

Metaphorical Analysis of *The Old Man and the Sea* from the Perspective of Cognitive Linguistics

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Abstract: *The Old Man and the Sea* stands as the pinnacle of Hemingway’s literary achievement. While its surface narrative is minimalist, the text conceals a complex network of metaphors. Although existing studies have explored the novel’s symbolic meanings, few have systematically analyzed its metaphorical structure from a cognitive linguistic perspective. Grounded in Conceptual Metaphor Theory, this study employs textual analysis and the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) to extract and categorize metaphorical expressions in the novel, revealing how Hemingway constructs profound philosophical themes through everyday language. The findings identify nine categories of metaphors—natural, bodily, religious, ecological, etc.—all rooted in the protagonist’s embodied experiences (e.g., exhaustion, pain) and interactions with nature.

Keywords: *The Old Man and the Sea*; textual analysis; conceptual metaphor; embodied experiences

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1. Introduction

The Old Man and the Sea is a seminal work by the renowned American author Ernest Hemingway, cementing his status in world literature^[1]. Published in 1952, the novel quickly garnered acclaim and contributed to Hemingway’s Nobel Prize in Literature in 1954. The story portrays an aging fisherman’s indomitable resilience and courage, crafting a timeless protagonist through concise yet potent language^[2]. The novella draws inspiration from Hemingway’s encounter with Gregorio Fuentes, a Cuban fisherman whose real-life ordeal—catching a giant marlin only to lose it to sharks—formed the narrative’s core^[3]. Hemingway’s deep connection to Cuba, where he spent nearly a third of his life, permeates the text. For instance, the sea is personified as a “kindly female” imbued with emotional and symbolic complexity.

From a metaphorical perspective, the novel’s seemingly simple surface masks a rich cognitive structure. The marlin symbolizes humanity’s relentless pursuit of ideals, the sharks represent destructive forces of fate, and the sea mirrors the unpredictability of life or society. These metaphors align with Hemingway’s Iceberg Theory, which emphasizes submerging deeper meanings beneath the textual surface. As Hemingway (1961: 34) stated, “I always try to write on the principle of the iceberg. There is seven-eighths of it underwater for every part that shows.”^[4]

Cognitive linguistics provides a theoretical framework for decoding such submerged metaphors. Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) Conceptual Metaphor Theory posits that metaphors are not mere rhetorical devices but fundamental cognitive mechanisms, mapping concrete “source domains” (e.g., war, journeys) onto abstract “target domains” (e.g., struggle, life)^[5]. For example, the metaphor “STRUGGLE IS WAR” in the novel reflects universal cognitive patterns while embodying

Hemingway's unique interpretation of human resilience. Embodiment Theory further elucidates how Santiago's bodily experiences (e.g., pain, solitude) are metaphorically transformed into spiritual symbols (e.g., dignity, faith).

Existing studies predominantly interpret the novel's symbolism through literary or philosophical lenses, with limited systematic analysis of its metaphorical structure via cognitive linguistics. For instance, Dong (2003) cataloged symbolic elements (e.g., the sea as fate, sharks as misfortune) but neglected linguistic theory^[6]. Semino (2008) briefly cited the "sea as female" metaphor without dissecting its source-target mapping^[7]. This study bridges this gap by identifying metaphors, deconstructing their cognitive mechanisms, and revealing how Hemingway elevates personal experience into universal philosophy, offering a novel methodological lens for literary interpretation.

2. Theoretical Framework

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, the founders of cognitive linguistics, proposed the Conceptual Metaphor Theory in *Metaphors We Live By* (1980), marking the shift of metaphor research from rhetoric to cognitive science.

The core viewpoints of the Conceptual Metaphor Theory are as follows: The essence of metaphor is cross-domain mapping. That is, by mapping specific and concrete source domains (such as "journey," "war") to abstract target domains (such as "life," "struggle"), we can understand the latter. Moreover, metaphors are systematic. Metaphors do not exist in isolation but form a systematic conceptual network. For example, the metaphor "life is a journey" implies sub-metaphors such as "goals are destinations" and "difficulties are obstacles." Metaphors are embodied, which means that the generation of metaphors is based on physical experiences. For example, the mapping of "pain is mental torture" originates from the physiological connection between physical pain and emotional distress.

