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The Inevitability of Decay: Disability in Ernest Hemingway's The Old Man and the Sea

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THE INEVITABILITY OF DECAY: DISABILITY IN ERNEST HEMINGWAY’S
THE OLD MAN AND THE SEA

by

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ABSTRACT

With his suicide in 1961, Ernest Hemingway seemingly cemented into place his legacy as the classic image of the able-bodied, masculine man; he was, to many, the anti-disability writer, the author who lived for ability, lost ability, and took his life once he realized no chance of regaining his ability existed. Such a narrative, however, ignores the truly complicated and dynamic shape his understanding of the body took. Through an analysis of The Old Man and the Sea, I examine the form this ideology of ability took at the end of his life when, like the novella’s protagonist, Santiago, his failing health forced him to focus on the realities of the inevitable failure of his own body. Through the application of research such as David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder’s theory of narrative prosthesis, Tobin Siebers’ work on the ideology of ability, and Andrew Farah’s research on Hemingway’s declining physical condition, I demonstrate the ways The Old Man and the Sea legitimizes the disabled body, avoiding, in the process, several common narrative tropes such as the overcoming narrative or the kill-or-cure dichotomy and creating a space in which the inevitable decay of the human body must be seriously and honestly addressed. Through this research, a new more nuanced picture of Hemingway emerges, one that recognizes the complicated and dynamic nature his view of the able-bodied individual took.
Introduction

In July 2, 1961, nine years after he published The Old Man and the Sea, Ernest Hemingway shot himself in his home in Ketchum, Idaho. With his suicide, a persona was born: the narrative of the hyper-capable writer who lived for ability, who lost ability, and who ended his life when no hope of regaining ability remained. Critic Carolyn Slaughter links Hemingway explicitly to ableism, calling him, “a man obsessed with danger and violence” and asserting that, to Hemingway “anyone who lacked physical excellence had no authenticity . . . no self” (322). Slaughter is not alone in this sentiment. Hemingway is, to many, the archetypal ableist, the writer who not only taught but also demonstrated that a complete and worthwhile life outside of one’s full physical capacity cannot exist. A brief survey of Hemingway’s most famous work seems to confirm this image, his novels centering predominantly on the theme of ability.

Hemingway’s 1929 work A Farewell to Arms, for example, tells the story of ambulance driver Frederic Henry during World War I; Death in the Afternoon, published three years after, delves into Spanish culture, glorifying the dangers of Spanish bullfighting; Green Hills of Africa and For Whom the Bell Tolls followed within the next decade, addressing the topics of big game hunting in Africa and the Spanish Civil War, respectively. In each of these works, a common theme emerges: an almost obsessive fascination with ability and the functionality of the healthy human form.

While critics understandably interpret his texts as bound by narratives of ableism, such readings may overlook the nuances in his texts through the close associations critics make between his work and life. In "Hemingway and the American Mythic Mind," Earl Rovit addresses the public’s need for retro-explanatory narrative to “explain” Hemingway’s death,
writing, “In a way the reader inevitably reads Hemingway’s life starting at its end. We begin with our knowledge of his suicide, and we want a narrative to explain, to fill in the empty spaces, to provide answers to insoluble questions” (Par. 8). Biographer and psychologist Andrew Farah offers a similar word of caution, arguing that Hemingway’s mythos has been propped up by many untruths. His remedy: “Perhaps it is as simple as acknowledging that any life is complex” (6). Hemingway’s views on ability fit Farah’s invocation of “complex” precisely, varying greatly depending on situation, age, and alcohol subsidized vitriol. The impact of Hemingway’s suicide on subsequent scholarship, however, has been monumental, tempting scholars either to 1) so overemphasize his death that everything must be interpreted through it or 2) over correct, removing historical context entirely from analysis.

The nature of these disparate strategies make Hemingway scholarship ripe for disability studies, a field that seeks to provide a balanced conversation around physiology and psychology. This conversation intersects in important ways with Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea, a novella which, I argue, complicates the supremely ableist narrative commonly associated with Hemingway and his work. It is my contention that, far from undermining the worth of aberrant bodies, The Old Man and the Sea draws attention to the materiality of a disabled existence through its centralization on the reality of physical and psychological degeneration. Centrally, this article examines the dynamic nature of Hemingway’s understanding of the ideology of ability, a term coined by Tobin Siebers who defines it as a personal or societal approbation of the human body at peak performance and the subsequent
marginalization of the (dis/less)-abled body. Through an analysis of The Old Man and the Sea, a more nuanced understanding of Hemingway’s ideology of ability emerges, one that considers the transformation the human mind can (and, indeed, must) undertake when confronted with the inevitably realities of physical deterioration. Through the novella’s centralization the theme of physical degeneration, its rejection of the rehabilitation model of disability, and its avoidance of common narrative tropes such as the overcoming narrative, the kill-or-cure dichotomy, and narrative prosthesis, the work addresses many of the problems inherent in Hemingway’s earlier works, creating a space in which the reality of continued existence within the disabled body must be seriously and honestly addressed.

Embodiment: Physiology and Psychology

Foundations for this conversation lie in an applied understanding of embodiment, a phenomenological section of disability studies which “theorizes the body as the place where self and society interact” (Goodley 71). An embodiment model of scholarship recognizes that one’s worldview intersects inevitably with bodily conditions, focusing particularly on the consciousness that comes from living in a body with limitations. Thus, for example, embodiment scholars would note that Hemingway’s understanding of the world in his younger years likely differed greatly from those expressed in his later years when he was older, unwell, and rapidly declining. This focus on the biographical figure of Hemingway also opens the door for the medical model, a model that harmonizes with embodiment scholars’ focus on the corporeal. In invoking the medical model, however, I do not mean to reinsert an attitude of

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1 Siebers: “At its most radical, [the ideology of ability] defines the baseline by which humanness is determined, setting the measure of body and mind that gives or denies human status to individual persons” (8).

