

# *Comparative Analysis between the Old King in Alfred Tennyson's Poem "Ulysses" and Santiago in Ernest Hemingway's Novel "The Old Man and the Sea"*

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**Abstract:** The present paper is a comparative analysis between the old king in Alfred Tennyson's poem "Ulysses" and Santiago in Ernest Hemingway's novel "The Old Man and the Sea". Similarities between the two heroes in terms of their situations and characters are analyzed in detail. Through the analysis, readers may get a better understanding of the two heroes in the literary works.

## 1. Introduction

Both Alfred Tennyson's poem "Ulysses" and Ernest Hemingway's novel "The Old Man and the Sea" talk about the unyielding spirits of men in their remaining years. Despite their difference in genres, the two literary pieces do present many similarities in terms of their respective heroes' situations and characters, though the two heroes show some striking differences at the same time. Taking into consideration the time order of the two works, it is possible that Hemingway as a follower may be inspired by Alfred Tennyson's "Ulysses" and create his own masterpiece "The Old Man and the Sea" based on many aspects of the former by changing his hero Santiago's identity. The paper will try to explore the similarities between the two works in a bid to enlighten readers as to how famous writers think alike, be they poets or novelists.

## 2. Body

### 2.1 Similarities in Terms of the Two Heroes' Situations

The old king in "Ulysses" and Santiago in "The Old Man and the Sea" resemble each other in many aspects in terms of their situations. First, the old king is matched with a wife, which suggests the ordinary life he is living now. But he is mentally restless, reflecting the glorious past years and determined to set out once again to continue with his spiritual pursuit. In the same way, Santiago appears to be living an equally ordinary life. But he will by no means yield to his bad luck, and is ready to set out to the sea to try his luck again.

In addition, the old king has a son Telemachus who he loves deeply, and leaves "the scepter and the isle to him".[1] After the old king gives up his throne to pursue his more ambitious dream, he and his son will fulfill their respective responsibilities as he explains "When I am gone. He works his work, I mine." [1] Similarly, Santiago has his Manolin who functions as his son. They care for

each other a lot and become even more intimate after they have been separated by Manolin's parents. Like the old king in "Ulysses", Santiago parts with Manolin and heads for a different direction from the boy at sea. They also do their respective works, with the former venturing far out into the Gulf Stream in an effort to end his unlucky streak and the latter fulfilling his daily roles just as Telemachus does.

Third, the old king describes his citizens as "a savage race, that hoard, and sleep, and feed, and know not me". [1] That is, the old king is not understood by his citizens. He can only be understood by his peers who share with him mutual past experiences of ups and downs. Likewise, Santiago is always laughed at by people around him. Nobody understands Santiago's ambitions except his apprentice Manoli who shares the fishing experiences with him at sea.

Finally, the old king and Santiago are both related to the sea. They both try to get something or reach a destination via the sea. It is the sea that fascinates both and helps them realize their goals. As a symbol of nature and a mysterious and magic force, the sea serves as a perfect platform to exhibit the human conquer of nature and the depth of the human inner world. To be specific, humans are always inspired to explore the sea despite its vastness and infinity. The two heroes' exploration at sea itself shows the unyielding spirits of humans despite their doomed failure to some extent.

## 2.2 Similarities in Terms of the Two Heroes' Characters

As seniors, both the old king and Santiago are becoming physically weaker than their former selves in their younger days. The old king murmurs to himself, "We are not now that strength which in old days/ Moved earth and heaven;" [1] while Hemingway's Santiago is described as "Everything about him was old except his eyes and they were the same color as the sea and were cheerful and undefeated". [2] Besides, both men get aware of the possibility of failure in their adventures. The old king in "Ulysses" admits the possibility of failure by the line "It may be that the gulf will wash us down", [2] while Santiago fails to catch a single fish in a consecutive spell of over 80 days and is still unsure to catch one the next day. However, despite their old age and prospect of failure, both men insist on doing something meaningful that they consider their responsibilities as human beings. And they both remain strong-willed and uphold never-yielding spirits.