3. Metaphors in *The Old Man and the Sea* and Their Embodied Manifestations

Based on the Conceptual Metaphor Theory of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) and combined with Pragglejaz Group(2007)'s Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP)^[8], this paper systematically extracts and classifies the metaphorical expressions in the novel. The specific analysis steps are as follows: First, conduct a close reading of *The Old Man and the Sea*. During the process of reading the text word by word and sentence by sentence, use the Metaphor Identification Procedure (MIP) to accurately identify metaphors. The core of MIP lies in distinguishing between literal and metaphorical meanings. In specific operations, first determine the basic meaning of a word in the context, and then observe whether it has a different understanding in the text from its basic meaning. If the meaning of the word in the context can be understood through another conceptual domain, it is likely to be a metaphor. When using the MIP research method for analysis, this paper comprehensively considers popular general concepts, dictionary definitions, and the internal context of the text. For example, when analyzing the metaphors of "the sea," it not only refers to the general perception of the sea by the public, such as the concept of danger, but also uses the explanations of relevant concepts in dictionaries. More importantly, it combines context factors such as the interaction plots between the old man and the sea and the old man's inner thoughts in the text to comprehensively and deeply understand the multiple metaphorical meanings of "the sea" in the text.

3.1. Natural Metaphors

3.1.1. The Sea—A Mysterious Realm

In "*The sea was very dark and the light made prisms in the water...*"^[9], the meaning of "sea" extends to a mysterious realm. Taking "a mysterious realm" as the source domain, it highlights the mysterious characteristics of the sea, such as its darkness, the change of light and shadow, and its unfathomable depth, enabling readers to understand the uncertainty the old man faces in it.

3.1.2. Clouds—Mountains, Ice Cream, Feathers

In “*The clouds over the land now rose like mountains*” and “*He looked at the sky and saw the white cumulus built like friendly piles of ice cream and high above were the thin feathers of the cirrus...*”^[9], the meaning of the word “clouds” changes from a simple meteorological phenomenon to objects with the characteristics of mountains, piles of ice cream, and feathers respectively. Here, “mountains,” “piles of ice cream,” and “feathers” are used as the source domains, and “clouds” as the target domain for mapping.

These embodied metaphors stem from Santiago’s visual perception, translating abstract weather phenomena into tangible imagery. By mapping between clouds and mountains, ice cream, and feathers, Hemingway transforms the abstract meteorological concept of clouds into vivid, relatable forms. The mountain metaphor emphasizes their towering presence; ice cream conveys a sense of softness and approachability, while feathers highlight their delicate, floating quality. These mappings derive from Santiago’s direct visual engagement with the sky, where his bodily senses (sight) translate unfamiliar cloud shapes into familiar objects, demonstrating how embodied experience shapes metaphorical cognition.

3.1.3. The Glare—An Adversary

“*Then the sun was brighter and the glare came on the water...so that it hurt sharply*”^[9]. Here, the meaning of “the glare” (the reflection of the sun) changes from an ordinary light phenomenon to something with the harmful attributes of an “adversary”. This is a mapping with “adversary” as the source domain and “the glare” as the target domain. The sun’s harsh glare, which causes Santiago physical pain, is metaphorized as an enemy attacking him. This metaphor arises from the direct bodily experience of sunlight as a harmful force, linking the sensory impact of brightness (source domain: adversarial harm) to the abstract concept of environmental hostility (target domain: the glare).

3.1.4. Wind—A Companion

“*The wind is our friend, anyway*”^[9] metaphorizes “wind” as a “friend,” emphasizing its supportive yet unpredictable role in Santiago’s voyage. Here, the meaning of the word “wind” changes from a simple natural air current to a being with the characteristics of a “friend”. This is a mapping with “friend” as the source domain and “wind” as the target domain. Friends have the characteristic of providing help. Through this mapping, the wind is no longer just a natural force but more like a partner who can help the old man during his voyage, enabling readers to understand the importance and positive role of the sea breeze in the old man’s life at sea, although this help is uncertain. This metaphor emerges from his bodily reliance on wind for navigation, grounding the abstract notion of companionship in tangible, physical dependence.

3.2. Bodily Metaphors

3.2.1. Jellyfish Stings—Whiplashes

In “*But these poisonings from the agua mala came quickly and struck like a whiplash*”^[9], the impact of jellyfish stings changes from simple physical harm to a pain experience similar to “being whipped”. This is a mapping with “Whiplashes” as the source domain and “jellyfish stings” as the target domain. Being whipped has the characteristics of sudden and intense pain. Through this mapping, the pain caused by jellyfish stings is no longer just a vague feeling of harm. Instead, readers can more intuitively understand the characteristics of this pain by relying on the familiar pain of being whipped and feel the pain the old man endures when attacked by jellyfish at sea. This mapping originates from Santiago’s direct physical encounter with the stings, where his sensory experience (sudden pain) aligns with the source domain of whiplash.