2 In short, I entertain the following question: How does one’s (in this case, Hemingway’s) understanding of ability change when confronted with the reality of a deterioration?
rehabilitation, thereby transforming the disabled person into an object necessary of reform.
Instead, I use the model as a tool for understanding the biological complications present in
Hemingway’s latter life and thereby to draw attention back to embodiment by illustrating how
physiology affected his lived experience and altered his understanding of ability. An overview of
Hemingway’s physiological state, then, is vital for scholars as they attempt to understand his
later life and work.

It is precisely this inclusion of the psychological that students and scholars of
Hemingway often miss, a mistake that can lead to reductive narratives about Hemingway’s life.
The popular narrative surrounding Hemingway’s suicide, for example — that of a perfectly
reasonable individual living out the logical conclusion of his ableist philosophy — explains
Hemingway’s suicide entirely through a psychological lens, shedding, in the process, several
important physiological elements that complicate the narrative. Indeed, Farah’s invocation to
avoid overly simplistic explanations rings especially true here; suicide is rarely simple, occurring
most often as the result of several disparate factors rather than a single ideological construct or
traumatic event. Indeed, trauma is not even a necessary prerequisite for suicide. Psychologists
have long noted genetic conditions that elevate suicide risks (Bondy et al.), a detail which gains
added relevance by the now well-documented suicide epidemic present within the Hemingway
family. Within Hemingway’s immediate family alone, suicide claimed four members, including
his father, Clarence; brother, Leicester; and sister, Ursula. And genetics is one physiological
complication among many. Hemingway scholar Susan Beegel, for example, draws attention to
another explanation, hemochromatosis, a blood disease which causes the body to absorb and
store dangerous amounts of iron. Aside from causing extreme pain, the disease is also notably
associated with heightened suicide rates, a fact which further confuses understandings (Beegel 62). Given the possibility of more natural explanations, Beegel criticizes Hemingway scholars for their “willingness to psychologize Hemingway without reference to ‘material reality’” (65), arguing that such an overemphasis has created a mythic version of the writer that only loosely resembles historic reality. To fully understand Hemingway, psychology and physiology must converge. She sums up her criticism succinctly at the close of her essay:

Doctors have long known that organic and mental processes are tightly interwoven, but Hemingway’s biographers and critics have focused on the psychological dimensions of the author’s suicide to the exclusion of its physiological causes . . . We might also be cautioned against omitting the body from the mind-body problem when studying the life as well as the death (64).

Although identifying Hemingway’s suicide conclusively with ableism provides a sense of tidiness and closure, it ultimately falls short. Scholars would do well to embrace more nuanced understandings of Hemingway’s ideology of ability, one that takes into account inconsistency in Hemingway’s application of his views and variability over his lifetime in his conceptualization of the concept. In offering a reading of The Old Man and the Sea through the lens of embodiment, I hope to further this conversation.

Hemingway: A Biographical Understanding

While Beegel’s called for a closer look at the physiological elements of Hemingway’s suicide in 1990, much of the more significant progress in physiological scholarship has come in more recent years. At the time she published “Hemingway and Hemochromatosis,” for example, Beegel meant it as a probable but theoretic diagnosis for several converging
symptoms she had identified while reviewing biographical data on Hemingway. Years later, however, medical papers released from Mayo Clinic confirmed that Hemingway was, indeed, diagnosed with hemochromatosis near the end of his life. More recently, the groundbreaking work Hemingway’s Brain by Andrew Farah delves into the physiological effects of Hemingway’s genetics and lifestyle, arguing, like Beegel, for a more balanced understanding of the writer.

An important aspect of what Farah accomplishes in his work is to clean up the superfluity of theoretical diagnoses posited for Hemingway’s behavior. This act, far from downplaying the dire state of Hemingway’s condition in the 1940s and 50s, highlights the true extent of Hemingway’s rapid decline both physically and mentally. Rejecting many common explanations for Hemingway’s suicide, including post-traumatic stress, bipolar disorder, and even hemochromatosis, Farah focuses on a few specific factors such as genetics, alcoholism, and traumatic brain injuries linking each of these to a broader diagnosis of chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE). Farah cites a “mixed etiology” (159) for this diagnosis, noting Hemingway’s history of head trauma not only from boxing but also from a variety of accidental traumas ranging from his World War I injury from a mortar shell, to alcohol induced falls while fishing aboard his ship, the Pilar, to two major plane crashes later in his life. In all, Hemingway suffered at least nine major concussive head traumas in his lifetime, requiring many hundreds of stitches, multiple extended stays in a hospital, and one premature obituary. Unfortunately, Hemingway’s brain trauma rarely slowed Hemingway’s uncontrolled drinking habits despite repeated warnings from medical experts; before his fortieth birthday, despite still having

3 Although he dismisses her linking of hemochromatosis to suicide, Susan Beegel favorably reviewed his book in The Hemingway Review, calling it “a gift to Hemingway studies . . . [that offers] an invigorating perspective shift” (126).
several head traumas in his future, Hemingway had likely already incurred enough brain
damage to begin the premature onset of dementia, a condition that was already written into
his genetic code.

As Farah notes, “[t]he illness of dementia . . . clarifies much of the biography of his last
decade” (53), providing plausible explanation for a variety of symptoms, including Hemingway’s
mental descent into delusion and hallucination, his frequent mood swings (also partly explained
by alcoholism), and his inability to focus on tasks for extended times which heavily limited his
ability to write. Importantly, Farah’s diagnosis also draws scholars back to the years well before
Hemingway’s suicide, years which, though less immediately gripping than his suicide, prove
fundamental for a genuine understanding of Hemingway’s death; to Farah, Hemingway’s
suicide is a natural consummation of decades of bodily abuse. Although the public perceived it
to be so, Hemingway’s decline was not sudden but rather the culmination of many varying
factors dating as far back as the early 1940’s, when he first began exhibiting signs of delusion.
Perhaps it was CTE or even the early stages of dementia that prompted his son Gregory
Hemingway to observe a “profound change” in his father during in 1943-1944 (Reynolds 90-91).
Regardless, Farah’s data is persuasive: in the decade leading up to his publication of The Old
Man and the Sea, Hemingway was profoundly unwell, both mentally and physically, and had
been for some time.

