vision and how the boy might be able to help him see what was happening, but then his thoughts start to gravitate about how no one should be alone in their old age (48). Santiago’s desperation penetrates his thoughts, and he begins to think of his companion out of an emotional need. This is confirmed when Santiago thinks to himself about how he is “beyond all people in the world,” and that between him and the fish, there is “no one to help either one of us”—bringing to mind again that Manolin, the one who otherwise would be there for him, is not there (50).

Santiago tells himself off for being dependent when he finds himself wishing for Manolin a third time, saying aloud, “You have only yourself and you had better work back to the last line now” (51-52). When the old man wishes he had Manolin for the fourth time, he is in pain and wishes the boy would come with salt (56). Normally, the boy would be there to treat his wound; when he later has a cramp, Santiago thinks, “If the boy were here, he could rub it for me and loosen it down from the forearm” (62). Later the narrator reveals Santiago’s thoughts: “If the boy was here he would wet the coils of line, he thought. Yes. If the boy were here. If the boy were here” (83).

If Manolin is the narrator, here Manolin might be expressing his own regrets of not being there. The popular assumption is that the narrator is a third-person omniscient narrator, and that the narrator does not have a specific identity. This assumption is not necessarily the case. The novella has only three named characters, and if the narrator is anyone specifically, it would likely be one of those three or someone close to them. Pedrico, the proprietor, is not a valid candidate because the narrator appears to have a much closer connection to the characters than he would have had. The narrator explicitly writes out the thoughts of both Santiago and Manolin, beyond what Pedrico would be able to simply guess. There is an intimacy with which the narrator treats the boy and the old man that indicates that one of them might be the narrator.

 The narrator begins, “He was an old man who fished alone in the Gulf Stream,” which would be consistent with Manolin looking back, but Santiago would not refer to himself as an old man who “was” (9). The narrator shows the reactions of other fishermen to Santiago, moments that Santiago would not be fully aware of (11). While the narrator shows consistent awareness of Santiago’s thoughts, the narrator also can recite verbatim Manolin’s thoughts about Santiago’s supplies of water, personal care items, and clothes (21). Aside from Santiago, only Manolin’s thoughts are shown.

 The primary evidence indicating that the one reciting the story is simply an omniscient third -person narrator is how thoroughly the narrator can read Santiago’s thoughts. However, Santiago speaks freely to Manolin, and Manolin listens. When the narrator recounts even Santiago’s dreams, this is consistent with what Manolin would have known—Santiago would often talk about Africa and, presumably, his dreams about Africa as well (24-25). There is nothing that Santiago thinks about or does that Manolin would not be able to know. The relationship between the two is based fundamentally on Santiago’s habit of telling Manolin his stories with detail and clarity. Manolin would have asked questions after Santiago returned home, and Santiago, in his usual way, would confide in the boy his emotions, thoughts, and experiences.

The story concludes on a note that might further indicate that Manolin is the narrator. The novella ends by saying that the old man was sleeping and that “the boy was sitting by him watching him” as the old man dreamt about lions (127). The last image the reader receives from the novella is that of the boy observing the old man while he dreams of his past; in this same way, if Manolin is the narrator, this whole story is one giant observation of Santiago as presented by the young boy who was always with him.

If Manolin is the narrator as well as a stand-in for Hemingway himself, then *The Old Man and the Sea* can be seen as a metaphor for Hemingway talking about his father and childhood as well as his own experiences being a father of three boys. Just as Manolin recounts his own childhood and time spent with the old man, so similarly is Hemingway using Manolin to talk about the peaceful childhood of Oak Park and his “old man” – the father that is so much like Santiago. The boy lives in a quiet community by the sea, where his life is filled with baseball and exciting adventures abroad. He does not detect the unrest in Cuba, which soon would burst into an outright revolution. Manolin’s world is simple before the war, just as the author’s was, and in the words Reynolds used to describe Hemingway’s childhood memories, there was the same “quiet moral order” within the code of honor the fishermen lived by. The novella allows Hemingway to preserve the peace of Oak Park while at the same time fusing his childhood memories with his adult interest in Cuba, and it is all possible through the Manolin’s narration.

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