3.2.2. A cramped Hand—A Traitor

In “*I hate a cramp, he thought. It is a treachery of one’s own body*”^[9], the meaning of “cramp” changes from a simple physical physiological phenomenon to something with the behavioral attributes of a “traitor”. This is a mapping with “traitor” as the source domain and “a cramped hand” as the target domain. Traitors have the characteristics of bringing negative consequences and hindering actions through betrayal. The cramp, hindering his struggle, becomes a “traitor,”

reflecting bodily betrayal. Santiago's hand, which cramps during his battle with the marlin, is metaphorized as a disloyal ally. The betrayal stems from the hand's failure to function when most needed, mirroring the psychological shock of unexpected disloyalty. This metaphor is rooted in the physical reality of muscle fatigue and its psychological impact, merging bodily limitation with emotional betrayal.

3.2.3. Inner Fatigue—A Heavy Burden

In "*You're tired, old man...You're tired inside*"^[9], the meaning of "tired inside" (inner fatigue) extends from simply describing physical fatigue to having the oppressive and unbearable feeling brought by a "heavy burden". This is a mapping with "a heavy burden" as the source domain and "inner fatigue" as the target domain. A heavy burden has the characteristic of making people feel oppressed and unbearable. Through this mapping, the old man's inner fatigue is no longer just an abstract emotion but, like carrying a heavy burden on the body, becomes concrete and perceivable, helping readers understand the old man's inner fatigue after experiencing a series of events.

3.3. Religious Metaphors

3.3.1. Religious Paintings—Spiritual Sustenance

In "*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*"^[9], the meaning of "religious paintings" (the picture of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and the picture of the Virgin of Cobre) changes from ordinary paintings to things with the function of "spiritual sustenance". This is a mapping with "spiritual sustenance" as the source domain and "religious paintings" as the target domain. Spiritual sustenance has the characteristic of providing support and hope to people in difficult times. Through this mapping, religious paintings are no longer just simple decorations but, like spiritual sustenance, carry the old man's psychological need to seek comfort and strength in difficult situations. Although this metaphorical relationship is not directly stated in the text, it can be inferred by combining the context.

3.3.2. Prayer—A Lifeline

"*I will say ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys...I promise to make a pilgrimage...*"^[9]. Religious rituals map to psychological sustenance, underscoring Santiago's reliance on faith. Though he claims not to be religious, his recourse to prayer during crises reveals a metaphorical framing of religious acts as tools for mental survival. The act of praying becomes a lifeline, a structured practice to channel hope and discipline. This metaphor stems from Santiago's embodied need for ritualized coping mechanisms in the face of existential uncertainty.

3.4. Ecological Metaphors

3.4.1. Marine Life—Companions

In "*They are our brothers like the flying fish*" "*The fish is my friend too*"^[9], the meaning of "flying fish" and "fish" changes from simple marine creatures to beings with the relationship attributes of "friends". Fish and dolphins are metaphorized as "friends," reflecting Santiago's kinship with nature. The flying fish, which Santiago admires for their agility and beauty, are framed as comrades sharing his maritime journey. This metaphor emerges from his prolonged isolation at sea, where non-human beings become substitutes for human companionship. The mapping of "friendship" onto marine life underscores his deep ecological empathy, rooted in daily interactions with these creatures.

3.4.2. Sharks—Predators

Sharks, described as "*built to feed on all the fishes in the sea*"^[9], embody predatory threats, symbolizing nature's brutality. The sharks' relentless attacks on the marlin's carcass are metaphorized as a predatory force, reflecting Santiago's perception of them as embodiments of chaos and destruction. This metaphor arises from his visceral encounters with sharks—their physical aggression and the resultant loss of his hard-won catch. The "predator" mapping translates

biological behavior into a moral and existential threat.

3.4.3. Marine Ecosystem—Balance and Law

The ocean's ecological interplay maps to "balance and survival laws," mirroring Santiago's understanding of natural order. The interdependence of marine species—predators and prey, competitors and allies—is metaphorized as a system governed by immutable laws. Santiago's respect for these laws, shaped by decades of fishing, reflects his embodied participation in the ecosystem. The metaphor transforms ecological complexity into a comprehensible framework of balance, grounded in his physical labor and observation.

3.5. Combat Metaphors

3.5.1. Fishing—Warfare

Santiago's battle with the marlin and sharks is framed as warfare, mapping struggle to physical and mental endurance. Phrases like "*This will kill him, the old man thought*"^[9] evoke military strategy and lethal confrontation. The metaphor transforms fishing into a life-or-death conflict, where every action—reeling the line, enduring exhaustion—becomes a tactical maneuver. This mapping originates from Santiago's bodily exertion during the prolonged struggle, his muscles straining as if in combat.