Early Hemingway: A Brief Survey

Despite these clear connections linking Hemingway with disability, limited disability
scholarship exists analyzing his work. One valuable foray, however, has occurred, centered
predominantly on Hemingway’s first major novel, The Sun Also Rises, and the novel’s impotent
protagonist Jake Barnes. Indicative of the complex — and often paradoxical — form
Hemingway’s attitude toward disability took, few consensus readings emerge among critics.
Regardless, a survey into these works provides valuable insight into present conversations
within disability studies regarding Hemingway.

Perhaps the most widely known link between Hemingway and disability is Dana Fore’s
“Life Unworthy of Life?: Masculinity, Disability, and Guilt in The Sun Also Rises,” a piece which
links The Sun Also Rises with the cultural tendency to push for the rehabilitation of the disabled.
Fore finds Hemingway’s first major novel consciously emblematic of this cultural cognitive
impulse, arguing that “the experiences of emasculated war hero Jake Barnes reflect
Hemingway’s awareness of what researchers call a ‘medical model’ of disability” (76). This
model is problematic, Fore notes, because it “equates disability with pathology” (76). In his
reading, the novel’s central female character, Brett Ashley, embodies this cultural pressure for
the disabled to adapt, pushing for Barnes to either recover from his war wounds fully enough to
re-adopt normative standards of sexual intimacy or to embrace his role as an emasculated
male, incapable of substantive romantic relations. The novel’s focus, read through Fore’s
understanding, chronicles Barnes’ efforts to form an identity independent of Brett’s paradigm,
an endeavor that Barnes ultimately fails to accomplish. Barnes, Fore argues, demonstrates his
internalization of an ableist ideal through his inability to liberate himself from his phallocentric
understanding of romance. In a strikingly pessimistic reading of the novel’s final section, Fore
argues that Barnes capitulates to expectations of how a “normal” disabled person should act,
ultimately accepting the socially imposed ideology that “a sexually mutilated man . . . would be
better off dead” (86).
In contrast, Angela Lea Nemecek offers a more optimistic reading of the novel, focusing on the novel’s anti-eugenic message and progressive themes. By linking the novel’s main characters to earlier “vampiric traditions,” Nemecek argues that Hemingway’s characters illustrate the feeling of “otherness” present post World War I. Each of the novel’s characters suffers through some form of dissimilitude, performing life in an alien society but not fully living a normal life. Through this lens, Nemecek contradicts Fore’s conclusion. Rather than reinforcing ableist cultural norms, Nemecek argues that Hemingway challenges them by shedding light on their absurdity; Nemecek writes, “Jake’s triumph as a disabled character comes in his ultimate refusal of the rehabilitative regime that is thrust upon him” (106). Rather than a tragic representation of internalized anti-disability ethics, Barnes stands as a champion of humanity present within the mutilated body, thwarting eugenic progress and circumventing the medical model which seeks to either fix him or devalue his worth (112).

It is Deborah Susan Mcleod’s work on disability in modernist literature, however, that most thoroughly demonstrates the problem inherent in The Sun Also Rises. Mcleod’s work, titled The “Defective” Generation: Disability in Modernist Literature, highlights the myriad of disabled characters present within modernist literature, from Hemingway’s Jake Barnes to figures such as Joseph Conrad’s character Stevie, Virginia Woolf’s many partially or fully insane characters, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Nicole Diver, and James Joyce’s Gerty MacDowell. Mcleod is careful to note that modernist literature often avoids certain problematics representations of the disabled. Generally, for example, disabled modernist characters remain uncured throughout a given text, a development that “contrasts directly with the era’s focus on rehabilitation and cure” (6). Indeed, modernist writers are markedly adept at avoiding the “kill
or cure” trope that plagues much of the fiction that both precedes and follows the modernist period; however, although modernist writers largely avoid of a few common disability tropes, others rise in their place. One important example is the deindividualization of disability, the reduction of disability to a symbol of a generational trait rather than individual variance (ii). Hemingway’s The Sun Also Rises fits remarkably well into Mcleod’s reading of modernist texts. In Mcleod’s interpretation of the text, a reading which I support, the novel functions like many other modernist texts in that “Hemingway uses disability in a pejorative sense to characterize most members of his generation as ‘defective’” (98). Hemingway’s goal in depicting the impotent Jake Barnes, then, is not to represent a unique member of the disabled community but rather to symbolize the defective nature of another community, his own “lost generation,” a generation which struggled, like those within the disabled community, to function “normally” in a society that viewed them as aberrant and defective. The disabled, then, are reduced to a rhetorical function, a prosthetic device meant to utilize the disabled community as a tool to provide insight into an outside community. Hemingway’s refrain from “curing” Jake Barnes, then, is not an act of conscientiousness towards the disabled, as Nemecek argues; indeed, it has little to do with disability at all. Rather, the novel displays Hemingway’s views on his own post-war generation, reflecting his pessimism toward this group’s ability to successfully re-assimilate into society.

Hemingway’s subsequent actions provide further credibility to McLeod’s reading of The Sun Also Rises as some evidence does suggest that Hemingway did view ability as a fundamental aspect of a worthwhile existence. Carolyn Slaughter makes this precise point, arguing that Hemingway’s public image was a false persona, a “desperate performance of
physical excellence,” a performance she links to gender insecurity (321). Evidence from several of Hemingway’s letters seem to support ableist understandings of the writer. The very act of writing, to Hemingway, was a physical act, an ascension up a metaphorical dominance hierarchy through verbal clout. In a correspondence with William Faulkner, for example, Hemingway likens writing to boxing with literary giants such as Turgenev and Dostoevsky (Baker 624-625), an analogy he turned to frequently (Reynolds 208, Farah 27). Biographer Michael Reynolds singles out another circumstance, recording an instance in which Hemingway, perplexed that Bernard Shaw’s agent would compare Shaw’s work to Tolstoy’s, exclaimed, “If he could only get Shaw in the boxing ring, [he] would teach him a thing or two about fighting, cut him up slowly until they stopped it bloody in the fifth round” (Final Years 184). For Hemingway, Shaw’s status as a successful writer hinged, in no small degree, on his ability to demonstrate his physical prowess in the boxing ring.