Neither of them is satisfied with what they have accomplished and their current life styles. They both have achieved great feats in the past decades with the old king travelling to numerous cities and Santiago defeating many of his rivals. Unlike many common folks, neither of them gets indulged in their glorious past achievements. Instead, both decide to forge ahead to make new discoveries or pin down unprecedented prey. As sensible humans, both realize the infinity of the universe with the old king saying to himself "Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'/Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades/For ever and for ever when I move." [1] And Santiago considering the vast sea a tolerant feminine figure. Yet both would like to desert a cozy life and challenge their limits by seeking or creating a new world. The old king hates to "pause, to make an end, /To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!" [1] He is yearning for more knowledge by travelling and feels ashamed of having stored and hoard himself for three years. In the same way, Santiago shows his unwillingness to yield to his failure to catch fish. Instead, he challenges himself by reaching farther out into the deep waters of the Gulf Stream. In some sense, the old king and Santiago are both dream-pursuers who intend to achieve their spiritual wholeness even at the cost of their lives.

The old king in "Ulysses" and Santiago in "The Old Man and the Sea" are both complex composites of individualism and collectivism, with the former overwhelming the latter. During the three years staying in his own country, the old king seems most lonely, though accompanied by his

wife and endowed with a whole race to govern. He lives in his own world of fantasy and thinks about significant questions that people around would probably fail to understand and agree with. The old king's collectivism is highlighted by the appearance of his "mariners" or "friends" as he calls them. But on the whole his friends are just his inferiors or means to achieve his dream of pursuing a world of the unknown. The old king remains a lonely individual. Actually, he does travel alone sometimes. Santiago's loneliness seems more obvious. He lives alone, with a picture of his dead wife on the wall which is later sealed up. Though surrounded by the town people, he is often made fun of. And though accompanied by Manolin, he, a dreamer of the lions, is not easily comprehended by the little boy. The old man's loneliness is most highlighted when at sea combating the giant marlin and imagining Manolin's presence. Like the old king in "Ulysses", "in solitude, Santiago makes himself appear more real and complete."<sup>[3]</sup> Santiago's collectivism can be shown by his kindness and tolerance towards people around him. Often, he gets not only help but also a sense of belonging from people in the community. Yet like the old king in "Ulysses", he has to bear the loneliness all the time, especially when he is fighting at sea.

### 3. Conclusion

The old king in "Ulysses" and Santiago in "The Old Man and the Sea" have many similarities in terms of the two heroes' situations and characters. As to the similarities in terms of their situations, the old king and Santiago have four major similarities. First, both of them appear to be content with their ordinary lives, but are restless inwardly. Second, both of them have a "son" figure to help them achieve their ambitions. Third, they are both isolated in terms of thought, and can only be understood by those who share mutual experiences with them. Fourth, they are both inspired to explore the sea, and the exploration itself shows the unyielding spirits of humans. As to the similarities in terms of their characters, the old king and Santiago have three major similarities. First, despite their old age and prospect of failure, both men insist on doing something significant and remain strong-willed and unyielding. Second, instead of indulging themselves in their glorious past achievements, they are determined to challenge their limits. Third, the old king in "Ulysses" and Santiago in "The Old Man and the Sea" are both complex composites of individualism and collectivism, with the former overwhelming the latter. Through the detailed analysis of the two heroes in "Ulysses" and "The Old Man and the Sea", readers may get insights into the old king and Santiago in the two literary works and verify the saying that great minds do think alike.

### References

- [1] <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45392/ulysses>  
[2] Ernest Miller Hemingway. (2017) *The Old Man and the Sea*. Beijing: Xinhua Press.  
[3] Liang Meixian. (2018) *The Essence of Solitude in "The Old Man and the Sea"*. *Folk Stories*, 4.