3.5.2. Santiago—A Steadfast Warrior

"*I must hold him all I can...*"^[9]. Santiago's resolve maps to a warrior's tenacity, embodying his indomitable spirit. His refusal to surrender, despite physical collapse, aligns with the archetype of the warrior who fights to the last breath. The metaphor draws from his bodily perseverance—bleeding hands, aching muscles—translating physical endurance into a heroic narrative.

3.6. Dream Metaphors: Lions—Strength and Vitality

In "*He only dreamed of places now and of the lions on the beach*"^[9], Santiago's recurring lion dreams map to his yearning for vigor, contrasting his physical decline. The lions, symbols of primal strength and vitality, represent Santiago's subconscious desire to reclaim his youth and power. This metaphor arises from the dissonance between his aging body and undiminished spirit, grounding abstract longing in the tangible image of lions.

3.7. Tool Metaphors

3.7.1. Sail—A Banner of Defeat

The "*sail...looked like the flag of permanent defeat*"^[9] metaphorizes failure, echoing Santiago's prolonged futility. The patched, tattered sail becomes a visual emblem of his unsuccessful fishing ventures. This metaphor stems from Santiago's daily interaction with the sail—a constant reminder of past failures—transforming a mundane object into a symbol of existential struggle.

3.7.2. Boat—A Companion

In "*She's good, he thought. She is sound and not harmed in any way except for the tiller. That is easily replaced,*"^[9], the meaning of "ship" (she refers to the ship) is transformed from a simple means of transportation to an existence with the attribute of a "partner." The boat, referred to as "she," maps to a loyal partner, embodying Santiago's reliance on it. The gendered personification ("she") reflects his emotional bond with the boat, which sustains him through storms and solitude. This metaphor arises from his physical dependence on the boat for survival, merging mechanical utility with relational intimacy.

3.7.3. Fishing Gear—Weapons

In “*The old man was trying with both hands to keep the line just inside of breaking strength...*” and “*The old man dropped the line and put his foot on it and lifted the harpoon as high as he could...*”^[9] and other descriptions, the meaning of “fishing line” and “harpoon” is transformed from simple fishing tools to things with the function attributes of “weapons”. That is, lines and harpoons become “weapons” in Santiago’s struggle, mapping tools to survival instruments. The harpoon, wielded against sharks, is metaphorized as a weapon of war, emphasizing its role in his existential battle. This mapping derives from Santiago’s tactile use of tools—their weight, texture, and function—translating physical objects into extensions of his will.

3.8. Trauma Metaphors

3.8.1. Hand Injuries—Battle Scars

“*The speed of the line was cutting his hands badly...*”^[9]. Wounds symbolize the cost of perseverance. Santiago’s bleeding hands are not mere injuries but badges of honor, marking his relentless effort. The metaphor transforms physical trauma into a narrative of sacrifice, rooted in the visceral pain of lacerated skin.

3.8.2. Mutilated Fish—Emblem of Loss

In “*He did not like to look at the fish anymore...*”^[9], the ravaged marlin maps to existential defeat, mirroring Santiago’s despair. The mutilated fish, stripped to its skeleton, becomes a metaphor for futility—a visual testament to effort annihilated by fate. This metaphor arises from Santiago’s bodily act of witnessing the fish’s destruction, merging sensory horror with emotional desolation.

3.9. Gender Metaphors: The Sea—Feminine

Santiago’s personification of the sea as “*la mar*” (feminine)^[9] maps its duality—nurturing yet tempestuous—to feminine archetypes. The sea’s capacity to provide sustenance and unleash destruction mirrors traditional gendered dichotomies of care and caprice. This metaphor is rooted in Santiago’s lifelong engagement with the sea, where its physical unpredictability (calm waves vs. storms) aligns with culturally constructed notions of femininity.

4. Conclusion

Hemingway’s metaphors transmute narrative into philosophy. Through Conceptual Metaphor Theory and MIP, this study identifies nine metaphor clusters in *The Old Man and the Sea*, revealing how embodied experiences (e.g., cramp as betrayal, sharks as predators) underpin abstract themes. These metaphors blend universal cognition (e.g., struggle as war) with idiosyncratic expressions (e.g., sail as defeat’s banner), enriching the text’s literary expressive force. By prioritizing cognitive mechanisms over traditional symbolism, this research offers a fresh lens for interpreting literary classics.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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