Hemingway’s ableist ideas take even more explicit form in his other correspondences. Although Hemingway’s most famous characterizations of Zelda Fitzgerald occur in her unflattering depiction in A Moveable Feast, the criticisms found in his letters adopt an even more vindictive quality. In a letter to Maxwell Perkins, Hemingway claims that Zelda ruined Scott’s career, and that the only reason he did not tell her to “go to hell” was “[b]ecause she was sick.” He goes on to explain this connection in vicious detail:

The first great gift for a man is to be healthy and the second, maybe greater, is to fall with healthy women. You can always trade one healthy woman in on another. But start

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4 Farah: “[Hemingway] considered boxing a testament to his manliness at all points in his adolescence and adulthood” (27).
with a sick woman and see where you get. Sick in the head or sick anywhere. But sick anywhere and in a little while they are sick in the head (qtd in Baker 553-554).

The exact implications of Hemingway’s criticism are muddled. Taken literally, he seems to suggest that mental health, particularly the delusions and borderline schizophrenia Zelda struggled with, is contagious and that Scott could, or perhaps already had, contracted Zelda’s diseases. A more conservative interpretation, however, is no less incriminating. Taken figuratively, Hemingway’s statement carries eugenic implications, suggesting that care for the disabled limits the creative abilities of the able and, thus, that people of particular ability — Scott Fitzgerald in this instance — would be better off ridding themselves entirely of the confinement such a relationship creates. While Hemingway did carefully separate himself from the early twentieth century’s push toward eugenics, shades of eugenic philosophy do, at times, appear in his writing.

Even positive readings of Hemingway’s early works, such as Nemecek’s dissertation, are careful to point out that Hemingway was not a perfect representative for the disabled community. Even as she promotes Hemingway’s progressive depiction of Jake Barnes, Nemecek qualifies her position: “In arguing that The Sun Also Rises organizes a system of identities and moral values around the abjected, disabled state, I am hardly contending that Hemingway himself possess a particularly progressive orientation toward disability issues” (112). To illustrate this point, she draws attention to an interview. When asked whether an author can effectively write without a sense of morality, Hemingway replies, “A writer without a sense of

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5 For more information on Hemingway’s connection with Eugenics, see *Eugenic Fantasies: Racial Ideology in the Literature and Popular Culture of the 1920’s* by Betsy Nies and *Disabling Modernism: Disability and Anti-Eugenic Ethics in the Modernist Novel* by Angela Nemecek
justice and of injustice would be better off editing the yearbook of a school for exceptional children than writing novels” (Plimpton 30). To this comment aptly Nemecek posits the following criticism:

Although Hemingway here wishes to affirm the importance of an authorial conscience, he does so by ironically suggesting that ethics have no place in the consideration of, or work with, persons with disabilities (112).

Hemingway’s comment, while affirming the importance of morality among the cognitively able, problematically suggests that ethics are less important among the cognitively impaired.

These infractions are merely a few among many. Elsewhere, Hemingway made similar remarks, once referring to Sherwood Anderson as “a sort of retarded character” (Farah 86) and elsewhere expressed disappointment in meeting artist and filmmaker Robert Montgomery, who was “too tiny to be taken seriously” (Reynolds 329). Beyond his fascination with the corporeal, both in his actual life and in his fiction, evidence does seem to confirm links between Hemingway and ableism. To Hemingway, particularly when he was young, much of his value stemmed from his ability to perform physically, an attitude that is reflected in his writing and, in particular, his insults.

The Old Man and the Sea

In offering these criticisms, I do not mean to suggest that because he exhibited such ablest rhetoric, Hemingway’s works are without merit. As Mcleod notes, critics can level similar complaints against most of the authors writing during the early twentieth century, a time-period which, before World War II, was replete with “progressive” eugenic attitudes. Still, in arguing that Hemingway’s The Old Man and the Sea succeeds in its representation of disability,
Hemingway’s past comments and actions must be addressed and a reason given for any perceived change in Hemingway’s rhetoric concerning the less-able body. Embodiment, and in particular, Farah’s insight into Hemingway’s decline, provides impetus for a productive disability reading of The Old Man and the Sea despite Hemingway’s untoward commentary.

The story offers a deceptively simple plotline, focusing on a four-day experience of an aging Cuban fisherman named Santiago as he attempts to catch a large fish. From the outset, Hemingway highlights Santiago’s recent lack of success, beginning the novel simply, with the line, “He was an old man who fished alone in a skiff in the Gulf Stream and he had gone eighty-four days now without taking a fish” (1). Santiago’s failure has lost him his apprentice, a young boy named Manolin who, at his parent’s request, has reluctantly left Santiago to fish with a more successful boat. This day, however, is different; Santiago hooks “the biggest fish that he had ever seen and bigger than he had ever heard of” (23), and a three-day fight commences during which Santiago battles with the fish until he succeeds in bringing it in and killing it. The effort to catch the fish, however, pulls him far from land, and as he attempts to pull the fish alongside his boat to shore, the fish’s blood draws sharks to his boat. Santiago tries but fails to protect the fish from their hungry jaws, and when he finally makes it to shore, nothing remains of the fish but the skeleton. Santiago then packs up his fishing supplies and, exhausted, drags his equipment back to his hut. The novella ends with the young boy, Manolin, caring for the Santiago as he sleeps.

The Old Man and The Sea’s placement biographically in Hemingway’s life offers valuable insight into why disability scholars should take the work seriously. As in many of Hemingway’s works, the novella draws heavily from Hemingway’s own life experiences. More importantly,
however, the novella provides specific insight into the ideas Hemingway may have been entertaining at the time. Why was he writing about an old man who fishes, and what does this choice in topic reveal about his thought process at the time? In linking The Old Man biographically to his work, I do not mean to suggest that Santiago is Hemingway. Indeed, of all of Hemingway’s protagonist, few stray so markedly from Hemingway’s oft-cited propensity for placing thinly veiled reproductions of himself in his works. Still, certain aspects of Santiago’s character link him, if not directly to Hemingway, to certain aspects of Hemingway’s lived experience. Indeed, one of the most common readings of the novella centers around the parallels between Santiago and Hemingway’s struggles as relevant producers in their profession of choice (Young, Gurko, Cain). Reviewer Ridgely Cummings calls the book “a classic illustration of the truth of the critical contention that a sincere and honest writer writes always and eternally about some facet of himself” (495), and Critic William E. Cain goes as far as to directly assert that Santiago is an embodied representation of Hemingway, writing, “It is not that [Hemingway] is using Santiago as an analogy for himself as a writer. He is saying he and Santiago are the same. It is simple: one fishes, one writes, both die” (117). While Cain’s connection may be overstated, he correctly identifies an important aspect of Hemingway’s fiction: a propensity to write characters who parallel aspects of his own life experience. While it may be reductive to offer a 1 to 1, Hemingway to Santiago reading, carefully noting the parallels between the two characters is well within the precedents set by past scholarship. And so, despite the fact that Santiago is uncharacteristically sober for a Hemingway character, many interesting and worthwhile connections exist between the two.

Santiago’s age and physical deficiencies, for example, closely mirror the physical and
psychological declines chronicled in Farah’s work. This connection hardly warrants defense; age, it seems, is Santiago’s most defining characteristic. While Santiago is the central character’s name, it only appears four times in the novella; in the remaining 221 instances, Hemingway addresses his protagonist simply as “the old man,” thus establishing the supremacy of Santiago’s age as a descriptive identifier. He is not simply a man who happens to be old; he is The Old Man, his age warranting an even more significantly demarcative status than other important aspect of his identity including his status as a fisherman. This emphasis on age leads scholars to the before mentioned parallel between author and character, their status as former masters of their craft, Santiago, El Campeón in his youth, and Hemingway, over a decade away from his last successful literary work with a stalled “master project” mostly abandoned.

Through the text’s less-than-subtle use of the word “great,” Hemingway emphasizes this thematic element and expands it to the novella’s other characters.

Perhaps counting word usage seems semantical, but, in certain cases, the exercise can provide important insight into a text. For example, within the novella’s roughly 27,000 words, the word “great” or some variation of it, appears 71 times, claiming .262% (1 use per 381 words) of the text, and often appearing multiple times in a single paragraph:

‘But I must think,’ [Santiago] thought. ‘Because it is all I have left. That and baseball. I wonder how the great DiMaggio would have liked the way I hit [the fish] in the brain?’

‘It was no great thing,’ he thought. ‘Any man could do it. But do you think my hands were as great a handicap as the bone spurs?’ (39)

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6 Hemingway does not, for example, choose to address Santiago as the fisherman or even the old fisherman
7 Such as “greater,” and “greatest.”
Comparatively, this percentage far outpaces any of Hemingway's previous works. In The Sun Also Rises, for example, Hemingway uses the word only .07% (1 per 1328 words) of the time, a number which For Whom the Bell Tolls effectively matches. In A Farewell to Arms, it takes an even more dramatic dip, sprinkled a sparse forty-nine times in over 90,000 words, a rate of .054% (1 per 1851), textually, and in Across the River and Into the Trees, perhaps the work most significant to the conversation given its mere three year separation it from the The Old Man, Hemingway uses the word at a 0.085% (1 per 1176 words) clip. In one work, then, Hemingway effectively quadruples the rate at which he uses the word, a stylistic divergence which is both significant and, I argue, intentional.

I contend that the word serves a dual purpose, both introducing thematically the issue of physical decay through the idea of “greatness lost” and also emphasizing the connection between the novel’s “great” characters, a connection which highlights the universal nature of disability. Embedded within the text is the idea that greatness, those things that one traditionally looks to as indicative of “success,” are temporary, whether it be one’s everyday profession (as it is for Santiago) status as a cultural icon (in Joe DiMaggio’s case) or brute strength (as is true of the fish). Thus, while the conspicuous connection between Hemingway the struggling writer and Santiago the struggling fisherman exist, it is hardly the only parallel present between the two.

It is not Santiago, for example, who first merits the descriptive “great” but a baseball player, Joe DiMaggio, referenced in a conversation between Manolin and Santiago. When Manolin expresses concern about the Indians of Cleveland overtaking the Yankees, Santiago replies simply, "Have faith in the Yankees my son. Think of the great DiMaggio" (5). DiMaggio’s
name appears seven more times, invoked predominantly as a source of inspiration to Santiago in moments of rest and stress alike: "I would like to take the great DiMaggio fishing . . . . They say his father was a fisherman. Maybe he was as poor as we are and would understand" (7); “I must be worthy of the great DiMaggio who does all things perfectly even with the pain of the bone spur in his heel” (25). In every instance Hemingway invokes DiMaggio, the descriptor “great” precedes his name.

Although Santiago relates to DiMaggio through their mutual experience as victors, their primary connection is through the bodily pain they endure. Santiago makes this connection himself, observing “My head is not that clear. But I think the great DiMaggio would be proud of me today. I had no bone spurs. But the hands and the back hurt truly” (36). Clinton Burhans notes the connection between Santiago and DiMaggio, writing, “The image of DiMaggio is a constant source of inspiration to Santiago; in his strained back and his cut and cramped left hand he, too, is an old champion who must endure the handicap of pain” (43).

The true impact of DiMaggio’s inclusion in the text, however, is often lost on a modern audience which views the novella only in retrospect. In a Newsweek article written in honor of DiMaggio shortly after his death in 1999, Richard Ben Cramer expounds on DiMaggio’s physical condition:

It wasn't long after the war that Joe's body began to betray him. His back, his neck, were stiff and aching. One knee was always tricky. Then the terrible bone spurs in his feet made every step a shock of pain. In his last couple of years — '50, '51 — the Yankee infielders would sprint halfway out to the fence to take Joe's cutoff throws. By that time, the fabled DiMaggio arm held only one good throw a day.

The 1952 publishing date of The Old Man and the Sea's is important because, at the time,
DiMaggio’s decline was complete; after the 1951 season, a thirty-six-year-old DiMaggio retired from baseball, his body no longer able to withstand the physical toll the sport demanded. The novella’s original audience, then, would have been well aware of DiMaggio’s inclusion in the text. Santiago’s “source of inspiration,” the “great DiMaggio,” never fully recovered from his bone spurs and was forced to retire after two final injury-plagued seasons.

In the novella, Hemingway purposefully ties DiMaggio to Santiago, the novella’s second significant “great” character. Santiago himself makes this connection explicitly in the before mention conversation with Manolin. Hemingway writes, “‘Who is the greatest manager, really, Luque or Mike Gonzalez?’ Manolin asks, and when Santiago cannot decide, he adds, ‘‘There are many good fishermen and some great ones. But there is only you’” (8, emphasis added). The implication is not veiled: just as Luque and Mike Gonzalez are the greatest managers, and DiMaggio is the greatest baseball player, so Santiago stands alone in his profession; he is, in Manolin’s eyes, the Joe DiMaggio of his art, the greatest of all fisherman.

In many ways, Santiago’s story reads much like DiMaggio’s. He is the image of an individual formerly great in his profession whose body is failing him, his status as the greatest fisherman a tag earned for things past rather than present accomplishments. The text emphasizes this reality from the outset, noting in its second paragraph Santiago’s hands, which are “deep-creased [with] scars from handling heavy fish on the cords” (1). Directly after offering this detail, however, it qualifies it with the simple but telling statement “but none of these scars were fresh” (1). Similarly, while fishing, Santiago reminiscences on a time when he engaged in and won a twenty-four-hour arm wrestling bout against the “strongest man on the docks” (25). As with the scars, however, the story is quickly qualified: “he was not an old man then but was
Santiago El Campeon” (26). Santiago is formerly “El Campeon,” his days of physical mastery over.

Santiago’s declining physical condition is an especially important detail because it, like DiMaggio’s, has a direct impact on his present circumstances. Although he never admits it, readers are presented with at least the suspicion that Santiago’s eighty-four-day fishing draught could correlate with his declining physical and cognitive condition. Other fishermen, it seems, are having no problem catching fish. As he drinks a beer on a terrace, for example, Santiago observes a group of successful fishermen who “were already in and had butchered their marlin out and carried them . . . to the fish house” (1). Santiago’s explanation of the dry spell is that he is salao, “the worst form of unlucky” (1), but this could conceivably be a form of self-deception. Indeed, Santiago has already demonstrated his ability to self-deceive. Early in the text, for example, while conversing with Manolin, he pretends that he has yellow rice with fish ready for dinner and a cast net to lend out, a game that Manolin plays along with although he knows it to be untrue, a “fiction” that go through every day (4). Santiago clearly is capable of convincing himself of something other than the obvious truth.

A more concrete example of Santiago’s physical impediments limiting him professionally occurs in his battle with the great fish. The text emphasizes Santiago’s lack of strength early in the battle; after feeling the fish take the line, Santiago waits for the precise moment to set the hook to incur maximum damage so that he can bring the fish in easily; after waiting a moment for the hook to set, he strikes:

“Now” he said aloud and struck hard with both hands, gained a yard of line and then struck again and again, swinging with each arm alternately on the cord with all the
strength of his arms and the pivoted weight of his body. Nothing happened. The fish just moved away slowly and the old man could not raise him an inch. (16)

Despite his best efforts, Santiago is physically incapable of altering the course of the fish. It is the pain in his back, the weakness of his arms, and the “treachery” of a hand cramped “as stiff as rigor mortis” which ultimately causes him to stray too far from shore to protect his catch from the sharks (21). In this way, he reflects both DiMaggio and Hemingway, individuals whose physical declines jeopardize their ability to succeed in their chosen professions.

It is not only the physical, however, that links Hemingway and Santiago; Hemingway’s psychological battles also find their way into the text. While Santiago’s hands and back do limit him, it is his mind as much as his body that betray him; his decline, like Hemingway’s, is psychological as well as physiological. The text offers numerous examples of Santiago’s mental battles. While thinking of his cramped hand, Santiago briefly entertains the thought that it would be better if the line cut it off, an idea that he immediately sees as folly, berating himself for “not being clear-headed” (32). Later, he repeats this self-talk, “Now you are getting confused in the head . . . You must keep your head clear” (35), an invocation he makes several more times throughout the novel. Implied by Santiago’s tired mental struggles is the reality that in the near future, his intellect, his primary means for livelihood, will erode, a probability that is as dubious a proposition to his ability to continue fishing professionally as his declining physical condition. In a conversation with Manolin, Santiago makes it clear that it is not his strength but his mind that makes him a successful fisherman: “I may not be as strong as I think .

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8 “‘Last for me, head. Last for me. You never went’” (25). “‘Now you are getting confused in the head,’ he thought. ‘You must keep your head clear. Keep your head clear and know how to suffer like a man. Or a fish’” (26). “‘Clear up, head,’” (26).
but I know many tricks” (8). Although physical strength is important, Santiago understands that he makes his living primarily through his cognitive ability. In this way, Santiago’s struggles once again reflect Hemingway’s, a writer whose failing memory and inability to focus also made it increasingly difficult for him to write. Gone were the days when he could sit down for long periods of time and work single-mindedly on a particular piece, replaced by half-a-dozen scattered and unfinished manuscripts complete with ominous edit-in-case-of-death instructions (Didion).

The novella’s final “great” figure is reserved for one of its most important, the “great fish,” a character that completes the novella’s triangulation of declining characters. No character amasses more instances of the descriptor “great” than the fish. It is important for readers to view the fish, not as an antagonist or even as a neutral character, but as Santiago’s co-protagonist. He is the third declining character, one that both reader and character grow to view as nearly human as the novella progresses. Santiago notes this reality, repeatedly calling the fish “beautiful” and emphasizing the fish’s moral worth as equal to his own, remarking, “Never have I seen a greater, or more beautiful, or a calmer or more noble thing than you, brother. Come on and kill me. I do not care who kills who” (35). Santiago even questions the morality of killing the fish, and after he has done so, he repents of his deed, remarking, “I wish it were a dream and that I had never hooked him. I'm sorry about it, fish. It makes everything wrong” (41).

It takes little imagination to read the fish’s story as an escalated retelling of Santiago’s

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9 “Then he began to pity the great fish that he had hooked” (17); But what a great fish he is (17); “I wish the boy was here,’ he said aloud and settled himself against the rounded planks of the bow and felt the strength of the great fish through the line” (18); “But he cannot pull this skiff forever, no matter how great he is” (19); “He is a great fish and I must convince him, he thought” (23).
and DiMaggio’s. Linked by their characterizations as “great,” each character fights through pain, DiMaggio, the bone spurs; Santiago, the pain in his back, joints, and hands, and the fish, from the hook, held in his mouth tightly so the “pain could drive him mad” (33). Indeed, the fish’s decline is important because, although the text clearly implies DiMaggio’s and Santiago’s future, the story is able to fully capture the entirety of the narrative arc through the fish, beginning with the fish at the height of its strength, following its struggles against an unknown power, and ending with its defeat and death. The inevitability of physical deterioration plays out most clearly through the character of the fish simply because the fish most fully illustrates the thematic elements alluded to through Santiago and DiMaggio. The message, though morose, is clear. Even the strongest individuals ultimately weaken, and, in the end, no amount of greatness can save one from the inevitability of bodily decay.

Narrative Structures

Although it is important that scholars address the thematic importance of disability within The Old Man and the Sea, an equally important element of the narrative is how it portrays disability, and, in particular, how it avoids tropic and regressive characterizations of the disabled. David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder expound on an import result of the ideology of ability in their book Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse, arguing that an internalization of the ideology of ability has created a phenomenon they call narrative prosthesis. According to Mitchell and Snyder, “[D]isability has been used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power” (49). As a result, the majority of literature texts place the able-bodied at the center and the disabled at the periphery. This note on the characterization of the disabled should not be
taken as a claim that disabled or less-able bodies do not appear in literature. Mitchell and Snyder note precisely the opposite trend, drawing attention to the large number of disabled characters present within literature. Narrative prosthesis focuses on the roles of these characters, claiming that disabled characters often take on their role as cursory characters, tasked with moving a plot forward (60). The role of the disabled, in other words, is to act upon and develop the storyline and/or the able-bodied character; once the author accomplishes that purpose, the disabled character has served his or her function, and the reader’s eye can then be turned away from that character and in a more desirable direction.

It is important, then, that scholars move beyond simply pointing out that disabled characters exist in a plot and even whether or not they are represented sympathetically, but instead focus on how a given texts portrays disabled characters. This problem is precisely the complaint Mcleod levies against The Sun Also Rises, a novel which also centralizes a disabled character but does so as a bridge to other topics. Initially, The Old Man and the Sea seems to foreshadow precisely the prosthetic narratology Mitchell and Snyder outline. In offering two characters, one a young apprentice and the other an experienced but aging mentor, Hemingway positions his readers for the seemingly inevitable, a narrative in which, through a series of difficult and possibly fatal challenges, the archetypal “wise old man” passes his wisdom down to his more able apprentice who rises to take his place. Indeed, this story line represents one of the most common narrative structures in literature, spawning many well-known literary characters such as Tireseas in The Odyssey, Merlin in the King Arthur myth, Odin in Norse mythology, and Ben Kenobi in the original Star Wars trilogy. Problematically, as Mitchell and Snyder would point out, in such a narrative, the aging character exists only as long
as he or she is useful to the young, able bodied pupil they assist. In The Old Man, the text dangles precisely this narrative of the aging sage only to depart from it abruptly by removing Manolin almost entirely from the novel a few pages in.

While narrative prosthesis does claim a typical pattern within literature, Mitchell and Snyder by no means claim that it is exclusive. Many narratives do break from this formulaic structure. The novella does not simply avoid narrative prosthesis, however; it actively resists such a reading. Throughout the text, readers witness a distinctly human representation of Santiago, a humanness that is not contingent upon his ability to catch fish. Critic F. W. Dupee notes Hemingway’s foregrounding of many of Santiago’s most human qualities, writing, “As the old man suffers for a good reason, so he is lonely in the quite predictable sense that he requires the companionship and help of others” (152). At various points in the text, Santiago experiences a variety of distinct emotions, ranging from excitement (when he first hooks the fish) to anger (as he attempts to fight off the sharks) to shame (when he repents of having killed the fish). Even in the midst of a mostly somber narrative, Hemingway gives Santiago flashes of genuine happiness, such as when he dreams of seeing lions on the beaches of Africa.

Perhaps the important emotive quality found in the text, however, is loneliness because it provides insight into a genuine problem found within the aging community. Although statistics in the 1950’s on loneliness among the elderly were less developed than they are today, it was an identified and developing field of study. In a 1952 public health report, for example, Paul Lemkau observes, “The elderly person is likely to be lonely, particularly if he is widowed or not in his own house, in control of his own life” (240). Later, he adds, “When friends have died, too often the gap they leave in the lives . . . can never be filled because no one else is available to
fill the niche. This means further emptiness and loneliness for many old people, a reduction of
stimuli and, thus eventually, lessened function” (240). In a similar study, published in 1955, D.
Grant observes a similar pattern, writing that elderly people often feel as if they are “parasites
on society” and urging his readers that “[t]he next demon we must try to exorcize for the
elderly is loneliness” (1182). Although the word “loneliness” only occurs in the text once,
readers can find its imprint throughout the text. The sole occurrence takes place in one of the
novella’s most emotive scenes, a quick aside the narrator makes about a picture found in
Santiago’s hut:

On the brown walls of the flattened, overlapping leaves of the sturdy fibered guano
there was a picture in color of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and another of the Virgin of
Cobre. These were relics of his wife. Once there had been a tinted photograph of his
wife on the wall but he had taken it down because it made him too lonely to see it and it
was on the shelf in the corner under his clean shirt (4, emphasis added).

Already, Santiago is feeling the ostracization from society noted in Grant’s study. The narrator
observes that “many of the fishermen made fun of the old man,” and, although a few people in
the village do help him, they cannot forever. Manolin’s parents, for example, force him to fish
on a different boat, one that is not “salao,” unlucky, and while Santiago accepts this reality and
even encourages Manolin’s departure, when he is alone on the water, he repeats the phrase “I
wish I had the boy” three separate times (16, 17, 18). On the second of these, he adds simple
but telling insight into the loneliness of aging: “‘No one should be alone in their old age . . . But
it is unavoidable” (17). Through the emotional layering of Santiago’s character, readers are
encouraged to understand the story is more than a narrative about an old man who fishes. It is
a narrative about an ageing man who experiences very real emotion such as joy, surprise, anger, and loneliness. Santiago, far from being relegated to a narrativistic device, is a deeply human and emotive character, a central element of the text.

Closely related but distinct from the Mitchell and Snyder’s narrative prosthesis is the overcoming narrative, another narrative structure that the text resists. Within this narrative structure, disability is depicted as a mental or physical barrier that one can overcome with enough willpower. This narrative arc problematically suggests three things: (1) that overcoming disability is a matter of self-discipline, (2) that those who are unable to overcome their disabilities are not trying hard enough, and (3) that those who are unable to achieve normalcy are less resilient than those who can. Like the narrative prosthesis, the overcoming narrative presents a distinct temptation for this text. For the majority of the story, in fact, the narrative seems setup for precisely that, offering yet another rousing anecdote praising the power of the exceptionally strong-willed to persevere despite hands that cramp, backs that hurt, arms that no longer contain the strength of a champion arm wrestler, and a head that will not remain clear. It is a familiar narrative and a comforting one. Everything turns out alright in the end.

But the text addresses a much larger concept than temporary success. If Santiago succeeds, then what? While this fish might bring in income and relevance for a time, eventually he must catch more fish in order to feed himself, an act that will continue to become more difficult as he becomes older and weaker. If Santiago successfully catches and brings in his fish, the narrative has simply disguised the long term reality that the disabled body must not only perform once in the world to gain relevance but must do so continually. This reality highlights the importance that the narrative end not with success but as it does, with Santiago limping
home with nothing but skeletal of his catch remaining. It is with this shocking realization that Hemingway draws attention away from the overcoming narrative and on to the greater narrative, the unstable position disabled persons continually live through within the world. Santiago, the fisherman who feels, dreams, and hurts like any other human being lacks the physical ability to simply survive.

It is equally important, however, that Santiago not be killed off at the close of the narrative. This narrative also serves as a potential destination for Hemingway’s novella, especially when referencing Hemingway’s vast track record of carnage in his previous novels. Indeed, Reynolds notes that Hemingway did, in fact, consider killing off his protagonist, writing Santiago’s death into early proof manuscripts (235). At first glance, such a conclusion seems plausible. If Santiago cannot catch the fish, one might assert, at least let him crawl onto the beach so that he can die a martyr while the people of the village repent for their unkindness.

But such a conclusion creates precisely the same long-term problem that the overcoming narrative does. If Santiago dies, then the narrative frees readers from contemplating the reality that the disabled person must exist continuously in the world. Past records suggest that Hemingway, the author who purportedly idolizes ability above life, should leave Santiago dead on the beach, in exactly the way he leaves Robert Jordan with his mangled leg dead on the Spanish mountainside. And yet, as the narrative concludes, Santiago sleeps in his hut, tired and hurt, but still very much alive. Santiago’s survival highlights Hemingway’s own struggle for life and relevance in a world he increasingly struggles to operate in. If Hemingway is able to successfully create a world in which he, with his own aging mind and body, can dwell, a third option to the kill-or-cure dichotomy must exist, one where the less-able body can safely dwell.
It is precisely this reality that he attempts to create to in his depiction of Santiago within The Old Man and the Sea.

Conclusion

In arguing for a positive disability reading of a Hemingway work, I recognize a potential tension. Few writers embody the ideology of ability in the public imagination as thoroughly as the hyper-masculine, “live to the hilt” writer and public figure (Nolan 13). In 1952, however, faced with the reality of a failing body, Hemingway wrote what many people consider his best work The Old Man and the Sea, a simple narrative that follows a cast of characters, including an aging fisherman, down their respective path of physical decline. In offering this reading, I do not mean to suggest that Hemingway never again demonstrated ableist rhetoric or tendencies in his later life; what I do hope to achieve, however, is an applied understanding and echoing of Farah’s advice to acknowledge the complexity of Hemingway’s life. Although it is tempting to build a coherent and tidy narrative around Hemingway, especially in light of his suicide, doing so ignores the manifold realities surrounding those events. Similarly, understanding that Hemingway, at one time, expressed problematic views regarding the disabled community does not mean that his views remained stagnant. Indeed, an applied understanding of embodiment suggests that they could not have; the Hemingway of the 1950’s was not the same Hemingway of past years. In noting this complexity, I do not mean to inversely overrepresent the saintliness of the writer in his old age; again, his life is simply too complex to do so, and while he may have made positive progress in certain areas, Hemingway expressed problematic sentiments in a multiplicity of topics post The Old Man and the Sea, including in his rhetoric towards the disabled. This reality does not, however, diminish the value of viewing The Old Man and the Sea
through disability studies. Through this lens, The Old Man and the Sea reads much differently than his earlier work, a plea for the world to recognize the reality of disabled bodies. Through his foregrounding of the inevitability of bodily decay, the text works to address the topic of ability, creating a dynamic that recognizes the disabled character as vital component not just of literature but of the world as a whole.
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